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The Impact of Religion

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The Impact of Religion

On Character Formation, Ethical Education,
and the Communication of Values
in Late Modern Pluralistic Societies

Contributors

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process shows how difficult it can be to balance values, yet how necessary it is to try.

Formation as Figuration

The Impact of Religion Framed by Media Anthropology

Philipp Stoellger

Some Preconditions on Perspective and Method

Religion certainly has an impact on the social and individual formation of character, ethical education, and communication of values. But *which* religion, *where*, and *how*—that is the question under consideration here. A relevant problem, then, is how to evaluate religion analytically and descriptively.

One could propose a widespread theological interest as the *normative claim*, thus justifying the question how religion can influence the public sphere (through public theology or its normative claims). But the normative interest of theology can appear as an outdated model, as if theology could explain what church believers and the public should acknowledge, accept, and follow in their lives. I would hesitate to accept this framework as a model for orientation. It appears more as a will to power than a scientific exploration. One may be pleased about normative statements, but their effects are not as strong as their claims—that is, they are highly questionable. Thus, the effects of normative claims cannot be predicted if the effects are precisely the question of research. The question is not about the effects of claims but about the alleged effects of religions.

Between *history* (what may have been the case) and *normative* claims (what may be the case in the future), the difficult question arises as to which methods can be used for a contemporary assessment of the effects of religion. The dominant and usual answer would be *empirical* research. One could ask, for example, what is taught at the university and in churches and schools, and what is the living orientation of private, public, or political life. The Bertelsman Stiftung Religion Monitor¹ and similar surveys would show that what is taught has almost no effect on real life. But to conclude that *religion* has no impact would be a misunderstanding. It would require empirical evaluations to be able to fully assess the impact, but it is always the interpretation of data that matters—always, so to speak, the researcher who judges and draws consequences. And if one follows

¹ See <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/our-projects/religion-monitor/>.

the incorrect but dominant secularization model, the prejudgment is obvious. If one does *not* follow that dominant model, the consequences can be different—that is, the normative effect of the secularization model leads to a normative rejection of the effect of religion and preconditions the production and interpretation of data. When the interpretative power of the model diminishes or is questioned, the floor is open again (without celebrating a no less problematic return of religion). A relevant prerequisite for the research question is thus obviously an assumed model of orientation.

Although it *may* be true that empirical evidence of the impact of religion is weak, empirical methods can overlook basic facts or even more basic orientations that are not or are no longer *explicitly* religious—for instance, Christian conceptions of dignity, gift (vs. exchange), the other (as neighbor), love, recognition, and so on. The driving forces, dominant frameworks, living passions, and ruling dispositions are not only empirical data but frames of perception and interpretative patterns. That means that these data *frame* research and interpretations, but they are not simply given data.

Therefore, I would prefer methods of phenomenology (for description) and hermeneutics (for interpretation and understanding) to meet the challenge of the research question. The latent backgrounds (such as a tacit dimension of culture) and the manifest claims (such as the normative interventions of religion) are less an empirical than a hermeneutical and structural topic.

Religion as Normative Order—or Prenormative Root of Order?

From the normative point of view, the question is, how can the impact of religion be *reinforced* (if one wishes)? This reinforcement can be the main interest of churches, congregations, and theology. But the question presupposes that they have fruitful contributions to offer. The Jubilee of the Reformation in 2017 was a celebration of the impact of religion on history. In the fields of education, music, art, literature, law, science, economy, and more, the historical impact has been documented. But the present and future impacts are a different field of research, not accessible by historical methods.

Globally and generally—as the topic of “religious impact” under discussion here is phrased within that scope—the impact of religion and its desirability is not as obvious as it may be with regard to the Reformation. Moreover, the search for public theology as reinforcement of the effect of the Protestant religion in Berlin is comparatively a quite provincial problem: an empowerment of Protestantism in times of loss and lack of public recognition. One example, in northern Germany, is the (re)establishment of October 31, Reformation Day, as a public holiday, a manifestation of religion’s impact on the public sphere. But does it have *any* impact in

the formation of character and ethical education? Are the “values” of the Reformation communicated by such a holiday?

Thus, a general consideration or hesitation appears: are different varieties of Protestantism on the right track if they search for “formation of character” and “ethical education”? Is it not a little self-contradictory to look for *ethics*, while soteriology is unlinked from “works”? And are Protestantisms well-advised to look for their sociopolitical impact in the line of Böckenförde, if his thesis was not only wrong but developed in a Roman Catholic orientation?²

Not a definitive answer, but pointing in the right direction, would be to ask more about *metaethical* implications of religion if the Protestant perspective is the guiding principle. What can we hope, what is human, where from can “salvation” be expected, what is the impotence of law (or the gospel, or love, etc.), and how should the institution of the church *order* things in the name of the extraordinary? If one were to follow this direction of metaethics, the *prenormative roots of normativity* may come to mind: the decisive conditions and roots of normativity. These may include the recognition of the other, the recognition of *coram Deo* (living in the presence of God), or the Hegelian logic of recognition, the Kantian subjectivity, or “public” recognition, if recognition is decisive at all.

From a Lutheran perspective, the *passions and fruitful passivities* become more relevant than ethics of recognition, because all ethics and education are rooted in *prenormative* grounds or conditions, by which they are oriented, grounded, and directed. That is a reason for *phenomenological* perspectives, not as eidetic reduction to an essence of religion, but as *pathic reduction* to the basic passions and passivities by which a religion (or culture) is driven. What others may call dispositives are dispositions of and by passions. The decisive differences are not just the ones of logos (thought, rationality) or ethos (morality or ethics), but of pathos, the passions by which we are driven with regard to strangers, to our nation, to Europe, and so on. Not merely the (construction) of values but the passionate *construals* (or perceptions) make the difference. The vivid challenge for a legal culture is driven by the passion for justice, perhaps even for *another* justice (Christ’s justice, what we call *communicative* justice: making just the unjust) or for the *others of justice* (grace, love).

Christ then is not a value, not even a messenger of values, but first and last a *figure of passions* by which morality is driven and ruled. The basic impact of religion consists in this figure—as *figuration* of a way of life (of passions, thoughts, habits, desires). Thereby all values in a Christian form of life are explications of Christ and are to be justified *coram Christo* (or *are* justified by him). God is the

² The Böckenförde dilemma, named for German constitutional judge Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, asserts that the freedoms guaranteed by a liberal secular state depend to some degree on an ethos that the state cannot generate by its own authority but must come from the shared virtues, customs, and culture of the people.

epitome of prenormativity. And Christ is the embodiment of a singular passion for the neighbor, not just a value-maker. The gift of justification is not an exchange by moral evaluation but the frame and condition for all values.

A consequence for the impact of Protestantisms is the imperative to make use of the decisive difference of prenormativity and normativity, so as not to reduce religion to its normative impact. The wider horizon is to cultivate the awareness of *the others* of normativity, like gift, gospel, and grace. The formation of character and moral education would be reduced and misjudged if they were not grounded in the prenormative roots offered by religion's tradition and innovation, given by the basic figure of this religion and the figuration of a new perspective and horizon. Insofar as religion is always in danger of being reduced to a moral order, milieu, or culture, the potentialities of the singular contribution of religion would be lost.

To claim religion as a prenormative root of order and culture is ambiguous. It may sound like Tillich's idea of religion as ground of culture, or like the Schleiermacher tradition of subjectivity as the ground of culture. One may follow these traditions, but there are two risks: reducing religion to culture; and reducing God and faith to religion. The theological difference is that first and last, *God* is the prenormative root of religion, morality, and culture. Concretely, that means that Christ as the embodiment of God's essence is the appearance (or revelation) of this ground-breaking prenormativity. An impact of *religion* should preserve this theological difference. Otherwise religion would be superfluous.

That is why the impact of "religion" has (at least) two different meanings: religion as social system, or as symbolic form, or as part of culture has impact on its "environment" (system/*Umwelt*). But then the intriguing problem is how a systemic communication can have impact on its environment. Isn't the internal communication a mere rush to other systems? The Luhmann question for "structural coupling" of systems is quite open.

The second meaning would be that religion—if it is speaking "in the name of God" or in distinctively *Christian* ways, for example—claims to manifest the impact of God in religion, and *by* religion in the other systems or public spheres. The latter question is far more intriguing, and also the theologically decisive one. Then one must claim that religion is "God's medium" for "immanent" interaction and impact—*without* mixing religion and God (or Christ's body) and *without* mixing religion and its salvific media (word and sacrament and others).

Religion as Medium—and Religious Patterns as Frames of Perception

Religion can have an impact only *in and by communication*, insofar as religion is communication. A "tacit" religion would have no impact; only a "speaking" and

"showing" religion can have impact (cf. Wittgenstein's distinction between saying and showing, like verbal and visual communication). Religion is not just *communication*, but—what I propose—*religion is a medium by, in, and through which we perceive, communicate, think, speak, feel, and believe in a distinct mode*. That is what I suggest calling its *Deutungsmacht*: symbolic, deictic, and medial power in *framing* communication.³

The question of impact then shifts: how do the ways of communicating within religion have impact on other forms of communication? Insofar as religious communication frames modes of perception and thought, the broader impact would necessarily frame not only communication within the realm of religion but also communication in other fields (systems, symbolic forms). It is not necessary that religious communication frame the explicit and manifest communication in spheres of, for example, politics, law, and science but (more important) that it frames the implicit and latent dimensions of communication.⁴

One example may be the "church-friendly" disposition of the Bundesverfassungsgericht (the German Federal Constitutional Court) or the (possibly) "neighbor-friendly" disposition of the German border opening to refugees in 2015. But—as the comparison with Hungary and its "Christian rhetoric" even in the political (and scientific?) elite shows—neither religion nor even "Christianity" but a certain Christian tradition and perspective has this impact; another perspective could have another impact. There is no strict conclusive ratio between Christianity and a distinct disposition—even if from one's perspective the ratio seems obvious.

If religion is thus a medium—and a vivid religion is a medium even for extrareligious spheres—the theological claim goes further: not only is religion a medium but first and foremost God is the main medium of religion, forming religion. Or, said otherwise, God is the medium of world-making, world-saving, and world-completion.⁵ *Christian* theology should thus claim: the medium of God as medium

³ Cf. Philipp Stoellger, *Deutungsmachtkonflikten. religion und belief systems in Deutungsmachtkonflikten* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); Philipp Stoellger and Martina Kumlehn, eds., *Wortmacht - Machtwort. Deutungsmachtkonflikte in und um Religion* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2017); Philipp Stoellger and Martina Kumlehn, eds., *Bildmacht - Machtbild. Deutungsmacht des Bildes: Wie Bilder glauben machen* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2018).

⁴ Cf. Philipp Stoellger, "Max Weber und das Recht des Protestantismus. Spuren des Protestantismus in Webers Rechtssoziologie, oder: Einverständnis als Geltungsgrund einer verstehenden Soziologie?" in *Recht als Kultur? Beiträge zu Max Webers Soziologie des Rechts*, ed. Werner Gephart and Daniel Witte (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2017), 279–311.

⁵ Cf. Philipp Stoellger, "Gott als Medium und der Traum der Gottunmittelbarkeit" in *Das Letzte-der Erste. Gott denken. Festschrift für Ingolf U. Dalferth zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed.

is *Christ*. Therefore, Christ is the principal “given” medium, guiding and forming religion—and thereby governing the impact religion may have.

The actual and future *presence* of Christ is the spirit (that is, *Christ’s* spirit, not just any spirit that blows wherever it wants, but the spirit of Christ that blows wherever *he* wants). And the spirit is the formative medium of the media of religion: word and sacrament and forms of life.⁶

We might live in, by, and through media, in a *labyrinth* of mediality, yet there is an orientation within the labyrinth: the “rule” of religion as medium *is* the trinitarian God *as* medium, forming religion, which may form our ways of life.⁷ The impact on culture claimed by religions becomes manifest “in the name of God.” That phrase, however, is highly liable to misunderstanding and misuse. The misuses are evident and well known (in all their ambiguous plurality in history). The root of ambivalence is that religions can take over God’s claim in their own interests. And religion can be taken over by other communications in their own interests.

But the challenge for and by religion is nevertheless to claim to be *a medium of God’s presence*: by word, sacrament—and images, rituals, education, diaconia, and other forms of the church’s life and work. Not to take over God, but to be taken over by him, as God’s medium, religion may carefully claim to articulate “God’s voice.” The risks and dangers are obvious; nevertheless, without such an impossible claim, religion would lose its backing and challenge—its *impact*. If one would no longer try the impossible, to speak in the name of God, but just in the name of a religion or a spirituality, the decisive difference would be lost—and religion would become more or less irrelevant. That may be the case for theology as well.

“Impact,” like “influence,” is a word in the semantic field of power. That is why religion’s impact means *religion’s power* over or about formation of character and education. The mode of power is then decisive: *what power* do we mean? (*Whose* power is already identified: *God’s* in Christ by the Spirit—yet the “who” remains abusable.) I suggest that *Deutungsmacht*, the power of interpretation, is a symbolic power, framing our way of life, speech, and action. That is *not* just power from above and top-down (as from kings, popes, or institutions), but rather power from below, bottom-up, by recognition. In late modern societies, of course,

Hans-Peter Großhans, Michael Moxter, and Philipp Stoellger (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 351–93.

⁶ Cf. Philipp Stoellger, “Die Medialität des Geistes oder: Pneumatologie als Medientheorie des Christentums. Zum Medium zwischen Gottes- und Menschenwerk,” in *Risiko und Vertrauen. Risk and Trust: Festschrift für Michael Welker zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Heike Springhart and Günter Thomas (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017), 139–74.

⁷ I differ from Luhmann in that the decisive distinction through all media practices is, in my view, *not* transcendence and immanence but the eschatological difference of old and new.

the stratification model of society (top-down/bottom-up) is misleading. We do not live in a world dominated by the hierarchy of kings and subordinates. But we live in a world framed and formed by media of communication. That is why the modes of power are media powers (not only “symbolic powers” from above, as Pierre Bourdieu pointed out with a little hermeneutics of suspicion).

There is a “figure of the third”: in order to “de-dualize” the old alternative of God’s word and human words, or God’s work and human works, it is worth looking for the in-between: the words and works and passions, like the parables, which allow and make us to see in a new way.

The media *in between* God and humanity are figures of the third, through which we perceive and communicate Christ. Thereby the powers of media are relevant: *through and by* which media religion becomes manifest and articulated. That is a third mode of power (and therefore impact): not just from above (kings, bishops, presidents: *potestas*, power), not just from below (recognition and reception: *auctoritas*, authority), but from in between (media: *potentia*). The *potentialities* are the *potentiae* of religion, the realm of (im)possibilities. Media of religion can make possible what otherwise would remain impossible. A strange responsibility and responsibility in regard to strangers is neither Greek nor Roman, neither German nor American, but distinctively Christian—if and only if the response to the stranger is given in the spirit of Christ, but the spirit may be present without visible unity and semantic markers: it is not the explicit rhetoric or semantic that is decisive, but the implicit passion and disposition.

Media of Religion: Word and Image (Verbal and Visual Communication)

So far I have shown that researching the question before us requires (1) a *method* which can perceive and make explicit the implicit and latent dimensions of the impact of religion; (2) a *concept* of God as medium, religion as medium, and therefore the media of religion as cultural forms of religion; (3) a concept of impact as *power*, and a concept of power as *Deutungsmacht*, which is a “soft” power in all communication; (4) the de-dualizing interest in *mediality* as cultural power in between stratification hierarchies.⁸

Religion *as medium* is the decisive presupposition for *formation* (of character, education, sociality), because media are *forms of perception* (speech, thoughts, feelings) *forming* the perceived and the perceivers. Thus, *media* form perception—and religion *as medium* is integral to religious media practice. In this case, the media practice of religion is the potential impact in question.

⁸ Cf. Philipp Stoellger, “After Pluralism: Transcultural Responsibility in Respect to Religious Diversity” (in print).

How, then, may religion contribute (in competitive constellations among other communications) to personal and social formations? That depends of course on the religion and its traditions. If one looks at various forms of Protestantism, the main media of communication are (1) *speech*, words (together: *saying*); (2) *living images*, persons, gestures, rituals, scenes (together: *showing*); (3) specific modes of *institutionalizing*, that is, *orders*, like the extraordinary forms of order on the horizon of the origin of Christianity, and *interventions* like “reformations” as critique and ruptures of the old order. “Institutionalizing” is what I would call the *embodiments* of religion.

A fitting hypothesis for research may be that religious communication is framed by certain patterns, which also *may* frame other communication in public spheres. To elaborate the media-specific potentialities of religion would constitute a “media phenomenology of religion” as a distinct methodology. But three hints may be given, nevertheless.

With Regard to Patterns of Speech

One basic medium of speech is narrative, like the parables. Therefore, one may claim that the culture of narrative has a strong impact in forming character and moral education (remember the parable of the good Samaritan). This is why, in preaching and teaching, narratives are not only objects but also “subjects”: they are “presence-makers” of Christian values. Even more, they are the main media of Christ’s spirit. And thereby they become patterns of actions and even relevant for constitutions and laws (like those against the failure to render assistance). That narratives are subjects of teaching and preaching implies that they can become the main media of educational practice and public interactions.

But this idea can be a little too reassuring. There is a latent ambivalence: are narratives like the parables media for Christian values, or do the parables become media for quite different traditional values and prejudices? What is mediating what? Is the teacher using the narrative for mediating his or her values? Is the audience using the narrative to recognize their own values? Or is the narrative so strong that it contradicts the a priori moral orientations of teacher and audience?

Because narratives are capable of interpretation (they always need interpretation again and again), they can be “entered” in a kind of friendly takeover by a teacher, preacher, or audience. Therefore, the *impact* of the narratives has to be carefully analyzed and interpreted. *Moralizing* the parables is customary and traditional, but in danger of losing the *salvific* impact. To take care for the narrative’s impact is a challenge for professional interpretation and hermeneutics. Otherwise the impact weighs more on the side of the users and their interests.

The case of narratives points toward a distinction between *formation and figuration*. *Formation* of character sounds like *biopolitics*, with will to power over the body and life (*zoe* and *bios*). To avoid this hermeneutics of suspicion, Paul Ricoeur’s response was to understand narratives not as narrative formations forming our lives but as *configurations* with the potential for *refigurations* of the reader’s/hearer’s life. That is why I would prefer to speak not of formation but of *figuration*. The main medium, Christ, is the figurative figure (*figura figurans*) for the narrative figurations. And the narratives communicate (hopefully) Christ’s spirit—for a *transfiguration* of those addressed. The further impact can then be described as follows: narrative figures can (and should) become cultural *patterns*—up to the spirit of law and language. In education the narrative figurations can become traditional patterns.

But is this a story of “success”? The successful transformation of a culture by religion? I am not quite sure when it comes to writing the patterns of the history of Christianity. Ricoeur invented the idea of living and dead metaphors. Even if the distinction is a little misleading, one can apply it to narratives (which Ricoeur left out): *as cultural pattern* the narrative figure like the Samaritan is a *dead* narrative if it becomes traditional. Would the impact of religion be fulfilled in that way: becoming an accepted and widespread pattern of interaction—and thereby losing its extraordinary challenge? Neoprotestants (like Hegelians) may claim this as the “elevation” of religion in culture. But then the difference between religion and culture would be lost.

To dare to speak “in the name of God” maintains that difference if (and only if) in the actual use of narratives the *prenormative spirit* of Christ becomes present. The vivacity of media like narratives is their potential to become media of the real presence of *his* spirit. Could education, for example, be capable of this? Or would it violate the distinction of public school and religion?

With Regard to Patterns of Visual Communication

Images appear not to be relevant media for many forms of Protestantism. But that is a deception, primarily a self-deception of church and theology. Although the Reformation was a media event, it was not in the end a conflict in visual communication. To become visible is perhaps the fundamental desire and passion—not only in theology but in churches, communities, and public life. Visibility has become the highest value in academia, just as in politics and in churches. Remember the strange idea of “visible unity” as the final fulfilment of ecumenism; or remember the will to visibility in public theology. Whenever visibility is desired and recognized as the highest value or success, visual communication becomes a field that religion never can resist. But, the *how* of playing in this game makes the difference.

For Protestantism the problem is that the religion of the *word* in *visual* cultures appears to be a little helpless and lost in old media. The paradoxical challenge for Protestantism is how to make the word *visible*. Otherwise, Protestantism would not be able to have an impact in public spheres, which are ruled by visual media. The desire to become manifest and visible may contradict the self-understanding of Protestantism. But the dream of global visibility and powerful images can also produce megachurches with their will to powerful visibility.

Christ was quite reserved in this regard; Luther a little less so. But at any rate, contemporary Protestantisms have a problem with their impact in visually oriented cultures. In the focus on modes of visual communication, the *use of images* becomes interesting. If Protestantisms desire a sociocultural impact, their *image* and their iconic media are in question. Remember the quincentenary celebration of the Reformation and its “image-politics.”

I pass over that, however, to focus on the central challenge: instead of public image-making and image-politics, the Protestant concept of *image* may be inspired by the distinction of *dead* and *living* images or even more, vitalizing images. We do not believe in the salvific power of old images on a wall. The images of saints are not quite relevant for Protestant service. They appear as old as the dead: dead images of dead saints. We do not pray to them and do not ask them for help.

Instead of dead images on the wall, we hope for *living images*. Imagine the communion as a living image of God’s kingdom, celebrating the coming community of Christ. Imagine the community as the living image of Christian life. And imagine the presence of Christ by vivid interaction of churches in the public sphere: giving signs and examples of a life in the name of Christ.

The narrative figures profess not to be mere history but to transfigure actual and future life. The media of *showing* (in iconic difference to media of saying) in the media practice of religion are analogous: not as demonstration of dead images or wishful image politics, but as the embodiment of living images.

What may sound strange becomes concrete in the Eucharist as *figura vera* of the coming community. In the ritual, a distinct community is embodied in visual communication. The ritual is the figuration of community in the hope for the real presence of the figurative figure (Christ). But what for? For a distinct impact: not for the transubstantiation of things, but for the transfiguration of the participants—into the body of Christ. The living image of the Eucharist is a medium for an end: that the participants are transfigured into living images, the embodiment in life of the spirit of Christ.

Given this model of living image as transfiguration of the participants of Christian rituals, some relevant impacts may be named. For example, the concept of “image” seems often to be influenced by this central image practice of Christianity. What is desired from an image is life, new life, transfiguration of life. Another impact is that the *immersive power* of images (their transfigurative poten-

tial) becomes a model for “making present” or “real presence” in film and games. Even the image politics of bishops like the bishop of Rome or the federal bishops in German Protestantism are not without the desire to become present in, by, and as image.

The crucial question remains: should we hope for a social or even global impact of living images? In regard to communion we hope for a world-completion by the embodiment of Christ’s spirit indeed. But as a model for image politics or for the image culture in our visual cultures, I would prefer not to burden the images with salvific desires. Therefore, the concept of the one living image may be a pre-normative root for image critique.⁹

With Regard to Patterns of Institutionalization

“Order of the extraordinary” is the paradoxical impact of Christ as the basic figure for the institutionalization of Christian religion. If he is the central and singular figure as the visual embodiment of God, he is also the critique of traditional orders of state and religion. The problem then is how to build a new order—not just as repetition of old orders, not just as another order, but as *another order in the name of the extraordinary*. The analogous problem reappeared in the “second” Reformation, when Luther had to suggest new ways of order for Protestantism.

The theological problem is how to understand and construct a *Christian* normative order in the name of Christ. Is it just *another* order? Hopefully a *better* one, more just, more open to the stranger? Or is it *no* order, because the extraordinary rejects all order, as charismatic forms of Protestantism would claim? Or is the solution somewhere in between, perhaps *an order in the name of the extraordinary*? Then the form and function of order changes radically.

For the *normative* order of Protestantism, I insist on the crucial difference of salvation and morality. Decisive is the *prenormative root* of normativity in salvation: the prenormative and salvific passivity as root of Christian forms of life, as in the “mere passive” of justification. To remember and actualize *this* crucial difference will be the central contribution to the “normative impact of religion.”

⁹ Cf. <https://www.eikones.ch>.