

# **Reshaping Protestantism – Theological and Cultural Aspects**

*Wilhelm Gräß*

Facing modernity and post-modernity, all religious and confessional traditions are under pressure of accelerated transformation. The rapid change is being summarized under such notions as pluralism and individualism. Nowadays it can be observed through the process of globalization, the flow of money and information through the internet and the big companies, the global players in the world markets. In Protestant circles these changes are apt to enhance the lament worrying that Christianity may lose its cultural power. Especially Protestantism, with its weak institutional forces and its internal plurality could get it in danger of becoming invisible in society, of losing its connection to the culture of the everyday life.

## **1. Protestantism as a force of modernization**

Protestantism is however not suffering from modernity and post modernity. To the contrary Protestantism was and is one of the strongest forces of cultural and economical modernization, as well as of globalization. Max Weber developed this idea about a hundred years ago with his thesis about the interconnection between the ethics of Puritanism and the uprising of the rational procedures of economics, capitalism and a secular world view in which all things are calculated in causes and effects.<sup>1</sup> Ernst Troeltsch developed the thesis about the interconnection between the Reformation and its transformation of Christian faith, away from a sacramental understanding of salvation to a personal relationship with God

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<sup>1</sup> Max Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (1904/05), in: id., *Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, Tübingen 1920.

grounded in the word of the gospel on the one hand and the modern religious individualism and pluralism on the other hand.<sup>2</sup>

In the religious field, Protestantism was one of the strongest forces in introducing the concept of individualism and pluralism into modern society. Each person has an immediate relationship to God and the form in which the believer lives his or her life is not to be regulated through the church. Protestantism developed a world view in which human beings are responsible for an efficient and productive organization of natural and human resources. In a protestant world, individualism and pluralism are not bad things. Therefore, Protestantism can play a positive and constructive role in the process of modernity and post-modernity. It can encourage people to deal with globalization in a constructive way. For example, it helps people to look for the chances of development and prosperity in that process and to minimize its destructive effects. The reason for that is Protestantism's "faith" in the dignity of each person and their finite freedom. In my understanding that is one of the reasons for the success of Pentecostalism nowadays, too. Pentecostalism gives people, each individual person, a greater self-confidence.

Each human being has infinite value. This is the modern protestant reconstruction of the doctrine of justification by grace and faith alone. Each human being is of infinite value and therefore, each human being has the right and the power to realize finite freedom and in its borders, to solve the problems of worldly things with the power of the Holy Spirit. In Protestantism, the grace and the power of the Holy Spirit through faith and consciousness are not related to the church. They are not provided under the conditions of good works for God and the church. For a Protestant, the grace and the power of personal faith and its convictions are the gift of baptism with water and the Holy Spirit. Each person who is baptized was for Martin Luther, a priest, a holy person, a person with the power of the Holy Spirit.

If we look first to the essentials of the protestant doctrine of justification through grace and faith alone we can see the devaluation of the church – of all the formalized institutions between God and human beings – and the revaluation of the individual person's dignity. We see the religious grounds of empowerment with self-confidence. Protestantism is the religion for free people and therefore the adequate religion for a world in the process of modernization and globalization. This modern

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<sup>2</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Bedeutung des Protestantismus für die Entstehung der modernen Welt*, München und Berlin 1911.

world needs free people, encouraged by self-confidence grounded in God.

Otherwise, we would be confronted with the danger of fundamentalism, a reaction to the process of modernization which delegates self-determination to big institutions or radical and fanatic movements. Protestantism is the religion of the free individual person without inhibiting communication and social community development. But Protestants have the power to choose their religious affiliation. Protestantism is therefore indeed an opportunity for fundamentalism too, but in deformation of freedom as an escape from the risk of freedom.

Unfortunately Protestant church leaders and many Protestant theologians often do not understand the quality of freedom in Protestantism coming from the divine justification. They misunderstand the constructive role of Protestantism as a power of freedom and self-determination. They condemn individualism and pluralism. They oppose the whole process of modernization and globalization. They only observe the negative and problematic aspects of all processes of transformation. They reduce Protestantism to each evangelical Church, to church-membership, to the approval of confessions of a particular Protestant church. Church leaders seldom imagine that modern Protestantism is a way of life and a mode of thinking not necessarily related to a traditional congregation or a traditional church.

Such a narrow churchly standpoint is often disappointed in the slow or absent response to what happens in the congregations with respect to what is being offered there. The milieu characterized by the church and its confession is seen to be disappearing. The shaping influence of church-oriented customs on the culture of everyday life seems to be vanishing. Teachers in the church and at school are confronted with the fact that it is becoming more and more difficult to communicate the traditional beliefs of the Bible and the Catechism in confirmation and religious instruction classes.

## **2. Fading traditions**

The majority of our contemporaries in Germany, as in all the countries of Western Europe, are no longer familiar with the Bible or the catechism. The traditional topics of the Christian faith, in the traditional formulations, are no longer transmitted. As a result, Christian education in the families is negatively affected. Even the main holiday (Holy day) seasons of the-church-year are less and less used for the instruction of a deeper understanding of the work and the words, the passion, the death and the

resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus, the Christian beliefs and confessional statements – the old biblical stories, the whole doctrine about God, the condition of human beings forlorn in their sins, the liberation of sinners by God's forgiveness and mercy through Jesus Christ – are lost. The deeper and meaningful sense of the final redemption of the believers from the powers of destruction, also their salvation in the kingdom of God which is to come, is disappearing under the convoluted rhetoric of theology and theologically educated churchgoers.

The content of the traditional Christian doctrine is no longer known. It has turned into a rigid ritual in the worship service. People no longer understand what the traditional Christian doctrine has to do with the problems of everyday life. It no longer expresses convictions, on which the lives of men and women, including truly Christian believers are founded. The old, orthodox Christian faith is gone. The confessional formulas have lost their biographical moorings, also the doctrine of justification in its old shape coming from the 16<sup>th</sup> century: People don't have the feeling that they need a reconciling God. The faith as it is being taught and confessed by traditional, orthodox or neo-orthodox theology of the word of God on the one hand; the faith, convictions, as it is being lived by Protestant men and women in their own lives – what it means to the values, the formations of lifestyle and everyday culture, on the other hand; these things are all different when it comes down to real life.

The church confession, the traditional doctrine of faith, formulated e.g. in the Apostolic Creed, in the Confessions of the 16<sup>th</sup> century or in the Confession of Barmen from the 1930s, is rarely associated with personal beliefs and the convictions of average Protestant people, who treat them seriously. Normally people do not expect the possibility to express what the traditional Christian doctrine proclaims in their own words. It is important to be aware of this. It shows us that we need the reformulation of the traditional Christian doctrine in terms of religious subjectivity and individuality, in terms of the convictions and values of contemporary Christian people. Therefore theology should enforce a hermeneutic of lived religion and everyday culture to bring it together with the hermeneutic of the Christian tradition.

Confessions are indeed a personal thing and are highly esteemed today, as long as they are expressions of personal, subjective convictions, documentations of protestant subjectivity. For then they signify authenticity, personality, strength of conviction. A confession like that of the traditional, hierarchical, institutionalized church in a normative understanding carries the suspicion of ideology, monopolization and loss of

freedom. It is the same pattern according to which people say: "Religion in a non-dogmatic sense or better a kind of spirituality, yes, that is important and I am interested in it, but church or belonging to a religious community or congregation, no, thanks."

In a specific sense we can acknowledge such a position as a new Protestant position. This is the mixture between protestant consciousness and modern or post-modern performance of subjectivity and expression of individuality. But what we need and what is often missed is the theological reformulation of Protestantism as a form of life or mode of thinking with the freedom of subjectivity and to perform individually on the basis of personal convictions. For that, we could learn a lot from the new liberal protestant tradition coming from Schleiermacher, Harnack and Troeltsch, H.R. Niebuhr and Tillich.

Theology should strengthen the tasks of answering the question why the traditional, orthodox Christian doctrine, the doctrine of justification in its old forensic shape, is no longer the basis for the deeper life-convictions of the people. There are many reasons for that. One important reason is the fact that theology and the church have lost the ability to speak about the confession of the Christian faith in such a way that its content is to be understood in a practical life-sense. So, they are unable to show what is at stake here. At stake, are the perspectives of meaning and value orientation – included in the Christian faith – which are important, being that they are an integral part of the fundamental values of our contemporary culture in general, also that they are able to solve life's problems in a global context and are therefore worth upholding and cultivating.

Reshaping Protestantism – about the theological and cultural aspects I see three challenges we have to deal with:

*First*, what we need is the reconstruction of a new style of church practice which enforces aesthetical forms, with a stronger performance of symbols and rituals. The emphasis needs to be placed on more preparation for individual religious practice, with a larger space for the experience of spirituality and with more flexible religious communities based on the free inclinations of the people.

*Second*, we need a new sensitivity for the modern type of theology. Theology must not dogmatically explain biblical sentences but it must reformulate personal experiences and convictions, the religious consciousness of people – through the mediums of biblical stories and sentences.

*Finally*, we need the exposition of Protestantism as a religious way of living of personal, finite freedom – an interpretation of Christian faith facing the challenges of the modern world in a global context. Theology has to develop more sensitivity for the religious and moral needs of the people, as they are being expressed in many ways in our present-day culture. Theology must learn to speak in such a way that men and women of today, in their search for meaning, ethical and political orientation in their own lives, can find something helpful in the symbolic world of the Christian faith, in the reformulation of Christian symbols addressed to religious, ethical and political issues today. I will now try to develop these three points in further detail.

### **3. The Reconstruction of a New Style of Church Practice**

The institutionalization of Christianity faces these three challenges in modern society: the loss of contact with the everyday problems of the people, secularisation, and the privatisation of religion. The “threefold form of Christianity in modern times” which Dietrich Rössler developed in his “Outline of Practical Theology”, can open up the possibility to deal with this situation.<sup>3</sup> His theory helps us to deal constructively with the fact that the old Protestant faith is gone as we now find a lot of Christian religious practices outside the church, in popular culture, in the different forms of individual spirituality and in different forms of Christian communities and Christian religious movements, like the charismatic movements. They are phenomena of modern pluralistic and individualistic Protestantism.

The thesis of the “threefold form of Christianity” tells us: a) Protestantism is explicitly alive as church Christianity; b) Protestantism is implicitly present in secular society: e.g. in its political and ethical culture, our fundamental human rights, the upbringing of our children and in the way we celebrate success, in our educational institutions, the arts, the mass media; c) Protestantism finally is, as it were, woven into the pattern of the individual religious disposition of mind, the inner life of the individual, and the personal decisions concerning the degree of participation in the communication within church, other Christian communities and society.

The thesis of the “threefold form of Christianity” outlines an understanding of Protestantism in its modern differentiation. In this context the liturgical and homiletical practice on the one hand stands for church-

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<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Rössler, *Grundriß der Praktischen Theologie*, Berlin & New York 1986.

Christianity, and on the other hand, church-Christianity also represents what it stands for in society and in the lives of the individuals. Protestantism is more than a matter of churchgoers.

Since the 1980s, many church leaders have turned their attention to present-day culture as their main point of reference. Actual church practice, especially the liturgy of the worship service, has moved to the centre of attention, providing symbolic forms for the development and cultivation of aesthetical and religious experiences, of personal spirituality, of an understanding of Christian interpretation of human life as it is connected with the problems of people in everyday culture. An aesthetical set-up and performance, as it were, of meaningful symbols and rituals is what falls within the scope of the liturgical form of giving. In the context of a colourful market of possibilities, where symbols are being offered and rituals are being proposed, and in the contest with the huge "sense machines" of TV and the cinema, it becomes necessary to explore new and distinctive possibilities to display and assert, in clearly defined terms, the world of Christian culture for finding religious meaning.

The church localities, the liturgies celebrated in them, the salvation history being told in them and the promises of blessings made in them all belong to the symbolic reality of Christian faith. That should remain so. But Protestant churches should encourage new performances to celebrate the liturgy and to preach the gospel. They should transform the aesthetic style of their performances with more orientation about the inner world, about the experiences of spirituality, with deeper interpretations of religious questions. To do this they need to break up experiences of contingency, through a deeper understanding that religious faith is a personal way to interpret experiences, and is unrelated to objective facts about the world outside. The service has to realize the world of Christian faith as a fragmented system of symbols. Sermons have to interpret life in its Christian perspective of meaning; they confirm this by being grounded in God and being watched over by Him. The liturgies have to display and articulate the specific symbolic world of Christianity, but not to explain all the things. The aesthetical and spiritual experiences are important. We need stylish forms of experiences that give people the deeper feeling inside themselves, and to come into contact with a spiritual, transcendent reality, a reality, which is beyond our comprehension but which exists in our minds and feelings.

The churches today no longer represent and sacrilege the political and social order and they should not do so. The proclamation of the gospel is no more than a contribution to the general, public discussion about

basic values. Churches do not constitute a superior assertion telling the minds and conscience of people what to believe and how to live. With their architecture, liturgies, sermons, church buildings have become spiritual localities for religious experiences – open spaces which may be filled with beautiful stories and where the “invention of God” (*Gotteserfindung*), to quote from the end of the Joseph-trilogy by Thomas Mann, may happen. Churches are or should become aesthetically stimulating media, places of discovery for god seekers, which open spaces for religious sensitivity, and the spiritual self-understanding in the “direction towards the absolute” (Paul Tillich).

Congregations make the wealth of the symbolic world of Christian faith available to those who pass by and happen to step inside, just like museums, cinemas and malls do in their own way. Men and women step into the church in the city, stay a while, take one thing or another of what they have heard and seen, and walk away with them. When they leave, most console themselves with the promise that God is going with them.

It feels good to post-modern men and women to come to such a non-dogmatic, open church, depending on what appeals to them, what touches them and what concerns them in a fundamental way. Such a modern or post-modern protestant church does not, however, result in a biblically or dogmatically pure and correct faith, not in the orthodox or neo-orthodox sense of the everlasting word of God. The result, rather, will be a multiple syncretism, a mixed belief of all that which for a long time seemed incompatible. Our post-modern time is characterized by what is conflicting in many facets, is pluralistic, even and especially in the religious sense, and by individuals with a patch-work-identity. The latter may have an adequate religion.

Reshaped Protestantism can realize the chance of this transformation to come to a new style of worshipping and preaching. The congregations should be aware of the great opportunity they have in their locations, symbols and liturgies, which can facilitate and foster aesthetic-religious experiences, the sensibility for the existence of a transcendent reality as a reality of the holy spirit. With its localities and with the particular style of its religious practice in the worship services, an open Protestant Church invites both passers-by and seekers. In liturgical practice, attention is paid to the Christian profile, without, however, succumbing to a profile neurosis.

#### **4. A New Sensitivity for Modern Theology as Interpretation of Personal Experiences**

The second question confronting Protestantism today is whether theology can help Protestantism strengthen its potential to support and to promote the transformation away from unity and identity in confession towards variety and diversity. This transformation can occur in real life with its different social, moral and religious problems, away from a normative, dogmatic and ethical style of thinking to a polycentric spirit and an aesthetic-symbolic enrichment of Christian life, without losing its own, characteristic profile. It depends on the answer to this question about the ability for pluralism. The question is whether Protestant congregations will now and in the future remain open Christian communities and public churches or not.

Theology should try to realise this structural change from a dogmatic, normative, rigid self-understanding to a theological thinking, which is able to be open for discussion of subjects, while remaining clearly defined to Christ and the God of the gospel. The intention of such a theology would no longer be presenting itself as a closed community of believers, but would also be open to those who do not believe or do believe in many different ways. Now theology transforms the word of the God of the gospel to an aesthetically appealing medium for self-discovery and a self-understanding.

The new reshaped Protestant theology no longer thinks along hierarchical or dogmatic-normative lines. Rather, it thinks from aesthetic-religious spaces and symbolic forms of the Christian tradition, from the images, words and stories transmitting it, to the liturgies, in which the Christian salvation history is being performed in a trans-rational, impressive manner. The invitation of theology, to come in and look, and enjoy the performance of the liturgies of Christianity, also extends to those who think of themselves as having no religion or belonging to another religion.

Modern Protestant theology is not afraid to be seen as part of today's cultural conditions in the sphere of popular music, the cinema and the arts, which are in themselves religiously charged and tend to go towards syncretism. The normative criterion which post-modern Protestant theology claims for itself and with which it identifies itself is based on individual freedom and is founded in the God of the gospel. Protestant theology emphasizes the experience and knowledge, that the consciousness of our freedom is founded in God. This means that the gospel is the justification of the sinner because Jesus has lived and experienced the knowl-

edge which is being taught. So it is also clear that individual freedom in the sense of Protestantism is not to be confused with solipsism but to be lived in responsibility for the freedom of the others. It is impossible to bring the individual freedom and the community in opposition to each other. They need each other.

The practice of the gospel, the justification of the sinner, the promise of forgiveness, the sharing in the life-giving and, for eternity, life maintaining, divine blessing – these remain the focal points of Protestant theology. They shape the Christian-religious profile. But the challenge for theology is how to realize the focal points of theology in communication with the people so that they understand what it means in their lives. Theology and religious meanings are different things.

We all know that there are many possibilities for a religious profile in our present-day culture. The change that religion has gone through in the encounter with pluralism and syncretism, has contributed considerably to the loss of plausibility suffered by the theology and preaching of the church – which is to be expected unless this encounter is taken up and brought into a constructive relationship with the Christian self-understanding. What that means is, theology must help the church to try to give such a form to its worship service that the liturgical and homiletical performance is aesthetically impressive, appealing, convincing – also to those who have just dropped by, who happen to be present because of ties to family or friends, as for instance to the couple at a wedding, or the mourners at a funeral and so on.

Theology must develop a hermeneutics of culture. By not doing hermeneutics of the old texts and traditions alone but doing the hermeneutics of contemporary lived religion and popular culture (in aesthetics, ethics, politics) theology could help the church and the congregations to become open towards post-modern culture, the arts, the modern world of the mass-media. Congregations could take advantage of aesthetically appealing performances of the Christian truth.

The sensitivity about the form, the style, and the performance makes the wealth of the liturgical tradition, wonderful images and stories full of meaning, locations and symbols available, which then invite individuals in their interest in and search for reassurance to bring sense experiences into their life story. For many people, it is this interest and search that brings them to church, in the first place. The wealth of the symbolic world of the Christian faith is to be found in the old stories about creation and sin, justification and salvation – but not formulated in the old orthodox shape. The theological challenge consists in creating an aesthetically

appealing performance in dialogue with the present culture of these old traditions.

What this is all about is theology's challenge to stage a performance of the existential meaning and truth of the symbolic world of the Christian faith, with the assertion of justification at its centre. This must be done in such a way that it is stimulating, or better, so exciting as to be infectious, that it is, as it were, to get this truth in communication, to be fluid in nature and to flow to each individual. It then becomes easier to offer it to each person to grasp and change, so that it will become his very own meaning-truth. It must not raise it dogmatically to the height of timeless truths, or demand agreement through the exertion of moral pressure. Then men and women will see that the great promise of post-modern culture is fulfilled also and particularly in the churches – the promise being freedom.

This is the chance, which the protestant church and its congregations have today. It is not so important to surprise with something new in e.g. each worship service, but to provide a deeper foundation for trust. The worship service of the church is able to relate the old biblical stories and images of life lived well, to tell salvation histories, to turn our attention to it, recall it to our memory, and lead us to deeper grounds of confidence. The worship service reveals what is lasting in the dynamism of change, it points to the presence of the infinite in the finite, the assurance that our destiny rests in a power, which goes beyond our own power, but to do things by our selves in the power of the Holy Spirit. The worship service brings about the encounter with this power, so that it will be experienced as a powerful blessing.

Worship services as information, as the mere announcement of a message is the wrong approach. It is not a simple 'message' to be told as the new 'Good News'. Rather, what is called for, is the awakening of the old traditions of the Christian religion telling about a God, who is love and grace, who is the infinite foundation of finite human freedom, opening up the meaning and truth in them, which makes life possible – through aesthetically appealing performances of the stories telling of Him. The hand lifted in a gesture of blessing grants us the absolute ground of meaning, the God who is there and who goes with us, omnipresent. Images are being painted in words, shapes and colours, which invite us to stay, making us think the high and feel the depth of all that is real.

## **5. The Exposition of Protestantism as a Way of Life of Finite Freedom**

To be religious in the sense of modern Protestantism is not believing in supernatural facts of salvation. It provides a kind of gazing and thinking. This happens when the old, well known stories are being retold. Religion can rely upon these stories to remind us of what is lasting in the face of our own experience of dynamically fast moving time. It displays the form of meaning, which the traditional Christian signs of meaning can have for us, in all our present-day experiences of life. The old symbols interpret for us, what it can mean to live – accompanied by God – in our current time and age.

The demand of religious questions rising up in everyday life, for the consolation and encouragement religion gives, and for its blessing occurs over all as soon as something happens that affects human life. As such, it shows us our finite freedom, how fragmentary our life is: Birth and death, youth and adulthood, wedding and anniversaries, separations and remarriages, school beginnings and retirements, health and sickness, unemployment and poverty. As soon as our life is affected, in its entirety, all of a sudden we find ourselves, as it were, standing beside ourselves, questioning where and when and demanding to know our destiny, whether there is a purpose or goal to our life, or whether death is the final end and whether or not there is an infinite creator or God.

We become aware of our condition of having no power over our own existence, while at the same time we cannot make any definite assertions about chance, fate or destiny, unless there is a God, who grants us his blessing. When we are confronted by our life as such, in its entirety, we stand before what ultimately is rationally indefinable. That is why we are trying to make sense through religion, why we are searching for a way of understanding by drawing upon a transcendent entity of meaning, upon a God and his actions. What we need, is the promise of this God that he will go with us, granting his blessing, his protection, his safe-keeping, the assurance of restoring life and that this rests in the power of God, from whom it comes, and trusting that he will keep my future life under his power.

Protestantism as a way of life and a kind of thinking is the performance of the grant of justification of the sinner, with words of blessing. Protestantism as a way of life is a specific interpretation of experiences of human life stories, reminding us of escape from danger, of being kept safe in adversity. It interprets the emotions of joy, of gratitude, of sorrow, fear, desperation and suffering with the symbolic material of biblical

texts, and interprets them in the perspective of the doctrine of justification through grace and faith. What it needs to speak to us about is the God who responds to the sinner with his forgiveness and grace, who, even in guilt and failure, in desolation and among graves affirms, that we do not live in vain, that life is promised to us, even through death: eternal life.

But it is of foremost importance what we say about God, the revelation of his creativity, his reconciling and redeeming activity. This can and will be related to our experiences in our own lives and interpretations of them. Our experience of success as well as failure, confronts us with what is not at our disposal, where we are powerless and are able to bear only if we find it enclosed in a wholeness comprising all of reality and a conception of its meaning. It must be clear that it is this whole of reality and its meaning, which is meant when we say: God. God is the absolute spirit, infinite vis-à-vis, of whom Jesus has shown that we can offer our gratitude to Him for our finite freedom, that we can put our trust in Him, in being safe, and that we can cry out in desperation before him, when we experience things that are awful and absurd.

Protestantism as a way of life and a kind of thinking is the symbolic presentation of the transcendent conditions for finite, definite freedom and therefore a meaningful life, a life in the consciousness of justification. It occurs when we hear that our life is in God's hands, that we owe it to him, the creator, that he is with us even when and where we have lost contact with him. To speak about God, the creator, is to explicate the Christological condition of the free and graceful justification of the sinner. When our life is affected and we are in shock and dismay, perhaps, the Christian faith, with the sign of the cross, makes available time and space to cry out to God when feeling the misery of being distant from him. We can then thank God for the preservation and the renewal of the basic reassurance of life – even if, as may be the case with mourners at a funeral, the pain about the loss may be immeasurable, or perhaps in the case of a wedding, fear, worry, uncertainty about the future cannot be denied.

The biblical lectures, the psalm reading, the announcement of the resurrection explicate the Christian religious understanding of life and promise that the God, of whom they speak, will go with us. The Christian believer will take up biblical texts – not however, to interpret them in view of the intention of their biblical author, nor to proclaim a revelation doctrine, the everlasting “Word of God”, as if given from above. He or she will, rather, in a gentle and sensitive way, relate the Christian under-

standing of meaning and hope to the experiences, which are pressing at that particular time. Also, the sermon should relate the biblical passages in such a way that the listeners will understand what they mean, which they will interpret to meet their needs in their own personal situation. With this it will be according to their strongest feelings right now; their joy, their sadness and mourning, their fear and uncertainty. The gratitude, which they feel, wants to find expression in language, sadness about loss, fear of what might be in store, prayer for preservation in danger – all of this longs to be put into words.

What is called for in order to sustain Protestantism as a way of life of freedom should be a hermeneutics of contemporary culture and lived religion, of the occasion, the particular case, of the experiences of the listeners in the context of their life stories, their situations, their feelings, which must then interconnect with the hermeneutics of the biblical texts and therefore the symbolic world of the Christian tradition. The hermeneutics of the symbolic world of the biblical tradition will be able to help to find the words now, which may express gratitude to God, give expression to sorrow and accusation, which may open a space for images, for the desperate cry out of the depth of a merciless fate. This is not for the despair of life, even in those lives which are marked by ruin and desolation, broken and cut off.

Each sermon speaks in terms of religion to make the faith in God comprehensible as an interpretation, an understanding of my finite life – my life in the case of drastic experiences, occasions which touch and change my life as a whole, which therefore are of ultimate concern to me.

A Protestant church, which is open as a place where blessing can be experienced, which stirs the heart by making us see the promise of a merciful God full of grace, who goes with us and does not leave us, even where the going gets tough in our lives – such a Protestant church and its congregations will be an indispensable necessity in the pluralistic culture of today.

### **For further reading:**

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