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**Cross-cultural Encounter:  
Experience and Expression  
of the Divine**



# **(How) Does God act in the life of individual people? Concerning the theological dignity of the biographical dimension<sup>1</sup>**

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## **1 Some aspects of doing Communicative Theology (CT) and Theme-centered Interaction (TCI)**

If (Christian) theologians want to find out something about „Experiences and Expressions of the Divine“ they will usually think of looking for biblical testimonies in their living transmission, the so called „Tradition“. If (Christian) theologians working according to the communicative-theologian style, as some of us in Innsbruck are doing, discuss the same topic, they will think of a communication area in which we hope to find out traces of the Divine. For communicative theologians the experience and expression of the Divine is not only represented in the biblical testimony in its living transmission or in other texts of the traditional religions but also in the dimension of personal experience and expression of life and faith. The dimension of personal experience of life and faith becomes a place of theological insight, a „locus theologicus“ in the process of theologizing communicatively<sup>2</sup>.

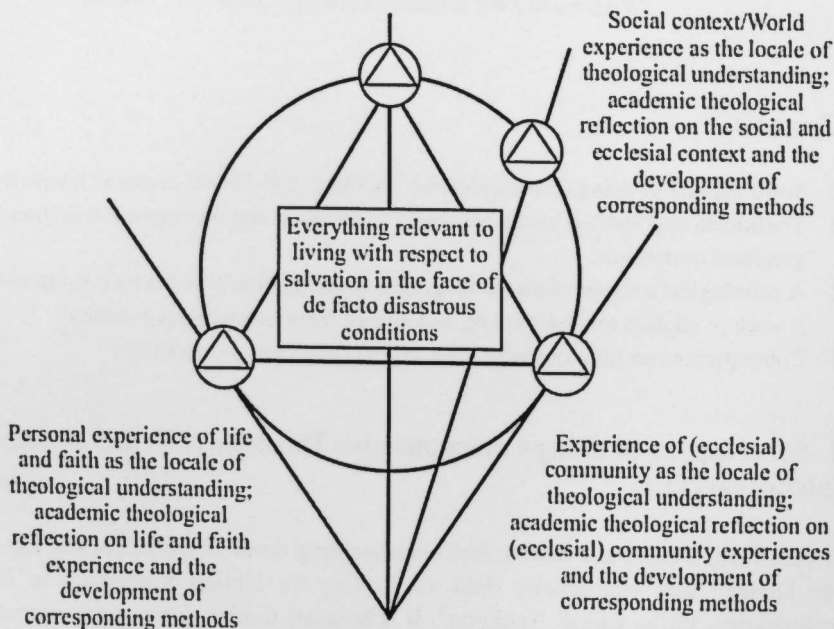
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<sup>1</sup> Thanks for the language assistance go to Teresa Peter and Ulrich Pallua.

<sup>2</sup> For the figure see Forschungskreis Kommunikative Theologie (2006) 87.

Biblical testimony in living transmission and other religious traditions as the locale of theological understanding; academic theological reflection on world views and religious/biblical traditions and the development of corresponding methods

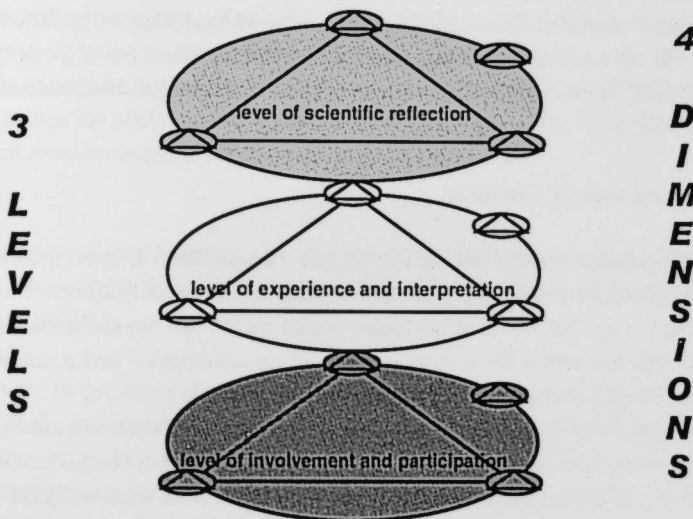
Social context/World experience as the locale of theological understanding; academic theological reflection on the social and ecclesial context and the development of corresponding methods



The way in which Communicative Theology (CT) works manifests itself not only in the horizontal linking of the four dimensions but also in a vertical linking. The vertical linking of the three levels of CT is based on the observation that, according to the traditional understanding of science, the levels of experience and the one of reflection are strictly separated and the level of direct involvement is hardly ever taken into account. Parallel to this separation is the splitting of roles among practitioners on the one hand, and academic researchers on the other.

Communicative Theology aims at an overcoming of this separation: precisely by appreciating the interconnectedness of all three levels in their interaction, this theological style looks for and finds theological insights.

## Levels and dimensionsof CT



### 2 Traditional and (post-)modern misunderstandings in the theological reflection on the biographical dimension

Preceding the reflection on the biographical dimension in theology we have to pay attention to some possible misunderstandings. I am pointing out three of them: a traditional, a modern and a post modern one.

## 2.1 „Save your soul“

During my childhood, each Palm Sunday the people of my home-parish went around the church carrying olive branches in their hand. On our way we passed a cross each year. It was behind our church. On the cross there was an epigraph: „Save your soul“. The implicit theology<sup>3</sup> of this sentence expresses a classical misunderstanding in Christian anthropology and theology: it does not stress clearly enough the truth that each individual is a relational and not an isolated being, as Martin Buber a.o. worked out; we are God's people waiting for our salvation together with the whole of God's creation. To treat the individual as the centre of theological awareness could be misunderstood: an individualistic spiritual turn like „Save your soul“ or thoughts about individual salvation without other creatures could be the result.

If we relate this with the question of religious education some of us will be reminded of their own experiences shaped through such an individualistic understanding of religion.

## 2.2 To be a mature Christian

There is no doubt that the texts of the Second Vatican Council stress the importance of the individual person. Examples of this can be found in GS or on freedom of religion in DH. This emphasis on the individual is no longer based on the old misunderstandings I already mentioned. This was rather the modern concept of an autonomous and accountable subject deriving from Immanuel Kant's enlightened human being.

Book titles from the field of religious education published after the Second Vatican Council can give us an important insight into the optimism, which was characteristic for the experts of religious education in the West and North. How much religion does the individual need to develop religious autonomy? Fritz Oser asked this question in an important book.<sup>4</sup> To become or to be a *mature Christian* was one of the most important keywords in the Christian Churches in the North after the Second Vatican Council.

The discussion on the cairological awareness in point three will develop further our understanding of the problems caused by the modern fixation on the autonomous subject as presented here by speaking of the idea of being/becoming „a mature Christian“.

<sup>3</sup> To the term „implicit theology“ see: Wandinger (2004) 189–212.

<sup>4</sup> Oser (1988).

### 2.3 Individualization and Pluralisation of Religion

One of the biggest challenges to religion in the post-modern World of the northern hemisphere is individualization and pluralisation of religiosity. Individualization of religion means in this context that religion is considered as something belonging mainly to the inside of a person, to his/her very individual experience of self-transcendence. As a consequence religion becomes more and more individualistic, which means that it is no more in touch with other living people or the world. Different aspects of Christianity and also different contents of other religions – especially eastern religions – are sometimes fused into a kind of patchwork-religiosity, as we call it. The logical consequence of individualization of religion, which is sometimes linked with privatisation, is pluralization. Everybody has his/her own individual God. Finally, there will be as many religiosities as people. God's acting in the life of individual people seems to become the only authority for the validity of religion and faith.

Of course the phenomenon of plurality has different causes in the South: for example the traditional rootedness of the diversity of religions, as in India.

## 3 A cairological awareness on the biographical dimension: What does it mean and how does it work in relation to God's acting and human freedom and responsibility?

To deal with the biographical dimension in theology requires a specific awareness. It helps us to be aware of the real and not the abstract „joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor and afflicted“ (GS 1), as *Gaudium et Spes* says. We speak about a specific attention of hope to be able to discover in everyday life the fullness of life despite of crisis and death. This is a transformed view which makes people aware of their own life and the lives of others.

### 3.1 A new relationship to time

The transformed view is connected to a new relationship to time: for modern people, especially for modern grown-ups, chronological time which we are able to measure is an ordinary thing. We ask for the time and hope to get a precise answer. Modern love and relationships are also much influenced by a chronological view. How much time do I have to spend with my wife or my husband or my children to satisfy them? The spirit of our century is a spirit of counting and measuring.



Young children, very dedicated people like a musician and people of native cultures have a different relationship to time. When children are enthusiastic about playing, they forget about the time. They are totally absorbed in their playing. Similar experiences can be observed in the field of music, meditation, love<sup>5</sup> or liturgy. The past, presence and future intermingle.

If parents in their „chrono-logical“ view tell the children to come to eat in ten minutes, children won't be able to understand them. For children it is the *Cairos* for playing at that particular moment. It is a difficult process for grown-ups to be aware of such a *cairos*.

It is not accidental that Jesus' relationship to time, as described in the synoptic tradition, seems to be similar to a childlike understanding of time. A new relationship to time seems to be a fundamental characteristic of the openness for God's Kingdom. Biblically the *cairos* is definitely seen as God's history with us. A transformed view which is able to perceive the aspects of time as *cairos* makes us aware of what healing and liberation ultimately means. It is about the way in which God acts in the life of each human being.

The transformed awareness changes the accustomed human perspective radically: attention is not primarily directed towards the action of human beings any longer. The perspective of one's own effort and performance changes into a perspective of mercy and the gift of the Divine.

The following text shows Jesus' seriousness speaking about the *cairos*. Jesus warns his listeners not to forget about this. He said to the crowd: „When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain', and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot', and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?“ (Luc 12:54-57)

What are the people around Jesus doing that he insults them in such a way? They obviously know about the weather: if clouds rise in the west, they know it is going to rain; if the south-wind blows, then it will turn hot, according to their correct judgment. Logically we would say, however, this is known by every child!

Economists claim that we are able to come up with the correct judgment from the empirically measurable „hard facts“. Jesus' challenging reply to this is: If you are able to interpret the phenomena of the earth and the heavens, why do you not understand how to read the signs of the time? Why do you not find the right judgment on your own?

In the *cairos*, the *chronos* can disappear. „Stolen“ time, as modern people sometimes say, changes into given life. From a *cairo*-logical point of view, time obtains a new quality. It is not accidental or indifferent anymore how we play our roles in our relationships. We will also see that Jesus in the end doesn't condemn those who missed the *cairos*.

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<sup>5</sup> See Scharer (2003) 69–81.

### 3.2 No autonomous Christian is born as such: Where is space for biographical development?

Cairological awareness leads us to an aspect of the biographical dimension theologians usually ignore. It seems that for most theologians – especially systematic theologians – the individual is by definition a grown-up, an autonomous, enlightened subject without his or her very specific biography. Theological anthropology sometimes speaks of human beings in an abstract way. There seem to exist no childhood, no youth, no love biography, no age and no passing away etc.

In contrast to these generalizations the latest youth-research confronts us with the sociological reality that it becomes more and more difficult to get general results concerning youth biographies in a world in which plurality and individuality become central protagonists.

### 3.3 If the days come about which you will say I don't like them

It seems that the unknown author of the book Ecclesiastes in the First Testament had a premonition of the modern view of the age: "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, 'I have no delight in them'" (Ecclesiastes 12,1).

In the Bible the frustration and invalidity of age and death is accepted. At the beginning of Psalm 22, where Jesus is praying on the cross in the Synoptic Gospel, we can hear extreme desperation: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent." (Psalm 22:2-3)

### 3.4 To pass away with trust or fear: What does it mean? Fearless death or dying in fear?<sup>6</sup>

Maybe one could ask what the difference between a Christian dying and that of a Non-Christian is. When we take a look at developmental models, like that of Erik Erikson<sup>7</sup>, the consum-

<sup>6</sup> See for the idea of the headline: Peter (2006).

<sup>7</sup> See Erikson (1987) 241–272.

mate biography is the ideal one. Using the example of the death of Jesus Franz-Josef Nocke<sup>8</sup> shows us that even dying can be a process of self-realization.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to this biographical optimism it's important to listen to a much more realistic voice: the famous theologian Karl Rahner was once asked whether he is afraid of death. Rahner answered with a sober Christian attitude: „I have been asked this question already a couple of times. I can only repeat: if I am afraid of death, why to border about it? As a Christian, however, I can experience a situation like Jesus. Jesus was sweating blood and if I am not afraid, it will also be alright. There are two attitudes: to be afraid of death or to have confidence of the last sense-custody-ness of death.“<sup>10</sup>

As Henning Luther shows us, there is no place for problems and crisis in the theories of human maturation and religious development<sup>11</sup>. In theories of human maturation like the ones of Erikson, Oser or Fowler<sup>12</sup>, individuals go through different stages step by step: to reach a higher stage is accompanied by crisis. The most familiar is our first crisis after birth, the crisis between original confidence and original non-confidence, as Erikson puts it. But in the end all these theories reach a level of integration (Fowler) or general communication (Oser/Gmünder)<sup>13</sup>. Is there a hidden hint of self-salvation in the concepts of human maturation, we may ask: a self-salvation which sometimes lasts until the act of dying?

Another problem of the generalization of people's individual lives and biographies in the speech of autonomous and enlightened subjects is the missing link between problems and crises of everyday life in theological concepts. An exception can be found in the Theology of Liberation with its emphasis on the poor. Gustavo Gutierrez – founder of the Theology of Liberation – stresses that the poor are not social outsiders like they are in the North: it is the real „pobressa mortal“, the deadly poverty of individuals<sup>14</sup>. As Puebla – the 3rd Latin America Bishop Conference after the 2nd Vatican Council – says: These poor are the „Interlocutores“ – the authentic interpreters of the Gospel, like the Apostles and the Bishops in the Christian Tradition<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Nocke (1978) 143.

<sup>9</sup> See Winzenick (1991) 302; Siller (1995) 6–16.

<sup>10</sup> See Imhof - Biallowons (1986).

<sup>11</sup> See Luther (1992) 165–171.

<sup>12</sup> Fowler (1989).

<sup>13</sup> See Schweitzer (2004) 121–136.

<sup>14</sup> See Gutiérrez (1985) 268–286.

<sup>15</sup> See Evangelisierung (1979) 1142.

## 4 Consequences on religious education and pastoral care – Conclusion

The questions if at all and if so, how God is acting in the lives of people, cannot be answered easily. Still these questions have to be posed and to look at possible answers is quite important in connection to mentoring processes like education, formation or pastoral counselling. One should have a closer look at the world-view, which is hidden in particular education as well as counselling concepts before adopting them in one's practical work. Such concepts can for example be based on the idea of a direct, immediate intervention by God. But particularly when we think of situations, in which we experience our limitedness and the impossibility to change the situation, one can see how problematic this sort of concepts is.

But also those concepts are problematic, which more or less implicitly foster an understanding of God just as precondition to the possibility of religious maturity and which therefore trust fully on and aim at the development of religious autonomy and maturity.

### 4.1 Immediate intervention or separation of God?

In the process of human religious development one can perceive on the one hand stages, during which the child expects a direct, immediate intervention by God. On the other hand there are also stages – particularly during adolescence – during which young people tend to develop a deistic attitude; which means that the separation of God and world has proceeded so far, that it seems to be fully unimportant if God does exist at all or not.

Those concepts of religious development, which hold to the logics of religious maturity – underlying that this can and should be reached earlier or later due to human effort – are at times as fascinated by the idea of religious autonomy and maturity, that the cairological awareness is neglected. I am speaking in this context of a cairological awareness, which enables people to discover traces of God's acting in the lives of individual people. This particular discovery has to take place with prudence, with carefulness and with empathy as well as with the ability of differentiation. This theological process aims at an uncovering of God's life fostering truth in one's own life as well as in the lives of others and gets its criteria in unfolding a connection to salvation despite all the actual calamities.

### 4.2 Experience of educational and pastoral powerlessness

Cairological awareness on God's acting, on human development and on the acting of people shows that in situations of Christian religious education and pastoral counselling from the human perspective (almost) nothing can be made purposely and still so much can – more or less

consciously – be disrupted. The insight, that (almost) nothing can be made or caused purposefully, can create in people/Christians, who are used to availability and feasibility, a radical experience of powerlessness, which consequently can lead to resignation or even increased, unquestioned pedagogical and pastoral activity.

### 4.3 Between the almost nothing and the almost all

If an academic, a practical-theological approach to the understanding of God's acting would succeed in balancing and in expressing argumentatively the tension between the „almost nothing, which can be made purposely“ and „the almost all, which can be disrupted“, this could really serve as a criteria in order to distinguish between healing and disrupting catechetical-pastoral presence of the church in the world.

In order to clarify and to understand more clearly the aspect, that in religious processes of education, formation and pastoral counselling with regard to God's acting so much can be disrupted, insights from depth-psychologically influenced development theories are helpful as well as insights from philosophical religious critics. These insights show clearly how the idea of God's acting can be misused for a problematic idea of education and pastoral care and these insights can enable us to distinguish more clearly between God's real acting on the one side and human desires of education, formation, pastoral counselling or conversion on the other side.

### 4.4 Standing fast, even when nothing moves anymore

An option, which is important in the communicative-theological approach, says: „Standing fast, even when nothing moves anymore“. In this option, in this expression the pneumatological and the christological – focussed on the mystery of the cross – perspectives meet and touch each other. In pastoral or catechetical situations of complete powerlessness the presence of Christians, who represent Christ, can at times be experienced as hope against all hopes and can show healing and liberating effects even when the situations cannot be changed as such.

## 5 Summery

Before I end, let me recall the major statements once again. At the top of this article some relevant aspects of CT and TCI are described and some traditional and (post-)modern misunderstandings regarding the theological dignity of the biographical dimension are dealt with.

These misunderstandings of individualism of salvation, of a problematic overstressing of the autonomous subject and of individualization of religion carried us to the question of a changed awareness on God's acting in the life of individual people. We reached the concept of the cairological awareness. This awareness – related to Jesus' relationship to the sign of times – opens a new horizon to be aware of the Divine in everyday life and in biographical experiences and expressions. Finally, we concluded with some consequences for religious education and pastoral care concepts.

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