
Not Strangers but Partners: Academic Theology and Social Work

Ne svešinieki, bet partneri: Akadēmiskā teoloģija un sociālais darbs

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The article deals with topical issue in the Roman Catholic Church – ministry of the Ordained deacon. In the hierarchical system of the RCC deacons find their legitimate place between priest and laity, whereas in reality they serve as Caritative social workers to those in need. It prescribes close relationship between Academic theology and social work, launched by the Second Vatican council and well-known from the New testament times. On the one hand, the ordained deacon needs competence due to his ministry in multi-religious environment, on the other, following Christ's calling every Christian is called to be a Social worker.

Key words: Ordained deacon, interdisciplinarity, academic theology is then a complement or supplement to social work.

Roman Catholic deacon as an ordained social worker

In the Roman Catholic church, deacons are sometimes called ordained social workers. This reflects an understanding of permanent deacons as being ordained to serve the poor. One of the early promoters of the permanent deacon in the Roman Catholic church – Hannes Kramer – emphasized the close connection between social work and theology (Helbach, 2018). The common understanding of the Greek noun “*diaconia*” as “responsible service of the Gospel by deeds and by words performed by Christians in response to the needs of people” (Lossky, 2002, 305) *is the basis of the idea that deacons are ordained social workers.*

I am a deacon and I have a degree in both social work and theology. For a long time, I did not like this designation, as it seems to underestimate the importance of ordination and excludes the theological part of my being a deacon. I spend a lot of time in theological reflection and teaching. On the other hand, each Christian – whether ordained or not – has to be aware of the poor and needy. In this sense, whether he/she wants or not each baptized person is invoked to be kind of social worker or – in biblical nomenclature – a good Samaritan. Does this also apply to academic theology?

I am aware that I make generalizations about theology and social work in the following passages. However, this is a necessary step in trying to realize an overview and draw general lines. Of course, from a broader perspective, differentiation is indispensable, unlikely not possible at this place. It is my concern to open a theologian's perspective.¹ My view is that of a Roman Catholic deacon and theologian living and thinking in Germany. Perspectives from other viewpoints will obviously differ, surely in details and argumentation, yet perhaps not in the conclusion and practice.

What kind of relationship?

What kind is the relationship between academical theology and social work? Are they colleagues working in different departments of humanity? Do they perceive or ignore each other? Even if theology and social work were strangers that are on the move without any interest in one another, they could possibly fail in their own business. They could have a narrow view of the world, missing important implications for their one task.

Theology and the empirical world

For a long time, Roman Catholic theology lived in an ivory tower. This long-lived practice was the strategy to organize faith and church after the time of enlightenment and revolution at the beginning of modernity. Roman Catholic theology tried to create a closed space of Roman Catholic identity. This was an important and well-going response to the changing times and the task to find a unique Roman Catholic identity. Even practical theology had almost no view on the reality of men, but the task to convey dogmatical insights into the ecclesiastical world (Hark, 2013). For many decades, this practice worked more or less well, although after the Second World War it was no longer passible to live as a Roman Catholic theologian in a separated world of one's own.

Pope John XIII proclaimed the second Vatican Council, which transformed the relations between the church and modern world. A new pastoral view was the central theme in all debates, often against the persistent resistance of conservative theologians and bishops. The documents of the council initiated a new direction in the church and theology. Since then, it is a matter of course that ministry and theology in the church does not exist for itself but rather as a sign and tool of God's love in and outside of church. Two important documents mark this change, opening with pointed statements: "*Christ is the Light of nations. Because this is so, this Sacred Synod gathered together in the Holy Spirit eagerly desires, by proclaiming the Gospel to every creature, to bring the light of Christ to all men, a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church*" (Lumen Gentium, 1). Even more, the council fathers overcame the traditional borders of ecclesiastical thinking when they started the final document of the council with a sentence that has become famous: "*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*" (Gaudium et Spes, 1). Accordingly, theology has no chance to reflect God and the holy gospel only with an inner view. As Pope John often proclaimed, the church has to open the windows to let fresh wind into her walls. Theology has to look at the world and actual discourses and cannot rest in the ivory towers of intellectual reflection.

After the council, pastoral and empirical theology prospered. Approaches such as liberation theology were involved in the struggle for justice and peace. Academical theology was often engaged in society and its research reflected current ethical and social problems. For many theologians, the step to ground theology in human sciences was a liberation from the step path of scholastic theology, a thinking and reflection that had become too small and narrow (Wachinger, 2006, 21).

The focus of theological reflection should include ordinary people in precarious situations. The present Pope Francis reminds us tirelessly that the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed is the challenging call to struggle for justice and peace (Rom. 14:17), including in academical theological reflection.

In recent years, theology has learned not only to react to phenomena outside of its traditional rooms but also to recognize that God's revelation can be found in foreign places. Theological reflection has a great profit viewing over the rim of self-evident rooms of discourse. The challenge of today's theology is to find answers in "heterotopia" (Foucault, 2013), places contrary to common life, which are disturbing, incompatible and challenging to traditional catholic understanding. For example, H.-J. Sander (2019) looks for places in nowadays contexts that usually are not of interest in traditional dogmatic. His research is based on the term "*sign of the times*" in "Gaudium et Spes" no. 4. He shows that these signs hold major importance for theological discourses. They relativize traditional thinking, which has often come to an end.

The church and faith are in an ongoing process of transformation, just like the whole of our society. It holds strong importance not to dismiss ourselves from the process, but rather to be actively and consciously involved not as masters of truth, but rather as guests in a world that is rich of problems. Our values and perspectives can hospitality gifts, that we can offer today's society (Theobald, 2018).

This very brief view of the development of theology shows that times are past, as academic theology had no connection to real life. By contrast, pastoral practice almost never had to fill this gap, because the needs and problems of mankind were always in the focus of Christian practice.

This development is not only a casual or other-directed circumstance. In the middle of the past century, K. Rahner and others rediscovered the roots of Christian belief. As God became human in Jesus, he sanctified mankind. Therefore, a theological orientation to human life is not incidental, but connected to the core of the gospel. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God that is justice and peace or shalom, which aims to the welfare of people simply because they are humans. Theology includes inevitably anthropology. This long-underestimated principle leads to the view on real life, especially precarious life, thus reflecting the direct connection to social work.

Social work

Social work has the task of supporting persons in need, especially in cases when they are unable to solve a difficult situation themselves. It is a common insight that this task knows an individual and community perspective. Many different methods and tools have been developed for practice. The work and commitment of the social worker is exemplary and irreplaceable in a world of need and poverty. General definitions of social work include more than a practical view.

In July 2014, the International Federation of Social Workers approved the following definition: "*Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the*

empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work" (IFSW, 2014). The roots of social work are emphasized in this definition. The humanitarian and democratic ideals are the foundation of social work. Its values "are based on respect for the equality, worth, and dignity of all people" (Ramsay, 2003, 336).

It is my concern to highlight the misunderstanding that is sufficient to reflect only on the tools of social work, imagining to have a neutral worldview. Practical action always inherits ethical, anthropological and political assumptions, sometimes explicit, more often implicit. I agree with I. Hare: "We need a changed conception of social work which represents effectively the whole range of its knowledge and skills throughout the world" (Hare, 2004, 408).

I am not urging a certain point of view, but rather pointing to the problem of unconscious positions. A point of view is a necessary foundation of every human acting or researching. Acting in a certain way always requires decisions based on values or beliefs that motivate the action and gives one direction. These values and beliefs may be religious, but this do not have to be the case. Whether the social worker realizes or not, his own convictions – religious or otherwise – will take part in the relationship with the client. It is a matter of professionalism to be aware of this influence.

The own individual standpoint can be an advance, if reflected and set in relation to other standpoints (Hunter *et al.*, 2002). Without a perspective, there is no chance to act or reflect anything, but one's perspectives are not necessarily reflected and conscious. The awareness of one's own worldview and values is the key to a professional dialog with vulnerable people, especially in professional settings.

Important fundamental questions in social work are about power and knowledge and for whom they hold importance (Clarke & Keller, 2012, 54). What are the ethical and political implications of social work? Who pays the social worker with which interest? Who is vulnerable and who is in danger of being vulnerable?

Reflecting upon these questions is indispensable to support sustainable value creation. However, even more, holistic help is required today. This includes religious dimensions of clients as well as the circumstances of the social surrounding (Wiesenhöfer, 2006). The awareness of one's own perspective is not necessarily a Christian position. There is no "qualitative difference between the work done by Christians in social work and social workers from other backgrounds" (Hosak, 2019, 4). Nonetheless, for Christian social workers it is essential to reflect on one's own belief, especially in relation to the professional work to be done. Faith can be an advantage when it prompts asking "what God and faith can mean, promote or even prevent in people's lives; and how this can be combined with knowledge and reason"² (Lutz, 2019, 35).

Partnership

In today's world, religion is not disappearing, as prognosticated just a few years ago. Our western societies are increasingly becoming multi-religious societies. Religion in its manifold expressions plays an essential role in individual, local-political and geopolitical stages (Knitter, 2010, 257). Religion becomes increasingly important, too often as fundamentalism and religious violence. Such violence is often rooted in the superficial philosophy of human life and its religious foundation. In 2007, the General Assembly on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation

for Peace stated: “If religions are not part of the solution, they will continue to be part of the problem” (United Nations, 2007). Hence, it seems necessary to look behind ideological theological argumentation, and realize a profound theological discourse on the state of the art.

Dealing with of all sorts of people, social workers cannot dispense themselves being challenged by the religious and ideological attitudes of their clients. The challenge needs a profound and well-reflected answer by the social worker, not to be shiftless against ideological argumentation.

Academic theology is then a complement or supplement to social work, simply because clients are religious persons or the world of clients inherits religious elements. Belief or religion affects and often decides how people and their surroundings act or judge about the world in which they live. Meeting religious thinking in the social world of clients forces a social worker to respect this thinking and even more to interact in a religious discourse. Often religious thinking is grounded in subjective and personal emotions without reflection.

In this case, theology can help to leave an unsystematic gut feeling and implement systematical reflection. This can transcend ideological and fundamentalist religious constrictions by including broader views to religious reality and relativizing narrow world views. The advantage of rational based theology is the capacity to transcend an immanent world view to one that is able to integrate transcendent perspectives.

It is a complex problem to enter into dialog with the often-foreign religious beliefs and values of clients. A religious dialog can soon become difficult, even in one’s own confession. Nevertheless, this dialog bears both difficulties and “very promising possibilities” (Knitter, 2010, 262). The comprehension of the word “God”, or devil, heaven and hell can offer a varying number of understandings. Because religion is founded in feelings and unspeakable realities such as God, it is even difficult to agree in fundamental terms. Above all, religion is not alone an individual issue, but rather is bond to social interaction. A client is always part of such interaction if religious themes occur. The importance of rational justified theology is obvious. “When religious experience is divorced from religious reflection, when people turn off their reasoning abilities as they are carried along by religious sentiment and fervor, the door is opened to exploitation, harm, abuse” (Knitter, 2010, 265).

Christians should be social workers

Not all social workers are Christians. However, every fellow of Christ should have the attitude of a social worker. There can be no doubt that a baptized person who wants to realize his faith has to serve his next and especially everybody in need. Just like a social worker, a Christian has to face social injustice and support the underprivileged. All sorts of discrimination are challenges that have to be met.

Indeed, this has to be more than an attitude. A social worker has to do work, investing one’s power, lifetime and commitment. He realizes his job in practical doing. This is just the same as the way of Jesus. Acting in his fellowship is hard work. Even a profound theological scholar cannot dispense himself from realizing his faith in practical work. If theology is true in realizing its roots, it will share with social workers, to work and not only to rest in theoretical discourses.

Helping the next in our postmodern world needs reflection and professionalism, otherwise well-intend help can be fruitless or even lead to ongoing problems. Christians' inclusive academic theologians can have great profit from professional social work. Christian charity depends on professional power, which social work can help to establish.

Faith can be a powerful resource to design life in critical situations. The faithful can always count on their God. If their own possibilities have come to an end, there is a power that is always available. The power that faith gives provides both social workers and their clients. A professional and well-reflected handling with this power is a chance in difficult situations that should not be underestimated (Hoburg, 2008).

Conclusion

The best practice would be a partnership of academic theology and social work. Both theology and social work have their own area of responsibility, but participating in certain discourses gives both the chance to look over the rim of their specific perspectives.

If Christian theology visits fields that are common in social work, it presents the opportunity to learn more than in usual theological issues. This will fundamentally change theological thinking. The task of theology is not only to realize the empirical world, but also to know about the tools and strategies of helping professions. Dealing with God's eternity and almighty academic theology tends to great and all-embracing views. Grounding reflection in daily live helps to escape the trap of idealistic reflection. "Theologians can learn to look pragmatically and contentedly at small steps at the place of social work and need not demand total identification. They learn to speak a simple and understandable language"³ (Wiesenhöfer, 2006). The daily practice of the social worker – often exhausting and engaged with ordinary and random problems – can help Christian theology to kneel down and serve, just as the Lord want's his disciples to do (Jn. 13:12-15). It will ground theology in situations of vulnerable people. If social work is open to theological thinking, it will profit from systematic research in religious themes and will have the advance to understand people's religious thinking and motivation from a reflected point of view (Krockauer 2006).

A deacon is not ordained for social work, but his baptism includes serving the needy and thus social work is part of his roots. Nevertheless, it seems necessary to find a sophisticated definition of the term *diakonia*, with its biblical roots. Although the Greek term *diakonia* has a different meaning (Recepcion, 2014; Collins, 1990; Hentschel, 2013) and the practice of permanent deacons (especially in Germany) is not focused on caritative work (Hark, 2018), serving the poor is a constitutive task for every disciple of Jesus. In this sense, *diakonia* "is therefore the indispensable prefix of every pastoral action, for evangelization and catechesis, for celebrating liturgy. For the service to the next, for immediate help to life in general and for adult church education in particular" (Stelzer, 2019, 251). Therefore, an academic theologian has to participate in the world of social work, and vice versa.

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3. Author's translation; original: „Theologinnen und Theologen können lernen, am Ort der Sozialarbeit pragmatisch und zufrieden auf kleine Schritte zu schauen und müssen keine Totalidentifikationen verlangen. Sie lernen eine einfache und verständliche Sprache zu sprechen.“

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Kopsavilkums

Raksts pievēršas Romas Katoļu Baznīcā aktualizētajam jautājumam par t.s. ordinētajiem diakoniem, kuru funkcijas Baznīcas hierarhijā ir kalpot par starpniekiem starp draudzes locekļiem un priesteriem; praksē viņi bieži pilda karitatīvā sociālā darbinieka uzdevumus. Tas nozīmē ciešu akadēmiskās teoloģijas un sociālā darba saikni, teorētiski un praktiski, kas iesākusies kopš Otrā Vatikāna koncila un ir pazīstama no Jaunās Derības laikiem. No vienas puses, diakonam nepieciešama kompetence, kalpojot multirelīģiskā vidē, no otras puses, saskaņā ar Kristus aicinājumu ikviens kristietis ir sociālais darbinieks.

Atslēgas vārdi: ordinēts diakons, starpdisciplināritāte, akadēmiskā teoloģija ir papildinājums sociālajam darbam.



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