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Ulrich Engel

Research Paper: Church

A partial position of the research project: “Community and Individualization. What links society and the Church?” (2014-2016) pursued the goal of examining the systemic condition of the ecclesiastical forces of cohesion and their survival in the future. The guiding question was: What keeps the church together in this society, i.e. in its concrete practical realization, its institutional composition included? This question was reflected upon on the background of what roughly could be sketched as the post-secular or mundane¹ formation of society.²

I.

Throughout the millennia, not just in the European dominion, God was in the center of the symbolic Order of Things.³ Heaven and Earth, Eternity and Timeliness, the Church and the Secular structured this Order of Things that collapsed with the Age of Enlightenment latest. Up until then the symbolic Order was aimed at “a transcendental ‘Thou’ which, by using the term ‘Heaven’, also had a locus and a center. With the loss of the heavenly palace, it started orbiting the void

¹ To clarify the term “mundane” in this context cf. Th. Eggenesperger, Keine Angst vor der Welt. Individualisierung im Raum des Mundanen, in: [euangel](http://www.euangel.de) 3/2013 = <http://www.euangel.de/ausgabe-3-2013/glauben-in-saekularitaet/keine-angst-vor-der-welt/> [Accessed 06.13.2016].

² Cf. the published findings of the previous research project: “Transference of faith in religious and societal transformation processes”. Th. Dienberg / Th. Eggenesperger / U. Engel (Hrsg./Eds.), Woran glaubt Europa? Zwischen Säkularisierung und Rückkehr des Religiösen / What does Europe believe in? Between secularization and the return of religious life, Münster 2010; Th. Dienberg / Th. Eggenesperger / U. Engel (Hrsg.) Säkulare Frömmigkeit. Theologische Beiträge zu Säkularisierung und Individualisierung, Münster 2013; Th. Dienberg / Th. Eggenesperger / U. Engel (Hrsg./Eds.) Himmelwärts und weltgewandt. Kirche und Orden in (post-)säkularer Gesellschaft // Heavenward and worldly. Church and Religious Orders in (Post)Secular Society, Münster 2014; M. N. Ebertz / L. Segler, Orden und Säkularisierung. Ergebnisse aus Befragungen von Mendikanten in Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz (Kultur und Religion in Europa. Bd. 10), Berlin 2015.

³ For the following cf. U. Engel, Kirche unter leerem Himmel. Skizzen zu einer kenotischen Ekklesiologie für post/moderne Zeiten [Church under empty skies. Sketches towards a kenotic ecclesiology), in: www.futur2.com. Zeitschrift für Strategie & Entwicklung in Kirche und Gesellschaft 2(2015) = <http://www.futur2.org/article/kirche-unter-leerem-himmel/> [Accessed 06/13/2016].

that threatened to devour all potentiality for meaning”⁴ This voided center caused severe traumata in the Occident. Friedrich Nietzsche (Topic: Death of God⁵) and Michel Foucault (Topic: Death of Subject⁶) took this very loss as the point of departure of their thinking.

Statement 1: *Any theological reflection on the community of the church has to take its departure point from the foundation-shattering undoing of the symbolic order, including the subsequent institutional shattering of the hierarchically structured ekklesia.*

II

In the hymn in the epistle to the Philippians (Phil 2:6-8), the *κένωσις* the Self-abasement of God in Jesus Christ is confessed as a renouncing of the original Gestalt of God (vs. 6a “μορφῆ θεοῦ”) including its “power and glory”⁷; at the end of the kenotic process, Christ is hidden in the Gestalt of a slave (vs. 7B: μορφῆν δούλου). Eduard Schweizer pointed out that in this case it is not so much a change with regards to the outer appearance but that Phil 2 rather aims at “the ‘status’, the position, the rank”.⁸ Later in this passage, Paul connects the divine self-effacement with ethical admonitions for the congregation⁹. This way he translates the *kenotically deconstructed Christology* in a similar *kenotically deconstructed Ekklesiology*, whose discourse renounces any representation of the divine *potestas* as the result of a realization of an *Ecclesia Triumphans*. The proof that this kenotic Ekklesiology was intended can be found in the mirroring of an inconsequential diaspora congregation. The members of this self-abased *ekklesia* acknowledge their loss of power and the precariousness of their position; in that they are equal to “all human beings” (cf. Phil 2:7).¹⁰

⁴ K. Appel, Vom Preis des Gebetes [The Cost of Praying], in: K. Appel (Hrsg.), Preis der Sterblichkeit. Christentum und neuer Humanismus [The Cost of Mortality. Christianity and new Humanism.] (Quaestiones Disputatae Bd. 271), Freiburg/Br. 2015. 186-228, here: 187.

⁵ Cf. F. Nietzsche, The Gay Science. With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs. **Ed. and transl.** by H.W. Kaufmann, New York 1974.

⁶ Cf. M. Foucault, La Naissance d’un monde. Entretien avec J.-M. Palmier, Le Monde, supplément: Le Monde des Livres, no 7558, 3 mai 1969, p. VIII. = Dits Ecrits tome 1, Texte 68.

⁷ Cf. O. Hofius, Der Christushymnus Philipper 2,6-11. Untersuchungen zu Gestalt und Aussage eines urchristlichen Psalms (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament Bd. 17), Göttingen ²1991.

⁸ E. Schweizer, Erniedrigung und Erhöhung bei Jesus und seinen Nachfolgern, Zürich 1955, 54.

⁹ Cf. for this and the following R. Kampling, Das Lied vom Weg Jesu, des Herrn. Eine Annäherung an Phil 2,6-11, in: Bibel und Kirche 64 (2009), 18-22.

¹⁰ With regards to the political implications of the Epistle to the Philippians cf. A. Zantonelle, Il Dio che si vuota. Filippesi: una comunità alternative all’impero (Cammini dello Spirito vol. 5) Bologna 2014.

Turin Philosopher Gianni Vattimo (*1936) formulated the statement that all tendencies for secularization that can be observed today within Christian Religion are self-authored. “Secularization as a positive given means that the disconnect of sacral structures of Christian society ... is not to be understood as vanishing or departure of Christianity but as a completion of its truth, that is kenosis, the self-abasement of God”.¹¹

Statement 2: *In accordance with Vattimo’s concept of ‘weak thinking’ (“pensiero debole”¹²), ecclesial existence in a secularized society is to be understood in systematic theological thinking as ‘weak existence’. Together with Schweizer’s analysis, according to which Phil 2:6 mainly attempts to define the deconstruction of status, position and rank, the weak Church is to be understood as an ekklesia that owns no privileges, but has to establish authority [lat. “auctoritas”] solely by the power of convincing through her reasoning and her actions.*

III

In identity and actions of her faithful individuals as well as the congregations as such, a “dented” Church without privileges is marked by:

- vanishing of a once clear dualism of “membership” vs. “non-membership”. In its place there are *Multiple Religious Belonging* (such as in the Netherlands), respectively – in a broader sense – *Multiple Social Belonging*. The construction of a new ecclesiastical “WE” has to be thought of as a searching movement that is conceived as an open process in individual responsibility¹³;
- vanishing of traditional institutions of communal engagements that were based on commitment and long duration of belonging. In their place are – mainly in urban areas – increasingly differently structured post-traditional forms of establishing community that rely on time restricted engagements within well defined purposeful projects. More than anything, the shift of the authority of finding meaning and decision making from the

¹¹ G. Vattimo, *Glauben – Philosophieren*. Aus dem Italienischen von Christiane Schulz, Stuttgart 1997, 44f. Cf. also Id., *Christentum im Zeitalter der Interpretation*, in: R. Vattimo / R. Schröder / U. Engel, *Christentum im Zeitalter der Interpretation*, ed. by Th. Eggensperger on behalf of the Institut M.-Dominique Chenu – Espaced Berlin (Passagen Forum), Wien 2004, 17-32.

¹² Cf. id. / P. A. Rovatti (eds.), *Il pensiero debole*. Milano 1983.

¹³ Cf. M. Kalsky, *Auf der Suche nach einem neuen “Wir”*, in: *Junge Kirche 1* (2014), 32-38; R. Bernhardt / P. Schmidt-Leukel (Hrsg.), *Multiple religiöse Identität. Aus verschiedenen religiösen Traditionen schöpfen* (Beiträge zu einer Theologie der Religionen Bd. 5), Zürich 2008.

institution to the individual marks today's communitarian engagements within the political, social and religious realm.¹⁴ According developments can be found in the urban environment of civil society: Barcamps, Guerilla gardens, swap meets...¹⁵

Statement 3: A future ecclesiastical Gestalt of ministry (in urbe) has to acknowledge and address these developments with regards to the individual faithful / those who are seeking as well as with regards to communal engagement by:

- a) becoming able to support pluralism, and not be afraid of hybrid forms of communal expressions of faith;¹⁶*
- b) re-orienting herself from a traditionally ecclesiastical form (e.g. territorial Parishes) to a form that acknowledges the situational, pastoral purpose orientation¹⁷ (e.g. congregation of individuals).*
- c) reconstructing theologically the category of an "(in-essential) discipleship" of the New Testament (i.e. curious adherent, clandestine disciple, people who for a time with follow Jesus on his way) because this model is extremely apt to take seriously individuals, experiences of encounter, and shared responsibility decisions¹⁸;*
- d) creating innovative and creative locals and Other-Spaces¹⁹ for those who are searching, especially for those who are unable to find a home in existing church structures; for short: opportunities for community for the post-modern*

¹⁴ Cf. R. Hitzler / A. Honer / M. Pfadenhauer (Hrsg.), Posttraditionale Gemeinschaften. Theoretische und ethnographische Erkundungen (Erlebnisswelten Bd. 14), Wiesbaden 2008.

¹⁵ Cf. H. Ruterberg, Wir sind die Stadt! Urbanes Leben in der Digitalmoderne, Berlin 2013.

¹⁶ Cf. J. de J. Legorreta Zepeda, Desafíos del pluralismo a la unidad y catolicidad de la iglesia. VI Simposio Internacional de Teología, Santa Fé (México) 2002; Id. Hacia otros modelos de comunidad en sociedades en cambio, Santa Fé (México) 2015.

¹⁷ Cf. R. Bucher, ... wenn nichts bleibt, wie es war. Zur präkeren Zukunft der katholischen Kirche, Würzburg 2012.

¹⁸ Cf. G. Lohfink, Braucht Gott die Kirche? Zur Theologie des Volkes Gottes, Freiburg/Br. 1998, 205-216. Cf. also its elaboration by U. Engel in two presentations within the research project: "Amt – JüngerInnenschaft – Volk. Biblische und systematisch-theologische Spotlights zu drei neutestamentlich überlieferten Vergemeinschaftungsformen einschließlich ihrer möglichen Relevanz für die Ordensausbildung" (Köln, Workshop mit Ausbildungsleiter*innen OFM, OFMCap, OP, 30.9.2015) und „Neue Gemeinschaftsformen in urbanen Raum. Ekklesiologische Konsequenzen“ (Berlin, Fachtagung in Kooperation mit dem Bereich Pastoral im Sekretariat der DBK, 10.3.2016).

¹⁹ Cf. M. Foucault, Of Other Spaces: Utopia and Hererotopias. Translated by J. Miskoviec, in: Architecture, Movement, Continuité 5 (1984), 46-49.

denizens of the urban area. This requires subsidiary conditions provided by church and institution to allow and experiments and facilitate their continuation once they have been evaluated positively.²⁰

- e) Creates conditions for such an experimental and open-to-the-future development of the Church, which is a communitarian culture that acknowledges failure (“trial and error”).*

²⁰ Cf. for example the Congregation “Zeitfenster” [Time-Window] in Aachen, <http://www.zeitfenster-aachen.de> [Accessed 14.07.2016].