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Awareness of life and culture of faith

Being human as the directive and purpose of the religious practice of Christianity¹

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Abstract: In Christian religious practices humankind's being human is central. Faith includes the experience of humans' coming to being. This is the reason why a person's faith should not be burdened with ideas charging or reproaching their humanity. For faith itself is a category of passionate human engagement. And yet, sometimes one is left with the impression that in a Christian culture of faith the alternatives are either to be fully human or to be religious – for God's sake. The following text explores some backgrounds of the experience, and shows why one of the most important functions of faith is to provide a solid basis for a good awareness of life.

1 Translation of my reprocessed article: Wilfried Engemann, Lebensgefühl und Glaubenskultur. Menschsein als Vorgabe und Zweck der religiösen Praxis des Christentums, in: WzM 65/3, 2013, 218–237.

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1 Preliminary remarks on a common self-diagnosis: “Religiously unmusical”

The academic ritual “introduction and welcoming of the speaker” makes speakers feel appreciated and welcome. This should actually be part of the usual effects of the religious practice of Christianity: The “communication of the gospel”, as this practice is occasionally called in theological language, entails that human beings enjoy living, that they perceive their life as a great, personal gift, that they get reacquainted to life and consequently “get to know how to live”. This implies that they step into freedom, experience appreciation – and feel how passion returns into their lives. Biblical texts are (partly) illustrious documents of experience for what this means. How the ecclesiastical practice of Christianity has to be estimated in individual cases does therefore not only depend on the doctrine it refers to, but additionally depends on whether this practice includes an approach towards humans that grants their freedom, strengthens their capacity to love and takes into account their dependence on affection – or not.

When people regard themselves as “religiously unmusical” and explain why they would “rather not” make use of the ecclesiastical repertoire of religious practice, they never say this was due to lack of interest in freedom or that the category of a passionate life would not mean anything to them. It rather seems highly unlikely to them that the culture of faith they came to know as religion could contribute to giving their life width and depth. During a consultation, a physician, Protestant, brought the matter to the point: after having diagnosed that I was a theologian, she thought she had to apologize to me for “not going there anymore” and then added: “You know, it just doesn’t do me any good. It simply doesn’t feel good being reproached for being myself every Sunday.”

This is presumably not an isolated case. It occurs often that people find themselves faced with the *grotesque choice of enjoying being human or being religious*. To opt for the latter would mean to adjust to a dull awareness of life and to accept being a guest in one’s own life. Why should anyone let him- or herself be convinced to such a way of living? This would be – in a non-confessional sense – unevangelical.

The best thing that can emerge from religious practice is *that a person appears as human being*, with everything that comes with it: not as a do-gooder, someone who understands everyone and everything, but as someone who is equipped with a mysterious predilection for freedom and love and has therefore assumed being the image of God in this respect for thousands of years. Being human furthermore

includes: realizable and unrealizable desires that have nothing to do with egoism, a reasoned individual volition which nobody should ever be dissuaded from by arguing it would affront a dubious will of God, sovereign decisions that fit the person one has become – and the happiness to throw oneself into activities that are perceived as meaningful without immediately being accused of works righteousness.

In the following I would like to (1.) further elaborate the problem outlined above, (2.) examine the latent understanding of religion of a widespread liturgical practice, (3.) outline human dignity as a directive of religious practice, (4.) elucidate the connection between awareness of life and culture of faith and finally (5.) exemplarily deduce consequences for theological work.

2 Being human or being religious? Outlines of a dilemma

In many church services, once the address of welcome has been said there is a sudden drop in atmosphere: things are serious now; even though only seconds ago we were talking about the nice weather. The first few minutes may have felt like a trip to a marketplace of opportunities. We were encouraged to contribute to the upcoming parish events, bake cakes for the church fete or accommodate ecumenical visitors from abroad. After a maximum of eight minutes, however, there is the sobering diagnosis uttered by the liturgist. It seems to be the overarching theme of the service: *the people and God are having relationship problems again*. The problem is, you see, that people are [...] so obsessed with their personal freedom, and addicted to appreciation, and notoriously narcissistic. It is no surprise then, that God must be aggrieved, hurt, offended, and angry – especially since during the week no one is talking to Him. It is a difficult relationship that is being analyzed every week.

This problem is mentioned right at the beginning, in the opening prayer, which is the “little evaluation of the week”. And we get the same results every week: people just will not stop being human. This week, they have been overly preoccupied with themselves again. They have not been welcoming enough, or thinking of others enough. They have thought of God too little. And what is worst: at least sometimes, they have acted according to their own volition. On top of this, there was too much worry in them and too little devotion, too much looking-after-themselves and too little following-Jesus’s-example. Too much or too little energy was spent on the respective tasks. In the opening sections of a church service as well as in the Kyrie, intercessions and the Eucharist, what is cultivated in a range

of manners is a complex which in German would be called “Sieblowa”, from “*Sieh bloß, was Du angerichtet hast!*”, “Just look at what you did!”²

It is interesting to note that in many cases, the person ministering is not aware of the perpetuation of this practice, or sees and presents it as an exception owed to the proper. This may be a sign of how uncritically traditional liturgical and anthropological paradigms are accepted and granted legitimation beyond the discourse of contemporary theology. What plays into this is a tradition which has been kept alive for thousands of years, in which religion is used to discipline people.

To make a long story short: humankind, as represented by every single person attending the church service, has once again proven to be a disgrace before God. Humankind’s being human seems to be an eternal thorn in God’s side, and the wound has to be treated and redressed every eight days. The impression conveyed is of God luckily having church services as the one chance He gets to finally get a word in again and show humankind the yellow card. Not that the liturgist is not full of sympathy. However, it is sympathy for God that is expressed, not for the people present, as He is once again the sufferer of the week.

This form of Christian religious practice is not the only one that exists, but there is no doubt that it is a common one.³ It is loveless and, in terms of theology, not thought out. Nevertheless, a wide range of liturgical texts and hymns provided promotes this practice, which is kept alive by a number of questionable anthropological premises. Thus a large and important part of Christian culture of faith perpetuates this dilemma: people are not only reproached for being human but the very repertoire they need in order to be human, e.g. their own free will, is vilified. And yet being human inevitably means being master of one’s own life and one’s own will, which includes a culture of self-esteem as well as proving oneself as a free-thinking individual.

A negative awareness of life is an inappropriate toll for religion to take. This holds especially true for a religion which emphasizes freedom and love, and whose theology includes companionship throughout life. A person who has undertaken several attempts to get to know Christian church practice and finds

² In transactional analysis, a phrase which highlights what is usually left unspoken in clear words is used to give a name to stereotypical patterns of interaction which can be found in various communication situations and which assign *a priori* set roles to the parties involved. See Eric Berne, *Spiele der Erwachsenen. Psychologie der menschlichen Beziehungen*, Hamburg (Rowohlt) 2006.

³ For a detailed account of this practice, see Wilfried Engemann, *Vom Umgang mit Menschen im Gottesdienst. Probleme der impliziten liturgischen Anthropologie*, in: *EvTh* 72/2, 2012, 101–117.

that this culture of faith demands being very strict with oneself will perceive a lot of what the religion has to offer as a threat rather than an invitation. The unpleasant experiences which are part of being human, such as impatience, aggression, or a sense of alienation from other people which we fail to understand, are discussed in the “evaluation of the week”; they are presented as things which anger God and which one is supposed to be able to switch off. Many people decide not to endure having their very being human questioned and challenged this way any longer. Does this inevitably set the seal on their verdict as being “religiously unmusical”?

There is a wide range of explanations of and excuses for one’s “religious unmusicality”. What they have in common is an attempt to describe the *unease* which people experience when they become aware (in retrospect) of religion’s influence on their lives. They are *personal* stories of people’s “unease in religion”. Therefore, they are not qualified as interpretations of one’s own perceived distance from religion; they cannot be called “wrong” in this context, and neither do these people have a wrong or insufficient understanding of religion which keeps them from “experiencing it properly”.

Christian religious practice is a form of being human, or becoming human. It is there for the people – not the other way round.⁴ It is not an end in itself, and it is no set of rules in order to subdue any kind of hysteria. However, this is the impression which is given, said Max Weber about 100 years ago, and therefore preferred to think of himself as religiously unmusical rather than take any more practice lessons.⁵ If, on the other hand, Christian religion were perceived as a deeply human approach to one’s own life, if a sense of eternity came from its inherent resources of freedom and love – who then would call themselves religiously unmusical?

Those who feel responsible for the church, in a theological, pastoral or any other way, should not worry about seemingly more and more people losing their faith. Instead, they should ask themselves whether *it might not in fact be the case that a religious practice is cultivated which makes people lose their faith because*

⁴ This maxim is reflected in hundreds of small positions of points in Judeo-Christian tradition, ranging from a clarifying explanation of Shabbat as a day of rest in both Old and New Testament to the reasons for Luther’s reform of the church service. The reasons why religious practice has in so many cases nevertheless developed in different directions, e.g. from the point of view of psychology or religion, are worth being studied separately.

⁵ Weber coined the idea of being “religiously unmusical”, who said of himself that he was simply one of the modern and “religiously ,unmusical’ people” to whom “caring for the afterlife” as “the most real thing in life” meant nothing. Quoted in Dirk Kaesler, ‘Religiös unmusikalisch’. Anmerkungen zum Verhältnis von Jürgen Habermas zu Max Weber, in: <http://www.literaturkritik.de/public/rezension>, last viewed June 6, 2009.

their religious faith is too disconnected from human life. Such a faith can only be lost. And there is no reason to bemoan this.

3 Premises and purposes of religious practice in theology and church

3.1 On the issue of the purpose of religious practice

To ask for a purpose of religion is not self-evident. One can raise *empirical or theological doubts*. Empirical doubts because some people – depending on in which family, community or region they are raised and which school they attend – experience themselves as being religious *without* pursuing any purpose in the first place. Through religion they are introduced to a certain understanding of existence to which they position themselves sooner or later in a particular way: in an either affirmative, grateful or rather hostile, resentful, mourning or ailing way. By means of a certain religious practice, which they experience physically, emotionally and spiritually, they become acquainted with a repertoire of how to view life, how to relate to themselves and to others etc. *However*, from this entirety of experience an implied purpose of what was conveyed to them as “religious” arises.

Whoever is furthermore professionally concerned with religion cannot do without clear terms concerning the purpose of religion for the experience of existence. How else could one support someone who has developed mental health problems not least due to his or her participation in a certain religious practice and wants to recover but not give up on religion?

Theologically, the question on the purpose of religious practice was dismissed – among other things – by arguing that in matters of faith humans are actually not faced with the choice of achieving certain things “by means of religion”, but that instead it is all about approving or denying God’s claim. Nevertheless the question on the purpose of religious practice has actually always played an important role within the history of faith and theology, as it revolves around its gain and meaning as well as its motives – and around the intention of those who are pastorally and liturgically responsible for the religious practice of Christianity. Existing religious practice can be estimated, accompanied and critically scrutinized only by looking at its “for-the-sake-of-what”⁶. In other words:

⁶ Cf. the wider philosophical horizon of the question of purpose in Aristotle’s discussion on ends, “for the sake of which” something is done. to. ou- e[neka e;scaton (the end for the sake of which

What does it ideally lead to? What is thereby at stake? And for whose sake should it be taken into account by theology?

Theology would have no place at university if it did not answer these questions – together with other humanities, yet with different arguments – with: “*for the sake of the human being*”. But what does this mean? Under the pretext of bringing delight, so far every religion has been abused as an ideology, in which there is no interest for the individual as the subject of his or her own life that is open from end to end, but in which individuals are misused to secure the advantages of third parties. Thus, what follows shall be a brief stocktaking of the concept of religion, in which I shall concentrate on the sediments the different understandings of religion have left in current liturgical practice.

3.2 Looking backward: Heathen patterns in the religious practice of Christianity?

Already in ancient times the bells rang when it got religious – more precisely the alarm bells. According to earliest known evidences,⁷ which date back to the third century before Christ, being religious means refraining from taking an originally intended action because of a fear of gods. A religious person is someone, who lets him- or herself be convinced to refrain from taking a certain action by something that is perceived as experience of God (e.g. an oracle). For centuries *warning and denial* have coined the concept of religion. In more positive words: from time immemorial religious people have had a conscience. *They are equipped with a sort of inner traffic light, which, however, consists of only yellow and red lights.*

Such an understanding of religion, that is based on the observance of and compliance with a binding and ruling will of someone else, is preserved in both etymological derivations of the term: Cicero (106–43 BC) thought the term *religio* goes back to the word *relegere*.⁸ Thus a *homo religiosus* is someone, who thoroughly envisions what the gods want and how they want it. He shows the gods

ultimately everything else is done), cf. Aristoteles, *Ethica Nicomachea*, rec. I. Bywater, Oxford (Clarendon) 1894 (reprint 1954) 1097a, 21f.

⁷ These evidences can be found in the texts of Titus Maccius Plautus (ca. 254–184 BC) and Aulus Gellius (ca. 130–180 AD); cf. Carl-Heinz Ratschow, Art. Religion II–IV, in: Joachim Ritter (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 8 (R–Sc), Darmstadt (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft) 1992, 633–644, 633f.

⁸ Robert Muth, *Vom Wesen römischer religio*, in: Wolfgang Haase (ed.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt II*, vol. 16, Berlin / New York (De Gruyter) 1978, 290–354, 349.

respect by carefully complying with the cult rules and hopes that they leave him in peace in return. Three hundred years later Lactantius, rhetoric teacher and Christian apologist (ca. 250–320 AD), on the other hand, derives the term *religio* from *religare*, from the dutiful human commitment to God. Thus to him religiousness is a “shackle” by means of which humans become “*religati*”, humans bound to God.⁹

Tracing the development of the understanding of religion in Christianity over the course of the centuries reveals that – with few exceptions¹⁰ – *in practice* it played hardly any role, whether one had Cicero’s or Lactantius’ concept in mind, whether one conceptualized religious practice as rather “heathen” or “Christian”,¹¹ as both lines of interpretation repeatedly interpenetrated each other. Whoever considers him- or herself religious, is additionally required to fulfill certain duties, which means to correctly comply with the cult rules in the first case and to create an effortful relationship with God in the second case: As far as Christianity is concerned, Thomas Aquinas states that religion is “eine Tugend, in der wir Gott zu Dienst (ad Dei servitium) und Ehren etwas darbringen.”¹² [“a virtue by which we do something to serve (ad Dei servitium) and worship God”]. Thus, religion is a “service of God” (genitivus objectivus) that has to be fulfilled, because God’s glory demands it.

Martin Luther tried to make plausible that church service should actually be a “service of man” by characterizing it as *beneficium Dei*, as a benevolent act of God towards humans. This was not only a change in theological thinking. The new culture of faith that came up with the Reformation was – not exclusively but yet particularly in Luther’s thinking – connected to a new awareness of life. All of a sudden religious practice and becoming a subject go hand in hand – in a relieving way: Faith allows humans to be human without having a guilty conscience and salvation is not conveyed by cultic vision, touching or participation, but becomes subject to human communication by speaking, listening and understanding.

Luther’s redefinition of religious practice could not prevent that its “heathen heritage” has been dragged along in Protestant culture of faith for centuries. Already in Lutheran Orthodoxy being religious meant again that people sorrowfully struggle for their salvation in church services, that humans sacrifice reason and bring themselves to affirm dogmas that seem absurd as well as irrelevant to

⁹ See Laktanz, *Divinae institutiones* IV, 28, 2.

¹⁰ These exceptions include – besides Luther’s theology – Eckhart’s understanding of religion as a culture of serenity.

¹¹ See especially Augustin, *Retractiones* I, 12, 9 as well as Augustin, *De vera religione* I, § 1.

¹² Thomas von Aquin, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, 9, 186, 1. Lat: „Religio [...] est quaedam virtus per quam aliquis ad Dei servitium et cultum aliquid adhibet.“

them. We observe that since (and despite) the age of Enlightenment whole generations have assumed that the main purpose of religion is to call them to order, in order to make their coexistence bearable. In the texts of those times, that translate Christian faith into religious practice, there is hardly any talk of the freedom of Christians, but much more about moral obligation, instructions for scrupulous self-examination and self-frightening – whereas, by comparison, only little is found about consolation.¹³ Voltaire dryly commented on the religion of pietism and the Enlightenment by saying: It's better to have a bad religion than none, after all people need “un grand frein“ – “a tight rein”.¹⁴

It is thanks to liberal theology, which greatly benefits from Friedrich Schleiermacher, that the term religion was reconnected to humankind's being human and that the relationship to God was regarded as given rather than something that has to be established by practice.¹⁵ To put human life and existence in the focus of religion – however, without being inquisitorial or burdensome – means to let human beings appear as the image of God, equipped with the ability to lead a life in freedom and love, without being condemned for their feelings, reason or behavior.

However, the resulting pleas for a humane understanding of religion, had – as the liturgical documents from this period reveal – only little impact on the offers for identification that were provided in liturgical practice. The analogies between heathen antiquity and church practice – as far as utilizing people for religion is concerned – continued to remain. They mainly concern the cultic sources of stress, which consist in complying with cultic rules necessary for salvation in non-Christian religions and in a constant control of relationship and ritualized self-incrimi-

13 Cf. David Hume, *Dialogues concerning natural religion* (1799), in: Thomas H. Green / Thomas H. Grose (eds.), *The Philosophical Works*, vol. 2, London 1882–1886, reprint Aalen (Scientia-Verlag) 1964, 463–466; Ger.: Günter Gawlick (ed.), *Dialog über die natürliche Religion*, Hamburg (Meiner) 1980, 112–120.

14 « Il est très vrai que par tous pays la populace a besoin d'un grand frein » – by this he meant religion. Voltaire, *Atheisme*, Section première, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, London 1764, 1367f.

15 Here I not only refer to Rudolf Bultmann's (1884–1975) attempt, to reformulate the interest in the myth into an interest in humankind, but also to previous, less spectacular theses, like the one proposed by Alois E. Biedermann (1819–1885): Religion is the „Beziehung des Menschen auf Gott, auf Grund der Beziehung Gottes zu den Menschen“ [the relationship of humankind with God on grounds of God's relationship with humankind] (cited by Heinrich M. Schmidinger, *Religion VIII*, in: *HWPh*, vol. 8 [R–Sc], Darmstadt [Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft] 1992, 683–701, 685). See also Eduard Zeller's (1814–1908) understanding of religion as „Verhältnis des Wissens und Handelns zum Gefühl,“ resultierend aus der Beziehung „des persönlichen Selbstbewusstseins [...] aufs Gottesbewusstsein“ [a relationship between knowledge and action on the one hand and emotion on the other hand, resulting from the relationship of self-consciousness and consciousness of God] (Eduard Zeller, *Über das Wesen der Religion*, in: Otto Leuze [ed.], *Kleine Schriften*, vol. 3, Berlin [Reimer] 1910, 127 f.).

nation in the Christian culture of faith. God's love for humankind is characterized by a great "despite". The liturgical dialogues indicate in no uncertain terms that God loves humans only "despite", i.e. despite them being human and thus sinners. Imagine someone with whom you would like to have close relationship, but this person tells you he or she loves you only "despite" you being who and how you are, because it is in his or her nature. Could you really love this person?

In this respect Sigmund Freud's *religious criticism* has not lost any of its meaning. Freud does not only refer to the Middle Ages or Francke's pietism. He also has Christian everyday life and Sunday practice of the second last turn of the century in mind, when he states that religion primarily finds its expression in *fostering a conscience of guilt* that is pervaded by a *feeling of a threatening withdrawal of affection*. Thus the most effective way to experience the love of God is to increase one's feelings of guilt¹⁶ – which in practice goes along with constantly declaring one's own unworthiness. Whoever refuses to accept Freud's verdict as that of a despiser of religion, can probably be provoked to thinking by Falk Wagner who taught Systematic Theology at the Faculty of Protestant Theology in Vienna until 1998: Up until his death he thought, „dass die faktisch-historisch ‚nach‘ der Aufklärung [...] bestehenden Religionskulturen kirchlicher und außerkirchlicher Provenienz immer noch ‚vor‘ ihrer Aufklärung und Kritik stehen”¹⁷ [that from a historical perspective “post”-Enlightenment religious cultures in- and outside church are in fact yet to be challenged by the ideas of Enlightenment and criticism].

Taking into consideration the different understandings of religion outlined above, it is hardly surprising that empirical religious research is mainly interested in issues that concern the relationship between people and church, dogma and church service: it inquires people's degree of approval of certain dogmas and beliefs, the degree of attachment to church and its officials and resulting experiences of closeness and distance as well as the degree of frequency of use of services offered by church (primarily worship services) and the participation in so called “church life.”¹⁸ The question is, however, whether people, who approve of

¹⁶ See especially Sigmund Freud, Zur Einführung des Narzissmus, Gesammelte Werke, vol. X, Frankfurt a.M. (Fischer) 1999, 169; Sigmund Freud, Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse, Gesammelte Werke, vol. XI, Frankfurt a.M. (Fischer) 1999, 344; Sigmund Freud, Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion, Gesammelte Werke, vol. XVI, Frankfurt a.M. (Fischer) 1999, 167, 192.

¹⁷ Falk Wagner, Art. Religion II (Theologiegeschichtlich und systematisch-theologisch), in: TRE 28, Berlin (De Gruyter) 1998, 522–542, 523.

¹⁸ Cf. also Reiner Preul, Art. Religion III (praktisch-theologisch), in: TRE 28, Berlin (De Gruyter) 1998, 546–559, esp. 548–552.

all these things only to a small degree, can or shall be characterized as unreligious – particularly given the many “heathen aspects” of this religious practice? Whoever claims to gain an adequate picture of the religious practice of Christianity in such a way, merely gets to know how many or how few people currently (still) try to get something out of the ecclesiastical repertoire for their individual religiosity. Yet, empirical research could also prove that strong, distinct individual Christianity can exist without being connected to church. Furthermore, particularly adolescents show a great interest in the question of God and the question of where we come from and where we are going, they believe in life after death more often than adults do, however, without being able to warm to dogmatic and denominational rules and views.¹⁹ In my opinion these observations mirror the attitude towards political parties on the one hand and politics itself on the other hand, often referred to as the attitude of the so called “Generation Berlin”:²⁰ Although this generation is very interested in political issues and they position themselves passionately as well as competently within the socio-political discourse, they refuse to refer to the program or the representatives of a certain political party, let alone consider becoming a member of a political party.

3.3 Perpetuation of the drama of salvation through religion?

Many worship services show *features of an ancient drama of salvation*: Basically humankind is lost. People broke the rules and caused a mess. As a matter of fact God should punish and abandon them. But behold and see! A savior sacrifices himself and puts away sin and the worst is averted. However, this benefits only those who share the premises of the play, which has often been understood as “faith” in Christianity and is extensively dealt with in the stock of texts and songs of the church service.

To be ironic here does not mean to eliminate soteriological and Christological perspectives of reflection from the discussion of Christian culture of faith. It means, however, to relieve the *resulting religious practice* from a *pre-Enlightenment as well as pre-reformatory salvation business*. When people get the impres-

¹⁹ Cf. Karl-Fritz Daiber, Religion unter den Bedingungen der Moderne. Die Situation in der BRD, Marburg (Diagonal) 1995, as well as the instructive overview given by Martin Rothgangel, Religiosität und Kirchenbindung Jugendlicher heute, in: PTh, 45, 2010, 137–142.

²⁰ Cf. Heinz Bude, Generation Berlin, Berlin (Merve) 2001. With the term “Generation Berlin” the author refers to those born from 1960 to 1965 – the last generation that was raised in Western Germany before the German reunification. The author thinks this generation is especially capable of giving fresh impetus to today’s Germany because of their specific social biography.

sion that church services have to take place because they have put their salvation at risk yet again by being human, theological intervention is needed.

Having revolted against such a concept of religion and having put theology and church in mind not to misunderstand Christian cult as a salvation business is one of the greatest (but at the same time least appreciated) achievements of Karl Barth. On the other hand, Barth radicalized questioning humankind's being human through religion and carried it to extremes by creating whole maps of the hopelessness of humankind²¹ and by stating that religion can only express people's horror at themselves and thus marks their daily need for grace by which it proves to be a true religion.²²

Given all these objections – how could theology be charged with the task of taking care that in Christianity a religious practice is established, in which humankind's being human is directive and purpose at the same time? It is *necessary* to proceed in such a way, because humankind's being human is not only the best thing religious practice can bring about, but also the only thing that can be asked of people, the thing they are “good at” and that does not overburden them; for people can adopt religion as their own only to the extent as it strengthens them in being human. This is not least a question of (their) dignity.

4 Human dignity as directive of religious practice?²³

Whoever is professionally concerned with religion interacts with people in a way that is linked to four different professions: the medical, legal, educational and pastoral profession. All these professions are characterized by working directly with people, require direct communication and deal with central and very often intimate questions of life. Figuratively speaking, they all operate on the open heart. Thus people who are professionally concerned with basic human needs, such as health, education, justice or religion very often enjoy special trust and have to meet high moral standards. Their foundation is the acknowledgment of human dignity.

²¹ Cf. Karl Barth's great essays on sin in KD IV/1, 458–520 as well as KD IV/2, 432–509.

²² Cf. Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, München (Kaiser) 1922, esp. 215–221, 231–237.

²³ For a more detailed account on human dignity cf. Wilfried Engemann, *Menschenwürde und Gottesdienst. Erniedrigte und Beleidigte im Kontext liturgischer Praxis?*, in: *WzM* 64/3, 2012, 239–252.

Medical, educational and legal guidelines for the treatment of people are very strict. This shows that human dignity is something pregiven and does not depend on achievements or certain qualities. Yet in practice it can be ignored. Although in practice the challenge is to recognize individuals as human beings and treat them as such, i.e. to value and appreciate them, it is open to question, whether this is really achieved in the individual case and remains to be seen from case to case. As Eilert Herms puts it, human dignity is, above all, „a directive for dealing with it”²⁴ and has to prove in communication.

What is true for the treatment of people in hospitals, educational institutions or in court should especially be true for their treatment in church services. For example: human beings are no objects upon which someone can act in whatever way – upon which religion can be “performed”. It all has to do with letting them become the subjects of their lives (again). Expectations of all kinds require compelling reasons that are in the interest of the individual. Whatever could be perceived as humiliation, insult or embarrassment must be avoided. Furthermore, it has to be assured that people’s capacities are not exceeded by what is demanded of them, for example that they are able to follow the sermon.

Bearing in mind these maxims, an analysis of how people are actually treated in church service would reveal that – at least in some cases – human dignity is acknowledged in a limited way. In such services freedom is only addressed as the “freedom of [...]”, of bad influences, inclinations and guilt, but they are, however, speechless or even limiting when it comes to justified autonomy or the freedom of leading a self-determined life. In such services the demand for love of neighbor and love of God are notoriously connected to a defamation of self-love. They cultivate a human ideal, which corresponds – despite preaching reformatory commonplaces – to the perfectibility thinking of past ages: Letting people constantly repeat that they achieve “too little” regarding the important things in life – particularly regarding love – implicitly implies that by trying just a little bit harder they could satisfy God’s alleged ideal of humans.

A church service that takes the Christian culture of self reflection seriously, strengthens human dignity by allowing people to perceive themselves in a different way, opens up the possibility to rethink and to experience repentance, which inevitably goes along with the discovery of one’s own freedom. Church services are places where people can rediscover their own dignity, that can lift them up and make them walk taller than they did before.²⁵

²⁴ Cf. Eilert Herms, *Menschenwürde*, in: *ZevKR* 49, 2004, 121–146, 146.

²⁵ In this connection cf. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s remarkable idea to regard “showing respect for oneself” as being at the center of the “three religions”. Cf. Johann Wolfgang von

5 On the facticity of cultures of faith and their effect on people's awareness of life

Christianity can be described as *a culture of faith with diverse subcultures*, as for example the religious practice of monasticism, pietism or any contemporary expression of Christian religion. Looking at Christian cultures of faith in such a way means focusing less on the dogmatic profiles of a particular era or denomination, but on the repertoire of communication of their religious practice, i.e. the whole world of signs and symbols, which includes their manifest conceptions of humankind, God and the world. After all, besides being based on historical documents, religious communication is based on agreed, as well as implicit conventions, on recommendations and taboos, on hymns and rites, on legitimized and sanctioned ways of treating people and things or dealing with experiences and situations.

In this respect, church services are focal points, inasmuch as they assert the formative character of a particular culture of faith. For example by a corresponding culture of prayer and song, a specific culture relating to the handling of bread and wine and not to be underestimated is the culture of dealing with scriptures.

The way of dealing with scriptures in church services – and the attempts that are taken (or neglected) to link them to authentic situations – is one of the most significant parameters for the orientation of religious practices towards humankind's being human. Sermons should not refer to distressing, astonishing or “incredible everyday stories” in order to illustrate biblical texts, to make them more plausible by means of such confirming stories and to induce people to agree with the texts provided. Sermons, as well as their references to particular texts, should rather enable people to understand their life and to find an attitude towards their life that allows them to “lead” their life. Thus the challenge we are faced with in dealing with scriptures is just the other way round: because it is part of our being human that certain things happen to us, because there are things that might not be understood but nevertheless have to be mastered and coped with, because there are experiences that need to be talked over (which were the reason for preaching already 2000 years ago), we deal with experiences of faith of that time.

It is undeniable that the texts were written by humans for humans. Although this statement sounds banal, it is frequently subverted – as if the scriptures gained in importance and dignity by *not* being written by humans. How much

Goethe, Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre oder die Entsagenden (1821), Werkausgabe in 10 Bänden, vol. 5, ed. by Bettina Hesse, Köln (Könemann Classics) 1997, 172.

more humanity could there be in sermons, if preachers did not use the scriptures as an opportunity to *volens volens* side with God and to reproach the parish for insufficiently “corresponding to” or “complying with” the texts instead of making them understand themselves better in the light of these texts. To attach importance to biblical texts without any plausible necessity involves the danger that the ethics they contain and the personal experiences and insights of the listeners are pit against each other.

By means of its different traditional modes of expression and flexibility and freedom concerning liturgy, church services implicitly and explicitly “cultivate” a specific way of believing and thus convey a certain understanding of existence, of the relationship of humans to the world – and provide specific possibilities of identification. In my opinion the strongest cultural or formative effect of a culture of faith is that it *provides its participants a specific way of understanding themselves*. By means of adopting a certain culture of faith people simultaneously adopt a certain way of dealing with themselves, a certain way of positing and “judging” themselves within the horizon of the world that has immediate effects on their awareness of life, which in turn becomes part of this culture of faith.

Both, Reformation as well as Enlightenment added new meaning to the *awareness of life* as an experience arising from and accompanied by the human practice of belief. Both eras accelerated the process of decay of a Christian-religious ideology, according to which a discontinuity between faith and awareness of life literally seemed inevitable and “biblically” (i.e. by means of a certain understanding of “discipleship”) justified. I refer here to the exclusion of all corporal and earthly aspects, to the practice of piety of the Middle Ages and partly also of pietism that culminated in self-control, self-incrimination and self-punishment. Luther’s support of an essentially human culture of faith that – as they say these days – holistically benefits the individual was at the same time a struggle for a new awareness of life without fear of impending disaster or of eternal suffering; it was connected to a quiet and “comforted conscience” that allows Christians to passionately turn to and throw themselves into life – be it by work or something else.

In everyday language *awareness of life* means the feeling out of which we approach our social world and are connected to it. The sense of oneself on the one hand and the sense of the world or of others on the other hand are two sides of the same all-encompassing awareness of life. One could also speak of a “feeling of existence”²⁶ in this regard. It is of great importance, as we basically experience it

26 Cf. Gottlob Ernst Schulze, *Grundriss der Philosophischen Wissenschaften*, vol. 1, Wittenberg (Zimmermann) 1788, 14-17; Wilhelm Wundt, *Grundzüge der physiologischen Psychologie*, Leipzig (Engelmann) 1911, pass.

as the deeply felt result of our life, as a sort of emotional outcome that results from the sum of all our perceptions, sensations and insights. *Our awareness of life mirrors the emotional overall evaluation of our life.* It can change over time, but in contrast to moods or tempers it does not surprise us with new results every few hours. It gives our life a specific foundation over long periods and is greatly influenced by the culture of faith in which we have established – or from which we have distanced ourselves.

I would not have chosen this connection as the subject of my talk, if the religious practice of Christianity did have positive impacts on people's awareness of life alone by referring to Jesus, quoting the Bible and by putting mercy before justice under certain conditions. Neither do we have to address this connection as if there were no such cases, where people find their place in life, become intolerant towards experiences of unfreedom, willingly accept disadvantages for the sake of others without perceiving all of this as an impairment of their life due to participating in (the) culture of faith.

But the religious practice of Christianity or the culture of faith that defines it respectively, can also make people sick or make them despair, it can have disturbing effects as well as it can lead to neurotic and psychotic behavior.²⁷ Among others, the first psychological novel of world literature – Karl-Philipp Moritz' shocking, highly autobiographic portrait of “Anton Reiser” from 1786 can be read as the documentation of such a process. Referring to Anton's dying awareness of life, the novel describes the dissolving effect of a culture of faith that is based on radical pietism.²⁸ About 200 years later Tilmann Moser describes the history of his “God poisoning”, which impeded him „sich als Mensch zu finden und andere als Menschen zu suchen“²⁹ [in his quest for himself and others as human beings].

Comparing these frustrations and the ones concerning the religious practice of Christianity mentioned above reveals two modes of experience in which the human awareness of life is deadened. They concern the issues of freedom and

²⁷ All attempts to prove that believers are healthier and live longer than atheists failed; however, effects regarding a connection between religion and health could be observed, but it all depends on the nature of belief – and of atheism. Cf. Ronald Grossarth-Maticke, *Formen der Religiosität und ihre Auswirkungen auf Gesundheit und Kreativität*, in: *WzM*, 62/4, 2010, 313–331.

²⁸ Karl-Philipp Moritz, *Anton Reiser. Ein psychologischer Roman [1785/1786]*, in: Heide Hollmer / Albert Meier (eds.), *Karl-Philipp Moritz. Werke in zwei Bänden*, vol. 1, *Dichtungen und Schriften zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde*, Frankfurt a.M. (Deutscher Klassiker Verlag) 1999.

²⁹ In the blurb of Tilmann Moser, *Gottesvergiftung*, Frankfurt a.M. (Suhrkamp) 1977. Horst Krieger appropriately described Moser's experience as „Entzweiung des Menschen mit sich selbst“ [the separation of human beings from themselves] (Horst Krieger, *Die Krankheit an Gott*, in: *Die Zeit* 49, 1976, 12).

love in two different respects. There is, for one thing, the *permanent conditioning and concession of the appreciation of humans as human beings*, who are made to understand that they are only loved “despite”. They are faced with the constant challenge to minimize this insuperable “despite” by trying to adapt to the ideals of a certain culture of faith. And there is, on the other hand, the *radical decoring of the concept of freedom*. Freedom is reduced to freedom of guilt, death and the Devil in such a way that freedom in the sense of leading a self-determined life is hardly ever considered. Furthermore, dubious concepts of freedom and love are communicated as a reward for relinquishing being human: for separating from oneself, for renouncing self-love and for ignoring one’s own volition.

However, for a positive awareness of life it is of great significance whether freedom and love are experienced as something that add width and depth to life. Without freedom we experience our life as narrow and oppressive, without love as shallow and trivial. This is the reason why – when preparing church services – people are to be envisaged as autonomous subjects who want and have to bind to their own reasons and need to experience the giving and receiving of love, without being accused of not being capable of the former and not worth the latter.

6 Faith as a resource of a good awareness of life and as a category of passion

Faith only exists as the “faith of someone”, only as an attitude in which someone experiences him- or herself as believer. This attitude, i.e. faith, always feels somehow. What and how people believe is in correspondence with the feelings that are constituted, provoked and increased by this faith.

When the authors of biblical texts speak of the meaning of faith, they also speak of the emotions accompanying faith in which vividness and authenticity of faith seem to be expressed: faith is discovered in a re-appearance of the own expectation, manifests itself in a sense of responsibility and lets people want certain things but others not. Faith emerges as a feeling of hope and takes shape as a feeling of determination, to “risk oneself”. It emerges as a feeling of gratefulness and wholehearted commitment. Thus faith is immediately connected to feelings that accompany everything people do: their desires, judgments, volition and action. Such a faith cannot be reduced to a category of certainty, it is also a category of passion.

Therefore it would be misleading to stage the communication of the gospel in a way that gives the impression that true faith expresses itself mainly in the

discontinuity between sustained dogmatic beliefs and the actual awareness of life of a person.³⁰ However, what we experience as awareness of life is, as shown above, not a Viennese *mélange* of sunshine, freedom from pain and waltz, but the *experience of a feeling of consistency in our life*. On the one hand, it appears when we feel that the life that we lead *belongs to us*, e.g. because it mirrors our well-founded attitudes or follows our own deliberate decisions – experienced as freedom. On the other hand, the experience of consistency echoes that appreciation and affection; they are not perceived as a unilateral transfer to others, but are embedded in reciprocity, in which affection is as well granted as received.

A criterion for the judgment of Christian cultures of faith – as well as religious practice in general – is its relevance for the acquisition of a positive awareness of life as described above, its usefulness for the struggle for freedom and for a life in relationships in which people are accepted for their own sake and experience themselves as loving persons. The area of faith is no inaccessible – and moreover no uninviting – *terra extra*, not something that is only for religiously musical virtuosi, but a culture of faith in which humans appear as human beings and do not have to be anything else than human beings.

Of course, this implies to call into question and reformulate those elements that are commonly regarded as “Christian” practice, that increase the impression of a salvation business or that demand something of people that cannot be considered as an expression of their humanity. To provide three examples:

(1.) One of the most important cultural goods of Christianity, people’s critical self-reflection under the premise of their acceptability – called *repentance* – is morally distorted by liturgically working off lists of human deficiencies in a way as if repentance was merely a scope for extraordinarily honest or notoriously self-doubting people, i.e. as if it was part of a *culture of confession*. But repentance is a *culture of awareness*. In the language of the New Testament it is the indispensable meta-mind of life, a meta-nou/j,³¹ necessary in order to be able to take an inner perspective and to rethink, to question one’s priorities, detect adaptation effects of unfreedom, to feel remorse and to reorientate.

(2.) The life principle of *discipleship* is considered one of the most difficult challenges of the religious practice of Christianity. Who would deny that? It is, however, wrong to explain this difficulty by stating that discipleship requires being self-abandoning and ruthless to oneself, that it does not know anything

³⁰ This can be increased even further by following the staurological cliché according to which an inconvenient awareness of life is a welcome rehearsal for the imperturbability of faith. Without renunciation faith would not cost anything.

³¹ Philosophically speaking the term meta,noia (repentance) refers to a meta-nou/j (meta-mind) in the sense of a change of thinking and a comprehensive revision of self-image and world view.

about self-love, and only acknowledges the giving side of love. Such a religiously cloaked objection of every kind of self-love or even of self-reference pulls the rug from under people's feet.³² Discipleship as promoted in the gospel, however, supports people in freeing themselves from restraint and in reaching the center of their life. The seriousness of the idea of discipleship consists in life getting serious, that people really start living, reach the presence of life and are not corruptible regarding the question of freedom. Living in discipleship means not to sneak off from your life.

(3.) What is furthermore – very often misleadingly – called into play regarding the Christian culture of faith is the *whole spectrum of explicit laws and instructions*, from the first commandment to the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. Purport of the commentation: “This is the will of God; but as we are human we are hardly able to fulfill it.” The usefulness of Christian religious practice for life greatly depends on whether we succeed in detecting the anthropological dimension of the life knowledge of the tradition it is based upon as well as in understanding it as a human approach to our existence. “I am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt have no other Gods before me.” Why? Because other gods – as the dance around the golden calf has shown – do not let people be human. They deprive them of their dignity and seek entertainment by making them perform cultic rites. They make people “jump through a hoop” but do not accept them as their image. Those gods subvert human autonomy. They regard people as their rivals. Because of their experience with freedom and love people have become a real threat to them. *This is why* people should better not have other gods – except the one who lets them be human. The Beatitudes follow a similar pattern. Let us take a closer look at one of them: “Blessed are the pure in heart: for they will see God.” This is, however, by no means an appeal in the sense of “Keep your nose clean!” In the language of the Bible “pure heart” means an undivided heart that is not corruptible, that ensures that people are committed to their conscience and do not get involved with anything that contradicts their judgment and thus can turn to life in an undivided manner.

32 Typical prayer requests that are frequently mentioned in one and the same breath stereotypically include begging for a deeper devotion to God, for greater affection for others and for more disengagement from ourselves. In the sense of “situation pickup”, the Protestant prayer book suggests the following wording: Wir sind „im Gewissen überführt [...] des hinhaltenden Widerstands gegen dich, der tötenden Gleichgültigkeit gegen unsere Mitmenschen und der unheilbaren Verlorenheit an uns selbst“ [We are convicted by conscience of our continuing resistance against you, of our mortal indifference to others and the irremediable lostness to ourselves] (Kirchenleitung der Vereinigten Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche Deutschlands (ed.), *Evangelisches Gottesdienstbuch*, Berlin (Verlagsgemeinschaft Evangelisches Gottesdienstbuch) 2000, 498).

Such a focusing has conceptual *consequences for the anthropological accentuation of the liturgical pieces of church service*: preparatory prayers and other liturgical elements that serve the purpose of reflection do not evaluate how successfully people fulfill the dubious quality standards of an angelic existence, but help us focus on our life regarding the coordinates of its width and depth – including those experiences and expectations that shall determine us day after day. This also includes the perception of delicately emerging wishes as well as being able to face unpostponable decisions, the clarification of one’s own volition as well as the affirmation of one’s own doings – or to abandon what we previously considered indispensable. It furthermore includes – beyond all actionism and self-reflection – the experience of serenity. To be finally able to leave things or people alone or – as Meister Eckhart advised his disciples – to even leave God alone (i.e. in the sense of being convinced by faith that we do not have to manipulate or win Him over) is an appreciated effect of church service.

By calling into question and accompanying the religious practice of Christianity, theology proves to be – in collaboration with other sciences – the guardian of *humankind’s being human*. The challenges that arise from this task are by far not the only ones that contemporary theology is faced with. They also do not absolve the old question that asks by means of which theology or religion we come closer to the *truth about humankind*. Yet, to a certain extent the anthropological approach to the Christian culture of faith developed above is a substantial part of the answer to this question. Since the basic function of truth is – following the etymology of the German term “Wahrheit” (i.e. truth) – its “wahrender” (i.e. protecting) nature; it protects humankind itself as well as its dignity and freedom. Whatever does not contribute to the protection of humankind’s being human can neither be part of the truth about it nor a criterion or a leitmotif of religious practice.

To accompany Christian practice in such a way should not be devolved to Practical Theology but is a challenge for all theological disciplines. This is the reason why I would like to insistently suggest all students, all those who work on a dissertation, or any other theological study – and of course all colleagues to permit the question what your results and insight could contribute to the critical constructive guidance of a culture of faith that lets humans – as described above – be humans with a positive awareness of life, i.e. nothing *more* and nothing *different* than humans. Humanization of humans and wanting to be nothing more than human through religion is a deeply emancipatory act. A religious practice that lets people reappear as human beings – and *therein* as the “image” and counterpart of God – is the focus of Protestant Theology. The most appropriate way to approach this focus is the “communication of the gospel” described from

different angles above. To focus on its preconditions, principles and consequences, in connection with the corresponding perspectives of reflection, is and will remain the task of contemporary theology.³³

33 Cf. the corresponding structuring of the fields of reflection of Practical Theology in Wilfried Engemann, *Praktische Theologie. Eine Einführung in Selbstverständnis, Struktur und Methodik der Praktischen Theologie*, in: Wolfgang Marhold / Bernd Schröder (eds.), *Evangelische Theologie studieren. Eine Einführung*, 2edition, Münster (LIT) 2007, 137–170.