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Contextuality and the Unity of Practical Theology

I was asked by the organizers of the conference to comment upon three papers which would represent different methodological approaches to the subject-matter of Practical Theology. The purpose of this request was that I should show – if possible – that these different approaches are complementary in such a way that the blind spot of one approach is filled in by the other so that in the end – viewed from a theoretical standpoint above the different approaches – the unity of the whole discipline would become visible as a differentiated unity showing the way to productive cooperation and an organized division of labour for all Practical Theologians. Now, I am very unhappy that I cannot fulfill this task and that I must disappoint such expectations. The attempt at combining the approaches in the given presentations or at placing them in a comprehensive conceptual framework seems to me too complicated a task. They represent – in my opinion – different programs for Practical Theology as a whole with certain implications for Theology as a whole rather than different methodological approaches such as – for instance – sociological, psychological or linguistic approaches.

In this situation, I can only make remarks of my own, with occasional reference to what Riet Bons-Storm and Gerben Heiting and Camil Ménard have expounded. My remarks will concern three points: First, my understanding of the task and objective of Practical Theology; second, my view of the unity of our discipline; third, various ways of understanding the concept of contextuality, which to my mind is anything but univocal.

I. What is Practical Theology?

My answer is: Practical Theology is an integral part of the system of the theological disciplines. Even though doing Practical Theology implies knowledge from all theological disciplines, and even though we produce theories ourselves, Practical Theology is – as Schleiermacher said – a technical discipline, the concern of which is the ongoing improvement of ecclesial activities. This interest corresponds to the subject-matter of Practical Theology: The unitary and, at the same time, internally differentiated subject matter of Practical Theology is a

social system, a system of activities, namely the church as the system of communication of the christian understanding of reality. This system comprises different *positions* or standpoints (all professions and jobs in the church including those of lay people), different *situations* of praxis (worship, education, pastoral care and so on), and different *media* for communicating the christian understanding of reality (like words, gestures, pictures, liturgy, forms of behaviour). The activity of the church, the maximum improvement of which is the concern of Practical Theology, takes various forms in this system. They are, however, capable of precise classification according to the criteria of 'position', 'situation' and 'medium'. A full explanation of this would elaborate on the morphology of the ecclesial system in its present state of affairs.

So my answer to the question „What is Practical Theology?“ obviously combines Schleiermachers conception of Theology as a whole with a systemic approach in the field of Practical Theology.

Let me add two brief remarks for more precision:

1. Practical Theology has not only to deal with the activities in given traditional situations of communication, but also with the arrangement or rearrangement of such situations and their connection. This is the main concern of the subdiscipline of cybernetics, a neglected subdiscipline which should be revitalized.
2. Reflecting upon the church system in order to improve the areaspecific activities and the arrangement of ecclesial interactions does not only presuppose knowledge from all other theological disciplines but also implies knowledge from the humanities, especially from sociology and psychology. There is, actually, no research in the field of humanities and social sciences which could be judged useless for Practical Theology. This is due to the fact that, on the one hand, the participants and addressees of ecclesial communication are *individuals* developing their mind, attitudes and forms of behaviour in the context of modern life, and that, on the other hand, the ecclesial system as a whole is *interacting with all the other systems and institutions of society*, such as the system of political organization, the system of jurisdiction, the system of economy, the educational system and so on. This is another reason to reinforce the approach of cybernetics. We should pay more attention to the interaction of the ecclesial system with all the other systems and institutions in modern society.¹

¹ For a precise analysis of this interaction cf. Eilert Herms, *Kirche in der Zeit*, in: E. Herms, *Kirche für die Welt*, Tübingen 1995, pp. 231-317.

Envisaging society and the various functions of the church in society, we should not merely complain about secularization.²

II. How the Unity of Practical Theology can be conceived

My hypothesis is: The 'unity of Practical Theology' can only mean that the objectives pursued in its different subdisciplines are not only non-contradictory but complementary.

Let me outline the context and the meaning of this definition of the unity of Practical Theology by some brief remarks.

1. The hypothesis is a conceptual definition, not an abstraction from observations of what is actually going on: In fact, many Practical Theologians disagree about the objectives of their endeavours, and that calls the unity of Practical Theology into question. Thus, I only wanted to mark the battlefield on which the struggle for the unity of the discipline has to take place, if there is to be struggle.

2. The unity of Practical Theology is not achieved by the proclamation of a new paradigm or by the predominance of a particular methodological approach – for instance pastoral psychology –, not even by common research projects or by international conferences, although the latter are very useful.

3. The unity of Practical Theology is called into question neither by a pluralism of methods and methodologies, nor by a high degree of specialization, nor by the intensification of area-specific debates in its subdisciplines. All this may be a burden for the dialogue of Practical Theologians, but it has to be tolerated. The unity of Practical Theology conceived in terms of a systemic coordination of objectives and aims must be compatible with the plurality of specialized methodologies corresponding to their respective fields, with the dispute about different models of action and with the development of relatively independent debates in its subdisciplines.

4. The central idea of a systemic coordination of objectives in the area-specific theories corresponds to the subject-matter of Practical theology which I described as a system of ecclesial activities. So contradiction in the aims of the respective theories amounts to contradiction in the very activities which would be disastrous for the whole

² For a more extensive development of my conception of Practical Theology see my article „Was leistet die Praktische Theologie für die Einheit der Theologie?“ In: *Pastoraltheologische Informationen* 13 (1993), vol. 1, pp. 77-92.

social system of the church. And it would disturb the minds of the members of the church who need a clear concept of the identity of christian faith and life. Such a contradiction is given in its extreme form when the activities are based on incompatible ideas about the destiny of humanity or the character of the Christian's liberation and liberty. Therefore: A system of complementary objectives and, consequently, the unity of our discipline can only be established on the basis of a consensus about the identity of christian existence, an identity which, though not positing a uniform picture of christian life, must be the same for men and women, young and old people, poor and rich people, Europeans and Africans and Americans and so on.

Is this identity called into question or, perhaps, even rendered impossible when we pay attention to the difference of cultural context? This question leads us to our last issue.

III. What do we mean by „contextuality“?

The word „context/contextuality“ is an element in the ordinary language of English-speaking people, not so of German-speaking people. The term has only recently been introduced into both our ordinary and academic language. In my own writings I used the term very seldom, though I am consistently concerned with the phenomena the term stands for. The introduction of the term and the consistent demand that we should be aware of contextuality when doing Theology or Practical Theology raises the question what the term really means. Is there some sort of program behind the term?

As far as I can see, there are at least three ways of using the term „context“ or „contextuality“.³

1. First, it can mean and usually means that the christian message – like any other message – has always been confronted and will at all times be confronted with questions, needs and interests which emerge from life experiences under various and changing conditions; and this applies to social, cultural and intellectual conditions. An outstanding example of this is the demand of women who want to know what christian liberation from evil and sin and christian liberty means for them. We are concerned with comparable questions in every good

³ I skip the unproblematic usage of „context“ which occurs e.g. in the advice that we should always pay attention to the context of a sentence if we want to grasp its precise meaning. In German we say: Man darf einen Satz nicht aus seinem Zusammenhang reißen.

sermon as well as in Systematic Theology and in Ethics. „Contextuality“ on this level also implies that the christian and the theological discourse within the church and beyond the church focusses upon certain topics which we call „Schlüsselprobleme“ in German. As the three papers have pointed out, „hope“, „liberty“ and „justice“ are among these key problems. Practical Theology is primarily concerned with this kind of „contextuality“.

2. In another context – if I may say so – „contextuality“ refers to the means we use in doing Theology in all its branches. In all our studies in Historical, Systematic and Practical Theology, we employ terms, concepts and methods which are worked out outside of Theology in other sciences and in Philosophy. In conjunction with the evolution of extra-theological thinking and research, our own vocabulary and conceptual network changes. And that, of course, has a tremendous impact on how we see and interpret the phenomena we are concerned with. There is, in fact, no specific theological method at all; Theology has only a small number of words of its own which only make sense in a religious language game, words like „God“, „religion“, „salvation“, „sin“, „creation of the world“ and „prayer“. Exactly these words have to be permanently reinterpreted by means of other words borrowed from other language games.

This aspect of „contextuality“ can be derived from the general theory of signs worked out by Charles William Morris.⁴ There is a syntax of signs, which means that every sign and every system of signs can only be understood by reference to other signs and other systems of signs. And that prevents us from being trapped in our own language games. It is obvious that this aspect of „contextuality“ is stressed in a pluralistic society. I adopt the proposition of the british Rabbi Jonathan Sacks that in this situation we should all become bilingual⁵. We must be able to articulate our own belief sufficiently in terms of our own inherited biblical language and we must develop another language for the dialogue with other believers and non-believers, a language that enables us to express shared meaning and difference.

By the way, on this second level of „contextuality“, the juxtaposition of normativity and contextuality does not make sense. There is only normativity for any speaker *within* contextuality; whereas on the first

⁴ Charles W. Morris, Foundations of the Theory of Signs, in: Foundations of the Unity of Science, vol. I, n.2, edited by O. Neurath, Chicago & London 1938.

⁵ Cf. J. Sacks, The Persistence of Faith. Religion, Morality and Society in a Secular Age, London 1990, pp. 66ff.

level mentioned above — that of question and answer, challenge and response — there is a tension between normativity and context.

3. On a third level, „contextuality“ must be considered in connection with the issue of truth claims. In this respect contextuality often means the same as relativity. Propositions and doctrines are relative to certain historical or social contexts. They only apply to their original or to similar contexts. This immediately raises the question, whether our christian doctrine or message is also relative to a certain context.

Now, this seems to be a problem for Systematic Theology. Being Practical Theologians, we do not produce doctrines but theories, models and rules of action, and these, of course, primarily refer to a given specific state of affairs of the ecclesial system. So we could leave the question to our colleagues in Systematic Theology — if there were not the problem mentioned above: the problem of the identity and nature of christian existence all over the world, which is the basis for our search for a system of objectives.

Instead of an extended discussion, I just want to point out two ideas which we should take into account when attempting to solve the question of contextuality in connection with the question of truth claims. Both ideas amount to a reformulation of the relation of normativity and contextuality, namely — on the one hand — in terms of identity and variety of human communities and — on the other hand — in terms of identity and variety, continuity and discontinuity of the christian life. So I plead, on this level, for a solution of the problem by its replacement.

First: What is the context of christian doctrine or message? The traditional and proper answer to this question is: The christian doctrine does not refer to a particular historical context but to the *conditio humana* as such. And this common condition or unitary context consists in the fact that there is interaction of persons who are individually gifted and endowed with finite freedom, reason and responsibility. Every particular human community and all forms of social life and, consequently, all sorts of specific contexts emerge from this one common *conditio humana* or fundamental situation. In other words: God did not make several orders of creation — like the state, marriage, family, the common market and so on — but only one⁶. All the rest is worked out, improved or damaged by interacting persons making use

⁶ For this understanding of the topic „order of creation“ see Eilert Herms, Die Lehre von der Schöpfungsordnung, in: E. Herms, Offenbarung und Glaube, Tübingen 1992, pp. 431-456.

of their finite freedom and being guided in doing so either by the Holy Spirit or by some other spirit. According to these different spirits or interests, there are different ways to interpret the *conditio humana* and to deal with it, but all of them refer to one and the same fundamental situation or context. Thus, identity and variety coincide in this view.⁷

Secondly, in my very last point, I switch over to Martin Luther's vision of the identity and variety, continuity and discontinuity of christian life or, more precisely: to the way he conceived what in Dogmatics is called the topic of the *ordo salutis*.⁸ Luther is in favour of a dramatic and dynamic model of the *ordo salutis*. According to his model, the believers' life is insofar identical and continuously the same as they are permanently confronted with the same radical choice between two alternatives: trusting in God's goodness and mercy or trusting in their own capabilities and merits. But, on the other hand, these radical alternatives occur in different form and roles. There ist — at its best — a growing knowledge of God's mercy and an increasing experience of it on the one hand, and, on the other, an unpredictable multitude of tribulations and temptations. Metaphorically speaking: the devil plays many roles using many masks and appearances, and so does God. And that brings variety and discontinuity into the christian's life.

I think this dramatic model of *ordo salutis* is compatible with all shapes and features of modernity, because it is open to various contexts on either side. To help people in their choice, their multiple choice between the manifold and radical alternatives is the motive of all our theological work. And since nothing is more helpful than the improvement of the ecclesial system of communication, there is a lot of work to do for Practical Theology.

⁷ I was asked in the discussion at the Berne conference whether speaking of the *conditio humana* would promote „unhistorical thinking“. Instead of an extended response I would just like to reply that historical thinking implies the question how and why history and historical thinking are possible at all. Referring to a universal *conditio humana*— described in formal terms like finite freedom, responsibility and interaction— must not be confounded with any substantial interpretation of the *conditio humana* as, for instance, the christian doctrine about the nature and destiny of humanity which, of course, is rooted in a specific experience within history.

⁸ Different models of *ordo salutis* have been sketched and discussed by Manfred Marquardt, *Die Vorstellung des „ordo salutis“ in ihrer Funktion für die Lebensführung der Glaubenden*, in: *Marburger Jahrbuch Theologie* III, 1990, pp. 29-53. For the most elaborated theory of the *ordo salutis* (David Hollaz) see Christoph Schwöbel, *God: Action and Revelation*, Kampen 1991, pp. 126ff.