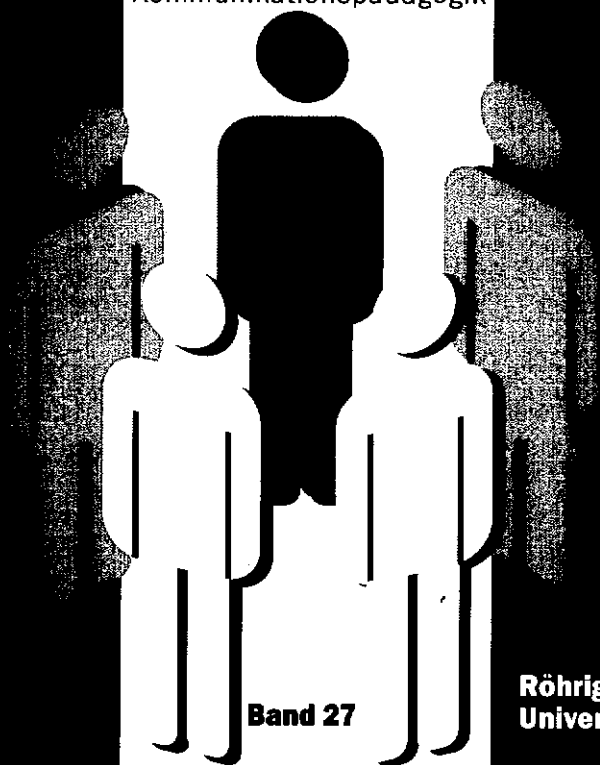


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Communicating Reformation – Reforming Communication

The Augustinian canon Martin Luther spent eleven years in Erfurt. Here, he enrolled at the university in 1501, and four years later he entered the monastery. First he studied, and then later taught, Biblical exegesis. During his teaching and studies, he noticed that what was written in the Bible had little or nothing to do with the teachings of the Roman Church at that time, which instructed believers what to believe. He began to have doubts, and many things became disputable for him. Thus began the Reformation.

Now – in keeping with Hellmut Geissner’s concept of rhetorical communication and his terms – I will attempt to describe what Luther wanted and did based on his findings, and what consequences this had for the Protestant understanding of preaching, as well as its impact on interreligious dialogue. When I work with Geissner’s concept, for me as a representative of the field of practical theology, it is not merely a gesture of courtesy due to the present occasion. I do it because this concept makes sense to me, and because it has intersected with my own thought processes and intentions since I met Hellmut Geissner some 15 years ago. For eight years, he trained my students in courses, first at the University of Zurich, where I taught for several years, and then at the University of Vienna, where I still teach. The concept of rhetorical communication is a constant component of my lectures and seminars in homiletics, which instructs students how to preach.

On Luther’s Challenge to Dispute Using Arguments

Luther was able to read the Biblical texts in the Hebrew and Greek originals. This made the church’s doctrine untrustworthy for him. For this reason, in 1517 he composed his 95 theses, which he presumably did not nail to the door of the Schlosskirche in Wittenberg, but rather circulated among theologians. He wanted to dispute, that is challenge,

using arguments. The reaction of the Roman curia is well known: A power apparatus was set into motion, in order to silence him, trap him, and – as usual – eliminate him as a heretic, since no one was allowed to have his own opinion; and if he did, he was not allowed to express it; and if he voiced it, he was not heard; and so that no one could hear him, his mouth was shut – at that time, the best way was by snuffing out one’s physical existence. This corresponds to Geissner’s series of five steps – stood on its head – as is normal even today in systems where there is no freedom of opinion.

The power of the Roman curia came up against its limits, however. For the first time, a voice spoke out from the world of *academia*, a learned voice that was capable of disputing using *arguments* and of provoking *counter-arguments*. The curia did not listen – but others did. The arguments were disputed. Many people understood what was intended, and they also agreed and prepared to take joint action.

All of this cannot be conceived, however, without the concrete situation, the *kairos* – the right word at the right time. The longer the more the German princes suffered under the tutelage of Rome, which also demanded increased financial tributes. In his open letter of 1520, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” Luther presented this clearly in detail to the nobles, and he demanded the separation of worldly and ecclesiastical power also in relation to property and finances. Also in politics, he challenged with arguments that were effective because they were understood. Many people understood, but because they were loyal to the emperor, they did not agree; many people agreed, but did nothing; and many decided to act together with Luther. Among the latter was Kurfürst Friedrich von Sachsen, who saved Luther from the curia’s henchmen and hid him in the Wartburg during this critical time.

The ability to dispute using arguments requires that freedom which Luther advocated in 1520 in his writing entitled “A Treatise on Christian Liberty”. He distinguished external freedom from the internal freedom of conscience. For Luther, no external power, not even prison or the threat of death can snuff out the conscience. And no one who shuts off his conscience under the pressure of power may use this power as an excuse if he wishes to remain a human being. With argu-

ments, Luther advocated the role of conscience and grounded theology in an ethics of one's own responsibility.

Following this, there were disputations all over Europe. These disputes using arguments went on for a long time. It was also established why and at which points people were unable to agree with one another, e.g., with respect to the controversy about the proper understanding of the Lord's Supper. Compromises were made that particularly Luther's comrade-in-arms, Phillip Melanchthon, understood; Melanchthon then composed the central Lutheran confession, the *Confessio Augustana*. Luther's call for a council, for the purpose of discussing the issues, fell upon the deaf ear of the Pope, who considered himself the only person who could convene a council. Disputing using arguments was ultimately brought to an end by murders, banishments, and wars. But Luther had taken precautions. He translated the Bible into German, since whoever wants to argue using arguments must know the subject at hand. The interpretation of the scriptures was now no longer reserved only for the theologically educated. The field that was disputed using arguments was significantly expanded. Since that time, every church member has been able to inform him- or herself, to participate in the competition for better arguments.

On the Sermon as Communication of the Meaning of Faith

The Protestant sermon does not understand itself to be a speech of affirmative edification or chastisement on the basis of persuasion. It is doctrines, but in the academic sense, and therefore a talk that seeks to convince: scriptural interpretation using pro and con arguments in a dialogically latent monologue (Geissner 1982, 141). Luther knew that a sermon is alive with the living word and at home in the context of oral language – since it has nothing but language to which it can refer or relate. Luther was conscious of this and appealed to the dictum of the Apostle Paul that says: “Faith comes from hearing” (Letter to the Romans 10, 17).

The sermon deals with meaning, with a speech that makes sense to the listeners. There is no proof of the “subject,” of the meaning of faith, neither logical nor factual proof, rather nothing more than plau-

sibility and believability. Furthermore, religious meaning still has the feature of considering all of reality from a holistic perspective. Its concern is the meaning of the “world at large” or “the universe at large” (Rizzuto 1979, 146, 179). Such meaning is certainly always assumed as a premise, an “a priori meaning,” and as such is a precondition for human activity (Anzenbacher 1981, 215). A decisive question follows: How can meaning be conveyed so that it becomes my own meaning, for which I vouch in words and deeds? This is what the sermon wants to effect. What poet Peter Hacks says about art is true for faith, too: The aim is not to impart information about reality, but rather “information about an *attitude* that one *can* adopt vis-à-vis reality” (Hacks 1972, 91).¹

“Having an opinion is not yet saying, saying is not yet hearing, hearing is not yet understanding, understanding is not yet agreeing, agreeing is not yet acting” (Geissner 1968, 169ff.).² Through its form of negation, these five steps of Geissner warn against the delusion that consists in a short-circuiting from having an opinion or saying to acting. This short-circuiting is very widespread among those who teach or preach: Someone says something and thinks that the listeners should immediately act upon what they have heard. Such an expectation exposes a self-understanding of the speakers as authorities who may not be contradicted. The listeners can certainly be silent, but they will not hear or understand if they are not at least able to participate – mentally – in what one says. Thus, a sermon undermines its purpose.

A speech *ex cathedra* does not by any means create meaning, since meaning is no “product” of those who speak or hear, as Hellmut Geissner says, but rather a common, intentional “creation” of those who talk to each other in a social situation (Geissner 1981, 129). Art is therefore necessary for convincing, and already for Blaise Pascal this was related to “the unique character of what one wants to have people

1 „Nachricht über eine Haltung, die man der Wirklichkeit gegenüber einnehmen kann.“

2 „Meinen ist noch nicht sagen, sagen ist noch nicht hören, hören ist noch nicht verstehen, verstehen ist noch nicht einverstandensein, einverstandensein ist noch nicht handeln.“

believe,” but also with the way “in which people agree with what is presented to them (Pascal 1963, 85):³ The listener participates in the preaching. The words of the preacher naturally tend to fall upon the ground of what Pascal called acknowledged truths in the sense of a common opinion. The “desires of the heart” are just as strong. When the two come together, then there is no doubt. For this reason, there is a strong tendency for listeners to hear what is free of doubt – regardless of what the preacher says.

On Plausibility and Doubt

In order to break out of this persistently doubt-free way of thinking, a sermon must make something disputable or debatable. The question is not whether a statement is true or false or whether something can be demonstrated by recognized procedures for an objectified proof. A topic becomes disputable when different opinions, valuations, attitudes, convictions, and worldviews come into play that compete with each other for validity (cf. Rothermundt, 147ff.). Since all religious faiths involve such valuations and worldviews, religious convictions, in addition to politics, are among the most contentious subjects in the world. Of course, then the question is whether one fights with arguments, instead of weapons. A culture of preaching can contribute to endowing peace.

Also a sermon depends upon strong, insightful, and *plausible* arguments, and whether strong arguments can be distinguished from weak ones. Willi Oelmüller felicitously defined plausibility as “something that one can justify to oneself and to other people on the basis of sufficiently numerous examples having good arguments, not something that one is forced to recognize or compelled to recognize due to habit or custom or empirical-logical proofs” (Oelmüller 1979, IX).⁴ Argu-

3 „... mit der Eigenart dessen, was man glauben machen will, ... wie Menschen einer Sache, die man ihnen vorträgt, zustimmen.“

4 „... etwas, das man aufgrund von hinreichend vielen Beispielen mit guten Gründen vor sich und anderen rechtfertigen kann, nicht etwas, das man durch Gewalt oder auch

ments prove to be strong when they cause the listeners to think over or shift their perspective, even if it is only a small shift when one can say, e.g., in response to a sermon: “That is interesting. I never thought of it in that way.”

According to Michel Foucault, we live in language areas that he calls discourses. Discourses are powerful, which can be seen in the fact that everything cannot be said at all times and in all places without causing problems. Situations are determined by discourses – they *are* discourses; they are *language areas* with their own rules. Herein lies the temptation of those who preach, since a sermon should be current; it should address the real lives of the listeners. By addressing real life, however, preachers usually follow the dominant discourse of their times, preach on what is “in” at the time. This can be observed when comparing different sermons based on the same Biblical text. As an example, I want to pick up the Parable of the Prodigal Son, this story of the son who had his inheritance paid out to him, then went out into the world where he became a reprobate and contritely returned to his father. In pedagogical situations, he is criticized for his lack of submission to fatherly authority. In the rebellious 1960s and 1970s, he was praised for an act of emancipation (Schieder 1995, 322ff.).

Thus, the discourses that are already dominant are reproduced and confirmed; in addition to this, however, they are inscribed in the Biblical texts so that common sense, that which is free from doubts, receives a higher religious consecration. In a drastic variant, this corresponds to the blessing of weapons. A sermon, however, should distinguish itself from other forms of speech in the public sphere precisely by *interrupting* the dominant discourses. In other words, a sermon should render debatable precisely that which is immediately plausible for everyone. Then it can cause a person to think again. This would also correspond to its situation, its venue; for in a church of sisters and brothers that understands itself to be committed to a humane god, things should not happen as they so frequently do in the world.

nur durch Gewohnheit und Sitte oder aufgrund empirisch-logischer Beweise anerkennen muß.“

On Emotions, Will, and Actions

Listeners should naturally also enjoy a sermon, since, as Pascal says: "... most people almost never believe something because it is based upon proof; rather, they are moved to believe because it pleases them" (Pascal 1963, 85).⁵ In order to like something, emotions must be touched. For Friedrich Gentz, a friend and also a critic of Immanuel Kant, knowledge is necessary "of people, of individuals and large masses, knowledge of human abilities, inclinations, weaknesses, and passions" (Gentz 1967, 103).⁶ Also a sermon wants to be heard and understood, in order to lead to agreement and joint actions. To achieve this, it must touch the heart. As Luther says, "that we, by our faith (as St. Peter says [Acts 15:9]), receive a new and pure heart" (Luther 1537, 460).⁷ Because, according to Schleiermacher, without "emotions," there is no interest; without interest, there is no will; and without will, there are no actions. "If, with respect to a matter, we are either indifferent or our emotional state in relation to it is such that there is no connection between the matter and our will, then no action occurs" (Schleiermacher 1850, 27).⁸

The question of *how* a sermon should be structured in order to activate emotions is generally answered with rules and technical-methodological suggestions. The favorite method is the affirmation, i.e., statements such as: How ravishingly beautiful this Psalm is! Summaries are also very popular as in the end helpless attempts to get into the listeners' world when the congregation is asked to suddenly implement what they are hearing within the family, with friends, at the workplace, and in politics. But, as Schleiermacher knows, "when one speaks of a technique, it presupposes that the speaker *himself* wants to

5 „... der größte Teil der Menschen wird fast stets nicht durch den Beweis, sondern durch das Gefallen bestimmt, etwas zu glauben.“

6 „... Kenntnis des Menschen, des Einzelnen und großer Massen, Kenntnis menschlicher Fähigkeiten, Neigungen, Schwachheiten und Leidenschaften.“

7 „... daß wir, durch den Glauben' (wie S. Petrus sagt [Apg 15,9]) ein ander neu, rein Herz kriegen.“

8 „Wenn wir in Beziehung auf einen Gegenstand entweder gleichgültig sind, oder doch unser Empfindungszustand darüber ein solcher ist, dass keine Verbindung zwischen diesem und unserem Willen stattfindet: so kommt keine Thätigkeit zu Stande.“

cause the events.” However, here attention must be paid to the will of the listeners, which cannot determine itself, but must rather be determined *by something* “that is inherent in the *object* or in the *actor*.” Both must always go hand-in-hand (Schleiermacher 1850, 28; cf. Anzenbacher 1981, 96, 250f.).⁹

With regard to the topic, the sermon always deals with Biblical texts, with traditions to which the church has linked itself. Therefore, neither arbitrary rejection nor blind acceptance is an appropriate way of dealing with these topics; rather: “Only by confronting tradition can a relationship to it be established” (Rehfus 1986, 53, 58f.).¹⁰ This can be accomplished with arguments for or against it, also in a modifying way. In any case, as Hellmut Geissner put it, there is “no such thing as *the* interpretation because there is no such thing as *the* situation and *the* meaning” (Geissner 1981, 130f.).¹¹ But the tradition must be well known; otherwise, there is nothing that can be disputed using arguments and that could be made a common concern. Emotion is certainly not moved by instruction, but rather by vivid images, by scenes and pictures, and – particularly in religious language that cannot refer to anything outside of itself – by symbols and metaphors. But in order to be able to speak expressively and vividly, preachers must be theologically adept, both in content and methodology – even if it is easier to ramble abstractly (cf. Reiners 1955, 37).

Regarding the listeners and prospective actors, there is no direct access to their hearts. What goes on within the listeners is not a process independent of what has been heard; it is a unique process that cannot be deciphered and planned casuistically. In this regard, preachers and listeners are in the same boat; since, in spite of great learning, the preacher who composes a sermon cannot intentionally create – even in himself – the emotional process that brings about those unique moments that generate insights. Schleiermacher compares it to music:

9 „... wenn man von einer Technik redet, setzt die nur voraus, dass man *selbst* Ereignis-
se hervorbringen will; ... [etwas], das im *Gegenstand* ist oder im *Handelnden*“.

10 „Nur die Auseinandersetzung mit der Tradition ermöglicht ein Verhalten zu ihr“.

11 „... nicht *die* Auslegung, weil es nicht *die* Situation und *den* Sinn gibt.“

Precise knowledge of a musical composition does not make one a composer. The same also applies to the listeners: Even the greatest hermeneutical and rhetorical artistry does not guarantee an emotional experience, an understanding, or an approval. For this reason, some preachers are inclined to rely on the intervention of the Holy Spirit – and to use this to their advantage in making their work easier. The following sentence by Schleiermacher will therefore never lose its validity: “It has never been written in the Scriptures . . . , that the efficacy of the Holy Spirit could do without scholarly efforts and art” (Schleiermacher 1850, 31).¹²

On the Wider Scope of Talk about Faith

If the sermon is understood as a type of dialogue, then it not only has its place in worship, but, along with this, also within the congregation. This means a great opportunity to communicate with one another at all times and in all places –within certain groups and across all groups, event-related, and chance, everyday meetings and also intentionally planned ones. Today, such meetings do not occur only within the scope of a single religion; interreligious communication also requires thoughtful deliberation.

The three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – have numerous common themes. But these themes always entwine around different centers, namely, the Torah, Christ, and the Koran – the diverse “places” of revelation. One and the same person, for example, Abraham, can therefore have different meanings within the different religions. In order for the faith communities of these three religious traditions to understand one another, it is therefore important to understand what a person *has in mind* when he or she speaks of Abraham.

12 „Es ist nirgends in der Schrift gesagt . . . , dass die Wirksamkeit des göttlichen Geistes der wissenschaftlichen Bestrebung und der Kunst entbehren könne.“

For a long time, the interreligious dialogue in which I have participated for some twenty years was limited to filtering out common themes – thus, emphasizing commonalities. This was alright in the beginning; but now I think that the time has come for also looking at the differences. Otherwise, we are reduced to recognizing, once again, what was already in our own mind. But this contradicts the goal of *understanding* one another.

The themes that play a role in interreligious dialogue are, from the very outset, contentious; and they call for a debate using arguments, not evangelistic missionary speeches. “Objective,” “scientific” religious studies alone do not contribute much to understanding, since this perspective, on the one hand, is not as neutral as it often purports to be; and, on the other hand, it is out of place when the discussion is among people who are committed to their faith. Communication among various religions can therefore occur only by way of self-understanding to self-understanding, and thus only among persons who are present. It is therefore not “Christianity” and “Islam,” but rather Christians and Muslims, who speak to each other, at a certain time, in a certain place, and in a certain group and situation.

Geissner’s five steps can also be very helpful for such dialogues. We must first say what is meant by Abraham or Jesus, or by certain conceptual worlds, such as, “creation” or “last judgment.” It is necessary to listen carefully and keep asking questions until there is a sign that the material being heard has been understood. This requires a will to understand. Here, the dialogue then ends, since everyone cannot be expected to be in agreement. But, as a prerequisite for respecting differences and having the feeling that one is understood and respected, it is important to understand and be able to say where the differences lie. Only in this way can we eliminate those concepts of enemies and aversive feelings that, over centuries, have led to defamation and wars and that, unfortunately, have not been eradicated even today.

Now comes a decisive question: Can people who do not agree with one another in respect to their faith act together? I think, yes, they can if we differentiate the respective levels on which the religions express themselves. For this purpose, I have created a five-part scheme (Heine 1995, 16):

- a reflected theology that interprets the revelatory writings;
- an ethical behavior, as evidence of the meaning of faith, in the practice of daily living: in the family, in the religious and political community, and in politics;
- -a devout life in worship, prayer, rites, ceremonies, and dietary rules;
- -cultural expressions: works of art, architecture, literature, music;
- -worldly customs and traditions in the sense of acculturation, which are not constitutive for the religious self-understanding.

On each of these five levels, the relationship of dissent and consensus presents itself differently. Dissent in matters of scriptural interpretation or different styles of piety do not, and should not, prevent us from supporting another person in need. Likewise, common political actions are conceivable in instances where human dignity and human obligations are violated by unjust social or economic structures. Naturally, one must debate, using arguments, what such actions could look like. The prerequisite for this remains mutual respect based upon understanding.

In this process, the history of conflict must not be forgotten which has played itself out very differently between and among the three religions: Christianity is guilty of anti-Judaism and persecution of the Jews, as well as the Crusades against the Muslims. Muslims are guilty of spreading Islam by violent means; the sieges of Vienna by the Ottomans, for example, have remained permanently etched in Austrian memory. It is important to keep this in memory in order not to retry such actions which always start with words and the refusal to speak with one another. Assigning guilt to one another serves no purpose and does not further peace, since this is always done in order to justify oneself by making a lopsided comparison between a good faith-theory of one's own with the other's mistaken practice of faith. It rather behooves us to understand what went wrong on our own side and to express this publicly to the others.

What remains from all of this is the gap between theory and practice, since practice does not automatically emerge from theory. Too

many steps lie in between, and too many possibilities of saying “no.” Presumably, I am not the only one, who time and again suffers from the feeling of hopelessness, not only in the theological arena, but also in the political sphere. Even though practice so frequently lags behind the many theoretical efforts, I nevertheless see no alternative to putting our hopes and energies in speaking with one another and debating with arguments. This is a decisive, albeit recent, European and democratic achievement which needs to be fostered. Thus, communicating Reformation once again may result in reforming communication.

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