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We feel honoured to be invited to this distinguished audience at this evening dinner. During the next hour we would like to give you a first glimpse about the empirical phenomenological approach of Frankfurt Practical theology. Being a team of Frankfurt I am happy that we are also able to present today something in teamwork.

Our presentation will proceed in three steps

- 1 some general information about the empirical phenomenological approach
 (that's my introductory part)
- 2 Examples of research projects
 (Dr. Kerstin Söderblom and Christopher Scholtz)
- 3 Theological Education between theory and praxis
 (dr. Matthias von Kriegstein.

As to the introductory part: What is the empirical phenomenological approach to practical Theology all about? The question in itself sounds very complicated, academic, to some ears even "German". My answer is complex, theoretical and I hope despite my poor English still comprehensive outside the German theological context. As to this general context: our overall theological education to enter ministerial work in any congregation differs from your situation. German churches usually require 6 years of university studies, graduation, another two years preparation in church run "preaching seminaries" and finally the second exam.

However, what we are briefly talking about this evening is connected to post-doc. work and to academic research elements. Nevertheless, also the protestant churches in Germany fully accept and even support these highly specialised research efforts of theological faculties.

I try to do my task explaining only one single sentence. It is even shorter than Cl. Geertz' famous one sentence definition about religion as a cultural system.

Here is my key sentence:

(Sheet)

The empirical phenomenological approach to practical Theology

- * *is a theological theory of praxis,*
- * *taking faith and religion as empirical cultural phenomena,*
- * *and studying its objects particularly from a life world perspective,*

**** in order to contribute to the normative, the analytic, and the practical needs of theology***

I will totally agree to those who know about phenomenology and oppose because such a deductive way does not follow a phenomenological way gaining knowledge. Anyhow, I don't know a shorter way from my presentation this evening. And now to my explication:

1 The empirical phenomenological approach to practical Theology

**** is a theological theory of praxis***

PrTh in German universities is one particular discipline within the curriculum of 6 theological disciplines (OT, NT, ChH, S, PTh, RStudies). Following the tradition from Schleiermacher we are doing Practical Theology as an academic enterprise, oriented towards praxis. The subjects of this praxis are professional theologians and lay people. It is not religious praxis in itself but reflection, a step back from naïve and self evident religious praxis in order to perceive, to describe, and to interpret praxis (religious and cultural) with conceptual tools. This stepping back is based on specific collective presuppositions about theory, at least the following ones

* It is possible and necessary to analyse religion and faith according to logic, and to critical reason in responsible ways of investigation in order to distinguish religion from mere assumptions or pure fantasy and superstition about our ideas, and communicate its truth and value with other academic disciplines and with society in general

* It is not sufficient to understand current religious praxis only as application or outcome of biblical knowledge or Christian doctrines. Religious praxis and related phenomena follow other influences, are intertwined with non-religious life and have their own anthropological and cultural logic. Pr Th has the task to develop a specific theological concept of praxis in dialogue with other philosophical or social scientific concepts of praxis to understand the relation between God's praxis and human life, active and responsive.

* It is accepted and even demanded by German churches (and public schools) that the study of theory is enhancing professional competences for dealing with religion in church and society. The assumption is that reconstructing the meaning and rules of religious praxis provides enlargement of dealing with religion in a professional way, it helps to deal more appropriately with perception, enactment and proclamation not only of religion, but also of the gospel.

2 The empirical phenomenological approach to practical Theology

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Faith is God's work through the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless faith has an experiential dimension, This is to be accessed for human study only in its human and cultural side. Empirical theology is attentive to this dimension. In recent decades all over Europe two directions of theories have been most helpful for Practical theology to investigate praxis, life, and reality: these are empirical hermeneutics, and "action theory". Semiotic and sociological instruments help to conceive religious life as meaningful reality, and to relate it to the structural dynamics of social realities. Based on these approaches in Frankfurt we continue to develop empirical theological insight introducing also phenomenology as another methodology for reality oriented research.

The object of PrTh is religion in a broad sense, elements of Christian religious traditions as well as new religious developments inside and outside church institutions. It relates on explicit praxis of faith as well as individual variations and new developments of religious seeking. That asks for openness of methods and concepts, it asks likewise for perceiving the wide range of current multicultural society. Together with fresh approaches in systematic theology, we conceive Pr Th as cultural science. Methodological communication with other disciplines about religion and culture enables to conceive our own faith in interdependence with "symbolic forms", with collective world views, and with overall "forms of life". This cultural approach even allows to reflect on the cultural conditions and limitations of theology in its academic forms. The theoretical bridge between a normative and a descriptive concept of culture allows theology and the churches to contribute to the development and humanisation of culture based on a specific theological concept of culture. Briefly this could be called a concept of "cultural difference".

The empirical interest in studying culture derives from two sides, first from basic theological notions (like God's revelation, epiphany and incarnation), and second from current non-theological theories about religion

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**** and studying its objects particularly from a life world perspective***

Every theological theory makes use of secular scientific concepts and models, developed in correspondence with non theological view-points, might it be metaphysic, hermeneutic, philosophy of language, semiotics, or whatsoever. PrTh as a theory for scientific and valuable research about empirical phenomena has to develop insight and knowledge which follow certain principles and criteria in accordance with other empirical sciences in general. The main methodological problem for our discipline PrTh is to construct a research methodology that maintains likewise a theological approach to reality. This asks for applying secular scientific models to get access to reality as well as to use

theological notions like God's praxis, faith as non active behaviour or the religious wisdom about the mysterious structure of reality.

Following this double need some years ago we started to introduce epistemological elements of phenomenological philosophy. We published the first outline of this model in two books and in several articles, some of them I emailed earlier to you. To cut the introduction to the model extremely short, we tried to develop an empirical theological model that is open to a broader perception and understanding of reality and life than more narrow sociological and psychological instruments used so far in PrTh. This mode starts with the prevalence of sensual perception, draws on the foundational function of every knowledge in life world, and stresses the inevitable involvement of the researcher theologian as an embodied subject in the research process. To drop some key authors, we refer to life world in the sense of the late Husserl's book, to phenomenology of the body presented by the French M. Merleau-Ponty and the German colleague B. Waldenfels, we also use contemporary religious studies approaches like the Dutch J. Waardenburg, and the German C. Colpe

In our model we do not restrict empirical theology to phenomena of explicit religious life only within congregations. Rather the concept of life-world as pre-scientific world-encounter plays a crucial role. Starting every investigation with that what is given in the senses does not neglect the transcendence character of faith. It contextualises explicit religion and approved forms of faith to other powerful influences in personal and collective life. It opens up the theologians eyes for "Living religion", for religion outside religious traditions and religious institutions. To do so we need contact to the wide range of everyday and high culture. You will recognise this approach within the two concrete examples. Empirical theology is not only about the naïve or curious look at the world. We need phenomenology in its philosophical elaboration to develop mindful theoretical concepts about "reality", "experience", "life", and human "subjectivity". PrTh needs this assistance matching the discussion about standards of scientific research of empirical phenomena.

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The overall theoretical intention of this approach to research is not to become fascinated by collecting perceptive bites of the variety of religious and life world phenomena and to forget about faith. Moreover it includes an impulse to identify a specific perception of the world being in line with the gospel. That is the

perceptive process, where “this our world appears as another world, as a world that is not complete but in its becoming’ (Waldenfels 1994, 236).

Likewise it is not our aim to replace theology by philosophy (or social sciences). On the contrary, a PrTh inspired by phenomenology will not only discover religion on strange places and in new cultural contexts (theatre, pop music, sport, the movies and so on). Moreover “Living religion” as the formal research object of PrTh contributes to a broader concept of faith. In biblical and philosophical approaches usually there is heavy stress on the doctrinal and the belief dimension of religion. Empirical PrTh will not oppose to this emphasis, but is able to enlarge the analytic competence of describing faith. Phenomenological theology helps to discover that also cultural patterns, forms of life, dreams, emotions, atmospheres are part of collective and individual religious life, also architectural symbols, liturgical music and a specific feeling of life are functioning and legitimate expressions of people’s faith.

I use the word “legitimate” deliberately: The phenomenological approach contributes also to the normative task of theology. This type of research draws heavily on the implicit pre-reflexive normativity within the life world praxis. But without any doubt also central phenomenological notions like the “givenness” of the world in human perception or the reflective subjectivity have high normative impact and theological impact.

To end up my general remarks on our theological model with a hot issue: for every empirical based theory the understanding of reality is of utmost importance. Phenomenology contributes to a concept of reality beyond the logic of cause and effect. It stresses the ambiguous character of perception between unfolding and foreclosing the given reality. Following this idea phenomenology could and should be tested as a structural parallel to incarnation theology; both are about embodied realities, both stress indirect access to truth (Kierkegaard!) Phenomenology’s emphasis on the intertwinement between the regular and the strange has a theological basis in old and new models interpreting the notion of the Holy Spirit.

Of course all these propositions deserve wider explanation, than I can provide now. Anyhow these ideas give a glimpse of our conviction that this type of empirical theology is not just a bad copy of sociology of religion, but part of theology. It is our interest and effort to combine analytic and normative investigations into faith with a new shape of the gospel’s praxis in the various fields of ministry.

HGH

Selected bibliography