
The Ongoing Task of Christian Theology in the World of Today

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Second Vatican Council emphasizes task to “scrutinize the signs of the time”. Pope Francis adds that “Realities are greater than ideas”. But how can theological research meet the world of today? Summing up, theological science must become empirical. A careful integration of sociological methods and the accurate consideration of secular heuristic approaches is necessary. An interdisciplinary theological research will gain a fresh view on the world of today, so that the proclamation of the Gospel will lead the profane world to understanding of the precious value of the kingdom of God, this is “justice and peace in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

Key words: interdisciplinary research, Second Vatican Council, proclamation of the Gospel, grounded theory.

It is an ongoing task of the Christian theology to pronounce the Word of God in the present world. Not because of the intellectual (self-) interest, however, but for the sake of people, especially for the poor and marginalized. Theology has no end in itself, rather more it has a task to serve the Gospel. If “the Kingdom of God is justice and peace” (Rom. 14:17), Christian theologians are obliged to take care of this justice and peace, with all the power they can afford. The double commitment to love shows two different directions of the Christian Theology: to look at God and to look at the neighbor.

The Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church (1963-1965) emphasized this in the Pastoral Constitution “*Gaudium et Spes*”. Often cited is the first sentence. “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.” (GS 1.) The Council Fathers and first of all Pope John XXIII

wanted to tear down walls that separated the inner Church from the secular world. To announce the Gospel means to share God's Message of hope and justice to the people of today. And even more: "To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel." (GS 4.)

Pope Francis emphasizes: "Realities are greater than ideas." (EG 231.) He reflects that the Roman Catholic theology and also the Magisterium long time neglected the challenge to meet the reality of the present time and remained in the world of theological ideas. Ideas are necessary to serve "communication, understanding and praxis". But theologians always have to avoid the risk of living in a self-sufficient world of "formal nominalism". The Pope stresses this because if theology rests in an academic ivory tower, it will "remain in the realm of pure ideas and [...] end up in a lifeless and unfruitful self-centeredness and Gnosticism". (EG 233.)

In this short article, I want to illustrate how "scrutinizing" today's reality is possible in the state of the art of nowadays social science. How will a theologian be able to know the today's world? How can he know, how humans live, suffer and are joyful in our time? How do they meet God and the Gospel?

K. Rahner already in 1966 noted how problematic it is, to reduce this theological research to a subjective and eclectic view on the empirical world (Rahner, 1966, 181). Today's world is irreducibly complex and the experience of an individual is limited and narrow. Theology as a science has to meet the claim not to reduce the empirical world to subjective perspectives in order to simplify the task. Superficial approaches will lead to superficial results. The only chance to conduct a view on the present human reality is the use of appropriate methods of empirical research on the state of the art. Although this is common in social science, theological scholars and persons responsible in the Church long time hesitated to accept empirical research, to use unknown methods and to trust "strange" heuristic approaches.

Besides this we can find God not only in the inner circle of Christianity or the own Christian confession. God can be found in the whole Creation and it is the duty of theology to find God in places outside the shared world of the faithful. It is of great importance to think outside the box of the traditional ecclesiastical surrounding. In places that might be in the opposite of common theological understanding, we maybe realize more of Gods call, than we anticipate. M. Foucault talks about heterotopia, i.e., separated places that show the common reality like in mirror (Foucault, 1992, 2014). These places differ from all other places we usually experience. The heterotopia are of special interest, because we need the view on the uncommon places to see the total room of discourses. A graveyard, e.g., is a place inhabited by the dead. However, it is connected to all other places inhabited by the living. Graveyards remind visitors of how vulnerable life is. The history of graveyards is a mirror of dealing with dying throughout the centuries. Nowadays graveyards are "outer cities" in which every family has its dark residence. (Foucault 1992, 42). As a heterotopia, graveyards help to understand how the present culture meets the inevitable death.

A theological scholar looking for heterotopia in the empirical world is looking at places outside ecclesiastical horizon and discovers the Gospel where it is not being expected. For the secular world religious places, such as Churches or theological reflection, can be a heterotopia, showing spiritual horizon with the chance to reveal blind

spots. In any case, discovering heterotopia is opening a narrow view with the chance of self-revelation. Heterotopia often are blind spots that are necessary to analyze a discourse as a whole, and theological scrutinizing of the today world requires open eyes looking for heterotopia, to review an extended horizon.

Common theological methods and heuristic approaches lack methods of current empirical research. There has to be an epistemological discourse how theology can inherit the missing skills. K. Rahner already discussed this theme in the 60-ties. (Rahner, 1966) He favored a two-step procedure. On the basis of sociological outputs, he wants to implement theological concerns. Sociological science is absolute necessary, but stays in the position being an ancillary science for theology. The essential task for theology is to transcend a mere mundane subjective description. Staying in the grace of the Holy Spirit theology has the chance and the task to face the present time with the transcended reality of God.

J. van der Veen (van der Veen, 1984, 1999-2000; Hark, 2016) opposed Rahner's segregation of the two disciplines, because he missed a common heuristic understanding. If the research is parted in two isolated approaches, it is difficult to understand how the two disciplines communicate. Social science has to know which issues are of interest and which theological terms are adequate. Theology needs the chance to prove empirical findings. Last but not least both need a common diction, to understand each other. E.g., the sense of the term "Church" differs in empirical and theological science. Van der Veen searches a mutual philosophy of scientific that empowers theology to share issues and conclusions with social science.

After discussing the possibilities, how scientific disciplines generally can cooperate, van der Veen concludes theological and empirical approaches have to be combined in an interdisciplinary or intradisciplinary understanding. Interdisciplinary rests on a dialog of two independent disciplines, both research with their own methods and preconditions. A good communication is the most challenging dimension of interdisciplinary. It is a problem, that usually every discipline recommends itself to be the more important science. Also, a common diction cannot be presupposed.

Therefore the only chance for theology to scrutinize the empirical world is intradisciplinary. If theology wants to meet the empirical world appropriately, it has to become empirical. This means that theology has to incorporate sociological methods in her own research. In a first stage a single scholar has to be an expert in theological and empirical science. This demands high standards for this individual. In a second stage certain useful methods and approaches can become a natural part of the theological discipline. Theology knows such processes of incorporating new methods. A common example is the integration of historical and linguistic methods in exegetical research.

H. Parthey (Parthey, 2011, 1999), an expert on interdisciplinary approach in natural sciences, emphasizes that interdisciplinarity will only be successful if one scholar is interested in two disciplines. Otherwise the research will always tend to have a biased focus. Successful interdisciplinarity does not depend on the formation of a multidiscipline group of scholars. Only the missing possibility to solve a problem leads an individual scientist to search for complementary knowledge, which will lead to the development of the discipline, and to the interdisciplinarity. This underlines van der Veen's thesis that theology has to become empirical itself.

O. Fuchs (Fuchs, 2000) criticizes van der Veen's approach as too limited to serve the concerns of theology. He remarks that many empirical studies of theologians tend to underestimate the theological dimension in their studies. The empirical findings sometimes seem to get normative quality, pushing theological topics aside. The logic of social science implicates certain orientations how to act, and then the Christian motivation may lose its importance. He assumes that the influence of empirical methodology often overwhelms theological concerns. In the worst-case theology becomes an ancillary science for sociological results.

O. Fuchs concludes that only if the empirical findings resonate in a theological understanding it will be possible to attend the task "scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel". Empirical research is necessary, but only one part of a sophisticated process. Theological science is especially founded on a confession, a clear perspective under which the whole process of theological investigation is founded on. O. Fuchs suggests "comparative hermeneutics" (*komparative Hermeneutik*) (Fuchs, 2002) making it possible to compare current empirical experiences with the experiences of the past. Only this procedure can connect the present time with the revelation of the Word of God. Meeting Christ in the Gospel and taking the experience of the Christian predecessors serious gives theological science the power to confront the signs of the times with the transcendental horizon, always greater than human reality.

Summing up it can be stated, that it is necessary to incorporate professional empirical research in theology, if the task of scrutinizing the present time shall be accomplished appropriate. I agree with K. Kießling that empirical theology has to avoid "positivist perils" (positivistischen Gefahren) (Kießling, 2005, 126) by adding confident the distinct theological hermeneutic. Theology can meet empirical science with her own critical hermeneutical approach without demonizing or idolizing empirical methods.

Although common sense attributes science to gain findings independent and unbiased from the individual researcher, it is generally accepted in social science that every research is influenced by the subjectivity of the researcher. Objective research as it was favored in the 50-ties and 60-ties is mere a myth of modernity (Charmaz, 2006, 123–150). Already searching a subject that is worthy to discuss depends on the preferences and interests of the individual scholar. Nobody will take over the burden of a long going research process without personal engagement. But also all following steps are influenced by the subjectivity of the researcher. Selecting the appropriate method, deciding which data to collect, interacting with the individuals during collecting data, analyzing collected data and writing a final review – nothing is independent from the personality of the individual researcher. Even choosing which literature might be relevant and which consequences may result, the subjectivity of the researcher will have an influence.

Established and well-founded methods lead to the advantage minimalizing subjective influence, without eliminating it complete. Scrutinizing the present time needs professional used methods and well-trained research. This inherits to be aware of all interacting factors, reflecting them and, if possible, take them into consideration when writing a final report. (Reichertz, 2015)

The subjectivity of every social research is no principle problem, if the scholar reflects it. He will not get rid of his biases and perspectives, but he can be aware of the influence that his point of view has on the result of his research. Even more the

individual interests and viewpoints of a scholar are a strong impetus starting and continuing a research process. A well reflected and described viewpoint is the prerequisite of high value results.

In the last consequents nobody can find everlasting or objective results to describe human reality. Every finding is preliminary and has to be proved by comparing it with the ongoing reality of human life. Dealing with the everlasting God and His Revelation theology tends to search holistic and eternal truths. But Christian theology depends on faith that needs a decision and has inherited values. Scrutinizing the present time needs perspective of the Gospel to proclaim the “Kingdom of God”. Theology looking for “justice and peace” has a clearly defined starting point. It is not the task of empirical theology to deny this, but to be aware of it, to disclose it and to review findings if necessary and possibly change long-lasting conclusions. This has already reached the modern theological dogmatic discourse (Seewald, 2018).

Theological research can use qualitative or quantitative approaches, and in some cases triangulation can be useful. The chosen approach has to be appropriate, approved and helpful. The chosen method depends on the subject of interest. No empirical approach can be excluded, if it meets the demands of modern social science. So empirical theology has to decide case-by-case, which external method is appropriate to analyze the subject of interest. Sometimes theologians only use empirical methods to verify results found in theological reflection. It is of great importance to respect the value of collected data. They represent the real life and should not be misused only to justify the researchers own ideas.

One possible approach to qualitative empirical studies is grounded theory. Empirical theology should be aware that this research concept includes heuristic perspectives about reality (Glaser et al., 2010; Corbin und Strauss, 2015; Charmaz, 2006; Clarke und Keller, 2012). A minority of German scholars follows B. Glaser's positivistic orientated concept. A. Strauss developed together with J. Corbin a version of the grounded theory on the basis of symbolic interactionism and in the tradition of the Chicago school of sociology. C. Charmaz emphasized a constructivist approach in grounded theory and A. Clarke opened microanalysis in grounded theory establishing a postmodern version, terming it a “situational analysis”. Due to lack of space, the holistic and often manifold approach in grounded theory cannot be discussed here, anyway, grounded theory promises to be gainful in modern theology (Klein, 2005).

The grounded theory method requires careful gathering of data. In an iterative process of coding, theoretical sampling and theoretical sensitivity the research process leads to an elaborated analysis. The scientific process is structured by three levels of coding. Open coding sets labels to the data with the aim to open the content of the data. Axial coding is a process to relate codes to each other so that connections and patterns can be found. The last step of theoretical or selective coding shows important lines in the collected data. The process of research is carefully structured and often results in a small amount of core codes. It is very important to interrupt the gathering of data from time to time and analyze the research as a whole. Through this process, the researcher is able to find gaps in the collected data and, if necessary, can collect data on questions he had not considered before.

The process of grounded theory is well described and explored in literature. Open questions remain, e.g., the relationship to post-structural approaches. Although the methodical steps of grounded theory seem easy to realize, it would be a mistake to use them only cursorily. Only a careful and professional practice will gain useful results. Very important is to understand the heuristic basis of the grounded theory, otherwise the research will tend to become superficial from the beginning.

Grounded theory is a good example for the gain theology can have due integrating social science methods. It leaves preconceived ideas and firmly anchored biases as long as possible unconsidered. The careful dealing with previous knowledge and existing concepts is of high advantage for traditional theological surroundings. Systematic analyzing collected data is the core of grounded theory. Although Glaser and Strauss differ in the way how the analysis emerges from the data, they would agree, that constructing or discussion holistic meta-theory is no subject for grounded theory. This prerequisite helps empirical theology to think out of the box of traditional approaches that might have become inappropriate or useless today. Grounded theory is a rather abductive method or concept, helping to gain fresh perspectives. This is very useful for theology in times that are changing faster than ever.

A big challenge is the relationship of empirical research and theology. In the iterative process of collecting and analyzing data, theological questions and methods have to be integrated. This requires keen attention during the process of analysis. The subjective point of view every theological research is based on, leads to benefits in the research process, because the research issue can be followed deeper and more fundamental. Theological research can discuss underlying value judgments and normative determinations. In social science the normative prerequisites are often not clearly expressed, mostly are unconscious or given for granted. Theology has the chance to bring up a discussion on this subject and to set a certain momentum, such as the option for the poor und marginalized.

For theology there is the big challenge to stay humble not to explain creation and the whole universe in a single project. Every professional research, also in theology, will limit the subject of interest. The tradition of theology often entails the difficult manner of an all-embracing understanding and trying to find the everlasting truth. Sometimes there is an unconscious ambition to think holistic and eternal. Grounded theory can help to reduce this ambition, because it is only looking for theories of middle range with limited time truth claim. In practicing grounded theory I experienced how valuable the careful and iterative interaction with data can be and how liberating it can be, to do restricted and situational analysis.

Interdisciplinarity is successful if the cross-pollination of ideas can be realized. In this sense social science not only contributes methods and methodological considerations. If empirical theology gains acceptance and appreciation in today's empirical discourse it can supply a careful reflection on ethical presumptions and above all can open narrow positivistic "dead ends" to a horizon that even might be able to accept the transcend reality. Empirical theology has to do her own homework first, that means to study, integrate and practice empirical methods on the state of the art of today's social science.

The task to scrutinize today's world is no mundane task, but inevitable. There is still a long way to go, until empirical theology has finished the integration of empirical methods. Getting surprised and challenged by the heterotopia is a chance to meet God

und his revelation in a new and fresh way. At the end the ecclesiastical view on the world of today will sharpen, the “joyful and the hopeful, the grieving and the anxious of this age” (GS 1) will profit and the profane world may understand the precious value of “the Kingdom of God, that is justice and peace in the holy spirit” (Rom 14:17).

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Kristīgās teoloģijas neatceļamais uzdevums šodienas pasaulē

Kopsavilkums

Otrais Vatikāna koncils uzsver “nepieciešamību pievērst uzmanību laika zīmēm”. Pāvests Francisks piebilst, ka “realitāte ir lielāka nekā idejas”. Bet kā teoloģiskā pētniecība reaģē uz šodienas pasauli? Īsi sakot, teoloģijas zinātnei ir jākļūst empīriskai. Ir nepieciešama rūpīga socioloģijas metožu integrācija un akurāta sekulāro heuristisko pieeju respektēšana. Topošā starpdisciplinārā teoloģiskā pētniecība sniegs svaigu skatu uz šodienas pasauli, lai Evaņģēlija pasludināšana profāno pasauli mudinātu saprast Dieva Valstības brīnišķo vērtību, kas ir “taisnība un miers Svētajā Garā” (Rom. 14:17).

Atslēgas vārdi: starpdisciplinārā pētniecība, Otrais Vatikāna koncils, Evaņģēlija pasludinājums, pamatotā teorija.



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