The Language of Equality in Early Christian House Churches: A Constructivist Approach

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What does modern brain research have to do with theology? Currently a lot of research focuses on the human brain, which poses challenges to the different sciences. Old questions of humanity are considered anew. How do we arrive at certain knowledge? Is this at all possible? What is "consciousness"? How should we understand "reality"?

As rifts have developed in the concept of "logical empiricism" since the 1970s, new approaches to the term "reality" have been attempted within the framework of interdisciplinary studies. One of these, a constructivist model stimulated by the sociology of knowledge, is presented here. This model describes under which conditions everyday realities — contexts of meaning that are valid for many subjects — originate.

The model will then be applied to a New Testament theme, the language of equality. Further early Christian examples as well as a more detailed theoretical discussion can soon be found elsewhere.[1]

The Model

The bulwark of logical empiricism, which once seemed so strong, has weakened since the 1970s. Patricia Smith Churchland words it more critically: "Logical empiricism, though still admired for its clarity and rigor, is now generally as-

sumed to have collapsed."[2] The dissolution of the logical-empiric bulwark resulted from its assumption that statements based on empirical sensory data were unchanging foundations for the structures of knowledge, while the theoretical statements built upon these foundations were changeable and could be replaced by better ones as they came along. Empirical sensory data statements were thought to be independent from these theoretical statements.[3] However, this was a fundamental mistake, as Mary Hesse, for example, demonstrated in 1970.[4] No language of observation is independent of theories; the theories inform perception. No term in an observational statement is so firm that it cannot be reclassified.

Since the collapse of logical empiricism in the last decades, the term "reality" has to be rethought. What is called reality rests neither solely outside in the world, as the naive realists postulated, nor solely in the mind, as George Berkeley (1685-1753), for example, believed. The answer to the riddle lies somewhere between the extreme poles of ontological idealism and naive realism. But where?

There have been many attempts to answer this question, and I have chosen for discussion what is in my opinion an important contribution: *constructivism*. Since the 1980s, it has been articulated in various ways by several disciplines. Building on the painful realization that perception and recognition cannot lead to a reflection or reproduction of the ontic reality, that even improved recognition methods do not bring us closer to this reality, the basic constructivist thesis states: the subject creates its own reality. *Reality is a construction of the brain.* Besides the traditional philosophical-epistemological reasons supporting this thesis, thanks to current brain research we now see that there are also neurobiological reasons.[5]

If reality is a construction of the brain, this of course does not mean that the constructionists consider deviating into solipsism, according to which the world exists only in human ideas — in the sense of "Only I exist, and every-

2. Patricia Smith Churchland, *Neurophilosophy: Toward a Unified Science of the Mind-Brain,* 3rd printing (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1988), p. 271.

3. Logical empiricism was based on the logic of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell. It tried to represent science as a system of logical relations between observational foundations on the one hand and theoretical superstructures on the other, between individual cases on the one hand and general laws, set patterns, and regularities on the other. From a logical-empiricist perspective, all statements that are not logically defining statements require empirical sensory data statements for their verification; for this purpose they need to be brought into the right logical relation with these observational statements.

4. Hesse, "Is There an Independent Observation Language?" in *The Nature and Function of Scientific Theories,* ed. R. Colodny (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), pp. 36-77.

5. For this, see the book cited in n. 1.

thing else is my imagination." No, an ontic reality, which is independent from us and our consciousness, does exist. Parts of it can even be *experienced*, but they are not *recognizable* and *knowable*. The ontic world is experienced insofar as it repeatedly puts up barriers against which our actions run. Such resistance is a decisive indication for the existence of an ontic reality. But this "world of objective obstacles, of ontic barriers, between which we act" remains "principally inaccessible and indescribable."[6]

The constructed reality is "objective" insofar as it represents an intersubjective, social reality. And with this we have reached the point where epistemological constructivism and sociology of knowledge start to overlap. For constructivism, all "knowledge that proves itself to be useful in intersubjective, over-individual, institutionalized contexts" is "objective."[7] The collective usefulness of knowledge is a sociological category. In other words, we have come to the constructivist-oriented sociology of knowledge. It affirms that the individual subject interprets the social- or culture-specific constructions as "outer" and "objective" realities.[8]

The Berlin sociologists Horst Stenger and Hans Geisslinger attempted to connect epistemological constructivism with the constructive theoretical perspective of the sociology of knowledge (Berger-Luckmann, for example). In an exciting empirical analysis, they examined how social, intersubjective reality comes to exist. Which processes of construction come into play? Under what conditions do groups form their realities?

In establishing their theoretical framework, the two authors started with the concept of meaning. For the constructivists, the meaning that phenomena have is a product of a constructive cognitive process. People, relationships, or physical objects are not meaningful *in themselves*. Rather the individual subject as well as a society, a culture, *construct* meaning. How do they do this? Two steps are carried out. One recognizes a phenomenon by attributing a meaning to it ("this is a table"). Meaning then unfolds in a second step as it becomes associated with other units of meaning ("table" — "a place to put something," "sit," "write," "eat," "community," etc.). When units of meaning are put together into a system, a so-called *context* of meaning emerges.

A subjective context exists in a subject's head. And this mental context be-

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6. E. von Glasersfeld, "Konstruktion von Wirklichkeit und der Begriff der Objektivität," in *Einführung in den Konstruktivismus* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1985), p. 19.

7. Cf. H. Stenger and H. Geisslinger, "Die Transformation sozialer Realität: Ein Beitrag zur empirischen Wissenssoziologie," *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 43 (1991): 247-70, here 250.

8. Cf. Stenger and Geisslinger, p. 250.

comes a social context when the subject makes it known to and relevant for other subjects. In this way the mental context becomes intersubjective.

A characteristic of constructed contexts is that they are based on axiomatic theorems. The psychoanalytical context, for example, rests on the axiomatic assumption of the unconscious. A theological context rests on the assumption of a powerfully acting God who reveals God's self. When a context develops and unfolds, becoming more and more differentiated, then also the *categories* are made available that allow the content of the respective axiom to be *experienced*. In this way, within the context of psychoanalysis, the processes and structures of the unconscious become *observable*. Or in the theological context, God becomes someone who can be *experienced* — whether in the history of Israel, in the works of a Nazarene, or, as for the Corinthians, in spiritual-charismatic experiences such as glossolalia. Axioms and categories produce evidence in this way. The contexts confirm themselves.

Stenger and Geisslinger report about a two-week field experiment that took place at a retreat center in the upper Pfalz area. The everyday social reality of a group of teenagers was transformed during the course of this experiment so that by the end of it, they all were firmly convinced of two things. First, they believed their nightly dreams were affected by underground streams running under their bedrooms, and that this even occurred in a reciprocal manner: not only did the underground streams influence their dreams, but the level of their dream activity could also affect the level of the water in these streams. Secondly, they believed that locations occurring in their dreams could be put on a map and then found during a nighttime walk through the upper Pfalz area. During this walk at night through the Bavarian countryside, which actually took place, a buffalo was seen sleeping in a field, a mole's hill towered to two meters, and a door frame stood in the middle of the landscape without a house.

How do such experiences originate? They sound like fantasy only to those unlucky enough not to have participated in the new social reality of this group. There is no room here to relate the entertaining individual steps of the experiment or to report how a new construction of meaning, a newly constructed reality, was made plausible to the members of this group. Various sources of evidence make new contexts of meaning seem plausible. However, the discussion of these sources would burst the frame of this article. The categories important for us here are:

- "constructed reality" = "context" = "context of meaning,"
- "objective" = "intersubjective" or "transsubjective,"
- "objective, social context" = "social reality" versus
- "subjective, mental context."

Early Christian Equality as "Social Context"

In Galatians 3:28 Paul states that whatever the worldly differences among the Galatians may be, they are abolished. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female." The text differentiates between two social contexts, two constructs of reality, which stand both beside and in opposition to each other. On the one hand is the worldly, Hellenistic-Roman context in which Jews and Greeks are differentiated from each other, the not legally free from the free, the men from the women. On the other hand, the Christian community has changed the paradigm. In their new social context, these differentiations among people are no longer made. In the house churches and in the Christians' interactions with each other, such worldly differences are considered irrelevant, so that the one person stands equal to the other. This is what is meant by "you all are one" (εἷς). You are all together one and the same; nothing differentiates you. A paraphrase capturing the meaning would be: "You all are the same as each other." Contrary to popular assumption, the masculine εἷς cannot mean that they all are "one (church) body." The neuter of σῶμα (body) contraindicates this.

In Galatians 3:28 this new context first of all is a subjective, mental context in Paul's head. However, it also represents a social context, a new social reality in the early Christian congregations. How can this conclusion be made?

In 3:27-28 Paul refers to the early Christian understanding of baptism (in baptism and in the postbaptismal existence, worldly differences among the baptized become irrelevant; regardless of their worldly status, all who are baptized are assured of the same closeness to Christ). The apostle reminds the Galatians of this early Christian construction of reality. If this construct existed only in *Paul's* head, then he would first have to convince the Galatians of its validity; he would first have to push to objectivize (= intersubjectivize) it. However, he does not do this. Rather, he presupposes that a successful objectivization of the construct has already taken place. He takes the construct for granted and uses it as a building block in the argumentation in the letter to the Galatians — as a building block with an argumentative function that does not need to be proved itself.

Paul argues to the Galatians that observing the Torah, especially circumcision, does not give anyone an advantage over the uncircumcised Gentile Christians. Without differentiations, all Christians are "children of God through faith" (3:26). *"In Christō,"* the difference between Gentile and Jewish Christians is irrelevant. This means, however, that the differences between slaves and free people, between men and women, mentioned in 3:28 go beyond the frame of the chapter and indicate a traditional formula that is older than the letter to the Galatians. This conclusion is also supported by the fact that here there is an ac-

cumulation of words that are hardly used in other Pauline texts — and never in this combination again: the ἔνι (there is), which is found three times here, otherwise occurs only in 1 Corinthians 6:5 in Paul's writing, and ἄρσεν (male) and θῆλυ (female) appear only in Romans 1:26-27. This pre-Pauline traditional piece presents a formula with three parallelisms.

After all, we can assume that the irrelevance of worldly differences among Christians was not only a mental concept in Paul's head but also a transsubjective construct of reality in the heads of the congregational members. But that does not necessarily mean that these congregations always behaved accordingly. As we frequently can observe in ourselves, there are frictional losses between mental context and behavior. However, although such losses doubtlessly occurred, our early Christian sources also document behavior that does correspond to the construct of irrelevant worldly differences. In the first Christian generation, *women* did have notable influence in Christian congregational life, as numerous studies have shown. It was not before the end of the first century that a significant effort was made to cut back this influence.[9] Although the integration of *Jews and Gentiles* could create severe problems in the church (e.g., Gal. 2), often enough Gentile Christian congregations, such as in the capital city of Rome, did integrate Jewish and Gentile Christians without any problems and without giving one group priority over the other.[10] *Slaves* could be treated as *pares* in a brotherly or sisterly way, as Paul shows in the letter to Philemon. He places himself at the same level as the slave Onesimus, who had converted to Christianity (Philem. 6, 12, 16-18), and he expects Onesimus's master to waive his legal rights as master and to take Onesimus back as an equal and a brother in a loving way (16-17).

We can assume from all of this that the irrelevance of ethnic, legal, social-economic, and gender differences, thus the equality of all congregational members, was part of the constructed social reality of the first Christian generation — at least in the Pauline churches.

Does this mean that the old, Hellenistic Roman social context was totally discarded by the Christians? Not at all. Otherwise the baptized would have to emigrate from this world, which was not Paul's intention (1 Cor. 5:10).

When Christians walked the streets or markets of a Hellenistic city and mixed with pagan people and visited them in their homes, moving around in the social context of the Hellenistic Roman culture, they fully belonged to *this*

9. For further details, see, e.g., Peter Lampe and Ulrich Luz, "Nachpaulinisches Christentum und pagane Gesellschaft," in J. Becker et al., *Die Anfänge des Christentums: Alte Welt und Neue Hoffnung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1987), pp. 185-216, here 189-93.

10. Cf., e.g., Peter Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen in den ersten beiden Jahrhunderten*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1989), pp. 53-63.

context. They worked as slaves, lived their roles as men and women, and were influenced by their Jewish or pagan pasts. These differences were not abolished in the worldly, social context. To the contrary, considering the impending eschaton, in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul even encouraged the Christians to remain in their given roles in the worldly context and not to try to be freed if slaves or to end a marriage with a pagan partner. All were supposed to stay in the same worldly status they had when they were baptized (Gal. 3:27) and changed paradigms from the worldly to the Christian social context. Paul expected everyone to stay in his or her κλῆσις (vocation).

Paul further concretized this recommendation: within the worldly context in which Christians continued to live after baptism, they should not actively try to change their status, but should accept changes if these are imposed on them passively. If a master decided to free a slave, this should be accepted; if a pagan partner in a mixed marriage definitely wanted to separate, then this should be done (1 Cor. 7). Whatever worldly status the environment placed on Christians, the baptized should voluntarily accept these worldly roles in light of the quickly approaching eschaton.

What then changed with baptism? What is exciting is that after baptism, the Christians lived in *two* contexts. When they were living their everyday lives "outside" the house churches in the pagan world as slaves or women or masters, the equality maxim of the Christian context was merely a mental context.

Is such a coexistence of mental and social contexts possible? In fact, it is possible, and here it can be seen how well the theoretical instrument of a constructivist sociology of knowledge fits to the early Christian constellation illustrated by Galatians 3:28.

In social interactions an individual can have a social as well as one or more differing mental contexts of meaning in his or her head. For example, in a crowded sports stadium a spectator can be excited by a team and its talent and therefore integrate well into the social context of the athletic competition and its enthusiasm but at the same time have a second mental context working in his or her head — for example, a social-psychological context, which motivates this spectator also to observe the behavior of the crowd and to interpret it in social psychological categories. Since the participants in a situation are always free to have another mental context in their heads besides the social context of the situation, there are often amazing differences in the reality of these different participants in the same situation. Only in rare cases is a situation something transsubjectively unified and monolithic.

In relation to the early Christians, this means that outside in the "world," Christians moved within the social context of the Hellenistic Roman society as they continued to play their roles of slaves, free people, men and women. At the

same time, however, they had a mental context in their heads, saying that such worldly differences were invalid before God and in the Christian congregation.

This *mental* context became *social* as soon as Christians met. Then they often interacted with each other as brothers and sisters by abstracting from the worldly differences of the old social context and not regarding each other any more κατὰ σάρκα ("according to the flesh," 2 Cor. 5:16).

It was possible that some Christians did not fully lose themselves in this new social context, but also had the context of the Hellenistic Roman society as a mental context of meaning in their heads at the same time. For example, a man who was successful and socially elevated in the world could feel embarrassed if he was too familiarly greeted by a Christian slave in the house church,[11] or if women like Prisca,[12] Junia,[13] or the patroness Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2) took over leading functions in the congregations. A man also could be irritated by two simultaneous contexts in his head if during the worship service he felt fascinated by the erotic aura of a female Christian, although this did not fit with the new social context of Galatians 3:28 — "neither male nor female." It was not for nothing that Paul pushed for women chastely to cover their heads during worship services (1 Cor. 11:2-16).[14] According to Galatians 3:28, the old gender roles were supposed to lose their strength in the new social reality of the Christian congregation. This means also that the erotic "electricity" between the sexes was supposed to diminish — at least as much as possible (even though this was not possible for everybody; cf. 1 Cor. 7:29, 32, especially 7:37-40).

Such people with two simultaneous contexts in their heads caused the "frictional loss" mentioned above, which often can be diagnosed when a reality construct is transposed into behavior. This transposition frequently entails some "watering down" of the reality construct.

Other Christians, however, probably lost themselves and integrated more completely in the new social context. At least during the congregational meetings in the house church, they blocked out the context of meaning that the "world" and the Hellenistic Roman society provided.

The early Christians lived in two contexts and moved back and forth be-

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11. Cf. 1 Tim. 6:2: Those slaves "who have believers as their masters must not be disrespectful to them because they are brethren, but must serve them all the more."

12. In Rom. 16:3; Acts 18:18, 26; 2 Tim. 4:19, she is mentioned before her husband. Together with him, she hosted several house churches.

13. According to Rom. 16:7, she either was an apostle herself or at least most highly respected by the apostles.

14. In order to justify his ruling, Paul gives reasons other than the danger of distracting men. However, his ruling of course also dampened eroticism, no matter whether Paul consciously intended this or not.

tween them. Whenever they shifted from one to the other, the mental context became social — and the social became mental. It depended on which people they interacted with: fellow Christians or pagans.

In my opinion, the constructivist instrument provides an adequate tool for describing the coexistence of the two realities that are hinted at in New Testament texts such as Galatians 3:28.

Not all early Christian groups could handle the tension between two such differing social contexts in their lives. If we jump one and a half generations to the 90s, the Asia Minor author of Revelation found that at his time the coexistence of the Roman Hellenistic and early Christian contexts was highly antagonistic, and he refused to integrate in the Hellenistic Roman context. This heightened antagonism arose in Asia Minor as the emperor Domitian's priesthood had started to propagate the imperial cult as obligatory for all. In Laodicea, for example, a temple to the emperor was erected by the officials in 83 c.e.; in Ephesus, a colossal statue of the emperor towered in the area of the Diana temple. The syncretistic association of the indigenous religions with the cult of the emperor had climbed to its apex in Asia Minor. The author of Revelation accordingly portrayed the Roman emperor as a hideous beast, which was assisted by a second monster, representing the imperial priesthood of the provinces.[15] The apocalyptic writer complained that the imperial priests "cause all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast" (Rev. 13:16-17). This is comparable to Pliny's *Epistle* 10.96.10: Christians were discovered when they did not buy sacrificial meat at the market, when they neither took part in public festivals nor swore in the name of the emperor. Those who did not worship the divine emperor risked their lives (Rev. 13:15). Some believers had already been executed (2:13; 6:9-11). The writer of Revelation expected a large persecution of Christians in Asia Minor (which, however, never took place) and felt the present to be full of hardship (1:9; 2:9-10, 13; 7:14; 13:7-10; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2, 20; 20:4), which he had "to suffer through" and "persevere with patience" (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 11-12, 21; 21:7; cf. 1:9; 2:2-3, 19; 3:10; 12:11; 13:10; 14:12). "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. . . . Be faithful unto death" (2:10); "blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth" (14:13). It was essential not to deny the name of Christ, not to give in to the imperial cult (3:8). For the writer of Revelation, the alternative between Christ and the emperor was absolutely exclusive.

Against this background, he compared the Roman Hellenistic context with the Christian one in an antithetical manner and caricatured the former as mimicking the latter:

15. Cf. in Rev. 13:1-10 the emperor and in 13:11-18; 16:13 the priesthood of the imperial cult.

- At the pinnacle of the Christian context stands God; at the pinnacle of the Roman Hellenistic context stands the Diabolos.
- As Christ receives his power from God, so does the emperor from Diabolos (13:2, 4).
- As the risen Christ carries his death marks (5:6), so is the emperor Domitian a revived Nero and carries Nero's healed death wound on his body (13:3, 12, 14).
- As God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit belong together, so the Diabolos, emperor, and pseudoprophetic beast (the priesthood of the imperial cult) form a satanic "trinity" (16:13; 20:10).
- The pseudoprophetic beast gives life like the Holy Spirit (13:15 together with 11:11) and disguises itself as a lamb like Christ but with horns (13:11).
- The Christian mark of baptism is reflected in the mark of the beast (7:3; 13:16).

For the writer of Revelation, the new Christian social context was a reality that was opposed to and in competition with the social context of meaning of the Hellenistic Roman environment. This also manifested itself morally. In the "world" murder (18:24) existed, rising prices and hunger scourged the provinces (6:5-6), while in Rome the pagans were feasting and partying (17:4; 18:12, 16), and "slaves and human souls" (18:13) fell under the wheels. In the Christian anticontext constructed by the apocalyptic writer, however, loving as brothers and sisters was valid, and *differences between "small" and "great" vanished* (1:9; 20:12; 19:5). Yes, affirmed the writer of Revelation, even Christ will *share* his throne with the Christians like a good brother (3:21; 20:6), in spite of all the hierarchical behavior in the world — and in the church. The writer of Revelation nonchalantly *ignored* the *hierarchical structures* that also had emerged in the Christian congregations by the end of the first century. Prophecy was the only church office he wanted to acknowledge in earthly Christian congregations (cf. 10:7; 11:18; 16:6; 19:10; 22:6, 16).

Radical apocalyptic antithetical statements and the refusal in any way to integrate into the old Hellenistic Roman context characterize this type of dealing with the coexistence of the two contexts. All evidence indicates that, like many other early Christian teachers, the author of Revelation chose to step out of a settled life in the Hellenistic Roman society and become a wandering prophet in Asia Minor.[16] He emigrated from the worldly context and conse-

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16. See Peter Lampe, "Die Apokalyptiker — ihre Situation und ihr Handeln," in U. Luz, J. Kegler, P. Lampe, and P. Hoffmann, *Eschatologie und Friedenshandeln*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1982), pp. 59-114, here 109-11.

quently also did not shy away from readiness for martyrdom. "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. . . . Be faithful unto death" (2:10).

His Christian context, that is, his Christian reality, was radicalized and therefore entirely exclusive in regard to the Hellenistic Roman context. He transsubjectively shared it with other prophetic radicals, but not with the majority of the Christians of his time.

The other and most often preferred way early Christians dealt with the tension between the two coexisting social contexts was by toning down the new Christian context of meaning a little instead of being radicalized by it. In other words, the new Christian context became partly accommodated to the Hellenistic Roman context. Thus, over time, hierarchical structures also developed in the church in spite of the doctrine of equality. And the influence of originally equal women in the early church was pushed back many places by the end of the first century.[17]

Galatians 3:28, this uncomfortable statement of the first generation, in the post-Pauline literature certainly did not enjoy great popularity. The letter to the Colossians, written by one of Paul's students, does refer to the passage: "There cannot be Greek and Jew . . . slave, free" (Col. 3:11). However, the "neither man nor woman" from Galatians 3 is missing already. And in Colossians 3:22–4:1 the Christian slaves are warned to be obedient to their masters — only a few verses after the programmatic sentence that there is "no more slave or free."

The principle of equality — not only before God but also in the life of the Christian congregations — often risks fading into an old traditional phrase. But often enough it described — and continues to describe — a social reality of the church, in other words, an intersubjectively shared social context, a construct of reality carried by a whole community. Whenever this happens, this constructed reality is much more than a mere subjective, mental context of some lonely dreamers.

17. See above, n. 9.