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## **Biography and Liturgy**

### Reflections on Theological Hermeneutics of Christian Worship

Communal and personal attributions of meaning merge in a special way. This article seeks to show how this also happens within the ritual realm of the practice of faith in Christian churches, though the following considerations have been informed more by a Roman Catholic perspective. The basic thesis is this: the interdependence of personal biographies and communal identities is an *integral dimension* of any form of Christian worship; which is why a theological hermeneutic able to incorporate this aspect is needed, and it should be clear that such hermeneutics require an interdisciplinary input. Such an approach might, for example, fruitfully combine the kind of research which is above all orientated towards normative testimonies of communally practised Christian rites with autobiographically orientated approaches (Lurz, 2018). The second section of this article will attempt to illustrate this by using the example of the ritual practices surrounding birth and becoming a parent. But for the sake of methodological concerns, a first section to describe the theoretical framework in sociological and theological terms is necessary.

#### **1 The Theoretical Framework of a Biography-Orientated, Theological and Interdisciplinary Hermeneutic of Liturgy**

##### **The structural model of biographical/narrative identity and its adaptation in ritual studies**

Fundamental to the hermeneutics we seek to construct here is the structural model of biographical identity used in the *social sciences*, according to which this identity is to be understood as a communicative relationship with the self (Wohlrab-Sahr, 2015). This model takes a middle position within the recent social-scientific discussion about subject and identity that has tended to move between two extremes: on one side of the spectrum sit substantialist ideas of an identity core and metaphysically based foundations of being a person; on the other, constructivist approaches that focus exclusively on how a person understands themselves at a particular point

in time. A biographical identity is created when persons communicate with so-called significant others and thereby learn to look at themselves “from the outside”. Thus, through reproduction and transformation, a structure is gradually created: “Identity as an organisation of experience, which also manifests itself in a physical and bodily way, represents the whole of the person”, and “from a certain point of stabilisation onwards, a biographical ‘reality’ which is incontrovertibly there emerges” (Wohlrab-Sahr, 2015, p. 88–89; here and below translations by the author of this article). And so, finally, the person increasingly expresses themselves as a subject who is also an “engaged actor” (Taylor, 2012). For this reason, “biographical narratives are an indispensable means of establishing temporal and factual connections, i.e. continuity and coherence” (Wohlrab-Sahr, 2015, p. 93). Such a narrative finds *and* constructs “a more or less coherent order from the dissonant, isolated and accidental” (Bausenhart, 2014, p. 63). To use Paul Ricœur’s explanation: we can differentiate between “event” and “incident”. “A story transforms a series of heterogeneous incidents into meaningful events in a diachronic context” (Meuter, 2011, p. 1208). Ricœur speaks of the “narrative identity” (Ricœur, 2013) that emerges from the history a person “tells themselves, revises and alters under the impression of new experiences” (Haker, 2000, p. 182; for the concept of identity see Röttgers, 2016). Another aspect needs to be added: in the long run, generalising perspectives also emerge, which solidify into group convictions and communal identities, which in themselves necessitate a deeper reflection “to analyse clearly the subjective reference to collective identities while holding on to the individual as a point of orientation” (Kraus, 2015, p. 149). These communal identities also serve as significant others for individual subjects. Subjects always belong (simultaneously or consecutively) to several biographically relevant groups, into which they in turn introduce impulses for change. For this reason and because they overlap, these groups are permanently in development. The same applies to communal and personal memories and pasts (Eribon, 2016).

This social science model can easily be adapted to *ritual theory* and then to the theology of liturgy. According to a common definition, rituals are “as a rule consciously designed, more or less form and rule bound, but in any case, relatively stable patterns of action and order rich in symbolism”. Such “forms of action generally accepted” by a community can be “constantly changed and adapted through ‘practical logic’, performance and by being brought up to date” (Brosius & Michaels & Schrode, 2013, p. 15; cf. Stollberg-Rilinger, 2019, p. 7–42; Bell, 1997). In contexts shaped by ritual engagement (Humphrey & Laidlaw, 2013) the “interplay and the tension between special and individual components, on the one hand, and collective order, on the other” and “the resulting dynamics have to be considered a core element” (Weinfurtner, 2008, p. 11–12).

## The relevance of a biography-orientated approach for the theological interpretation of liturgical practices

Everything said so far also applies to *Christian rituals*, which, for the sake of simplicity, I will collectively refer to as “*liturgy*” in this article (Winter, 2019; Gerhards & Kranemann, 2019, p. 15–28). With respect to liturgy, the aspects mentioned so far can be reconstructed *theologically* as follows: liturgy is based on a specific communal identity. The Second Vatican Council describes that identity in the Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC). This document was written from a Roman Catholic perspective, but with an ecumenical sensitivity, and so has been favourably received in many other denominations during the past decades. From the point of view of biographical/narrative identity, which is the focus here, it is indeed remarkable that SC 5–7 presents the origins, present and future of the Church as *history of God* – not as real history and not as fictitious history either, but rather as an *interpretative narrative* (cf. the analogous structure of two other Constitutions: *Lumen Gentium* 1–4; *Dei Verbum* 2–6). The text thus speaks “as it were in reflected naivety, reflected because these directly religious statements have clearly arisen from argumentation and discussion” (Bausenhart, 2014, p. 64). According to this narrative, God wants salvation and liberation for *all* people. Therefore he, in “many and various ways spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets”, but in the “fullness of time” he spoke through “His Son, the Word made flesh, anointed by the Holy Spirit, to preach the gospel to the poor, to heal the contrite of heart” (SC 5). This sequence of events is completed in the “Paschal Mystery”: in Christ’s suffering, resurrection and exaltation to the Father. SC 6–7 gives concrete form as to how this history continues in the liturgy, in that the community of the baptised “has never failed to come together to celebrate the paschal mystery”, reading the Holy Scriptures, praying together, singing and “celebrating the eucharist [...] through the power of the Holy Spirit” (6). The further explanations of the Constitution are to be understood from this narrative, not least the pivotal notion of the “fully conscious participation” of *all* the faithful (cf. SC 14 among others) (Knop, 2013; Stuflessner, 2015; Winter, 2016a). Thus an outline is given as to how a Christian-church identity in a *communal and individual* sense is formed in and from liturgy, because it is a paradigmatic place of Christian spirituality (Winter, 2016b): God gives in the power of his Spirit *each person with his/her individual biography* a share in God’s story with his creation; the climax is the Christ event and, in particular, the paschal mystery because in Jesus Christ a human biography *and* God’s story with creation, especially with humankind, is present in a perfect way. The Definition of Chalcedon puts it like this: “This selfsame one is perfect both in deity and in humanness; this selfsame one is also actually God and actually man, with a rational soul and a body. He is of the same reality as God as far as his deity is concerned and of the same reality as we ourselves as far as his humanness is concerned; thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted” – The *theological version* of the approach favoured here can now be summarised in more detail: liturgy

must continue the biblically witnessed history of God in the power of the Holy Spirit. In doing so, God freely binds himself to the realisation of his history in the locus that is liturgical practice, and thus he opens up the opportunity for people to allow themselves to be taken into this history with their biographical identities (what that might mean exactly from the perspectives of the philosophy of religion and systematic theology goes beyond the scope of this article). It is in this way that their life becomes a Christian and spiritual existence. The theologically motivated interpretation of liturgy therefore must not dispense with the explicit inclusion of actual celebrations and those involved in them!

### **Interim conclusion**

To draw a concise interim conclusion at this point: from both a *sociological and a theological* perspective, there are good reasons to use a biography-orientated hermeneutic as a basis for interpreting liturgical practices. Insofar as sources are accessible that enable it (Buchinger, 2016; Kranemann, 2016), such an interpretation of liturgy works in this way: *firstly*, it uncovers the motives or factors that bring people to the liturgy; *secondly*, it shows in a constructive and critical way which dimensions of the history of God are passed on liturgically to the different celebrants and which are concealed; and *thirdly*, such an interpretation looks at how interactions between personal and communal identities affect liturgical practice. The approach thus presupposes that in concrete ritual practice certain experiences – in the case of liturgy, including biblically testified experiences of God – can find a place to happen through the interplay of the intentions of participating biographical/narrative identities, the creation of meaning between physical beings and the different communal symbolic claims (Staudigl, 2015, p. 206).

## **2 Rites Surrounding Parenthood and Birth as an Application of Biography-Orientated Theological Hermeneutics of Liturgy**

Now we have available the theoretical framework that will allow us to provide an interpretation by way of illustration. Such an analysis must, of course, reduce factual complexity. Furthermore, I will use the illustration to touch only on practices marked by strong ecclesial and institutional ties and Roman Catholicism. However, it should be clear that the instruments can be applied to other areas. The interactions I am concerned with touch on *innovation, transformation and diversification*, processes which are, in fact, interconnected in many ways (Dücker & Schwedler, 2008): “[T]he old’ and ‘the new’ [are] difficult to separate in rituals [...] and [...] ‘the new’ [can] quickly become [...] ‘the old’ again [...]” (Weinfurtner, 2008, p. 11).

### **Ritual innovation: the “Blessing of newborns and their families”**

I will begin by looking at the example of sociologically demonstrable trends in a group of mothers and fathers just before or after the birth of a child (cf. Lotte & Schmied-Knittel, 2011; Hampel, 2020). For biographical identity, this phase is characterised by the fact that parents have to navigate their own course between the normative requirements of orthodox obstetrics, which tends to view pregnancy and childbirth in terms of risk, and the offerings advocating the paradigm of natural birth. This paradigm considers, as an example provided by an advertisement illustrates ([www.zentrum-der-gesundheit.de/natuerliche-geburt-ia.html](http://www.zentrum-der-gesundheit.de/natuerliche-geburt-ia.html), retrieved on 21 Jan 2020), birth as an “initiation process” for mother *and* child, which is to be arranged sensitively because “the birth experience [...] can shape a person for the rest of their life – and also in a beneficial way!”. Against this background, parents also write pregnancy and birth into their biographies as a planning project, as a project that has to be thought out as they deal with a large number of influences in the environment. But they usually also feel that they are heading for a rare event in *their own* unique lives that is not easy to manage and to be made calculable. In this respect they often go through a chaotic storm of emotions.

It is therefore not surprising that parents who are so disposed feel a marked need for ritual accompaniment in their situation. The Churches (in Germany) have already reacted to this need in various ways in the more recent past. One example: Since 2017, the German Roman Catholic diocese of Essen and her Lutheran partners has regularly offered an ecumenical “Blessing celebration for newborns and their families” subtitled “Welcome to life, little blessing”. According to this programme, it is important to those responsible that “[i]n the blessing celebration [...] the concerns, worries, uncertainties, but also the joy, the gratitude, in fact all the contradictory and unsorted thoughts and feelings that make up the exceptional situation of just becoming a parent, [are given a] space.” (Bistum Essen, 2018, p. 14–15). The Churches understand the celebrations as a “pastoral offer, conceived with the spiritual needs of people in mind. They are the expression of an inviting and missionary Church which gives God’s blessing to the people” (Bistum Essen, 2018, p. 6; cf. <http://segnfuerbabys.de/>, retrieved on 21 Jan 2020). This is reflected in the structure, in which a family blessing is integrated into the service after the sermon in a rather classically constructed liturgy of the word, itself very sensitively attuned to the occasion. The individual identities of the children are then aesthetically expressed by the parents writing their names on crown-shaped cards, which are gathered in front of the altar.

In his Master’s thesis at our College, Thomas Kröger developed a research model to investigate this blessing ceremony and conducted interviews with participating parents for this purpose (Kröger, 2018). The results are not representative because an actual investigation on the basis of the questionnaire now available has yet to be fully completed. Nevertheless, the results tend to show – in agreement with other studies (Först & Kügler, 2010) – that the participation in such a blessing

celebration is in fact primarily motivated by the desire many people have to integrate the relationship they have with the God that is witnessed to by the Bible into their own biographical identity and those of their family members. A stronger connection to institutionalised forms of Church life, on the other hand, tends not to be notably in the foreground. Should these observations be confirmed by a properly representative study, one could assure those who bear responsibility for the blessing celebrations that they have achieved their central goals as outlined earlier. These blessing celebrations thus provide a current example of how trends in biographical identity formation have influenced the liturgical landscape and provided for *innovation*. The next step now is to look at the extent to which this innovation can be traced back to the *transformation* of a ritual practice that originally had a completely different effect on the biographical identities of mothers in particular.

### **Ritual transformation: the “blessing” of the mother as a pledge of free biographisation**

*“Self-reflexivity as a structural feature of identity is subject to historical conditions. Social development and the transformation of social institutions can force the ‘biographisation of experience and action’ [...]”* (Wohlrab-Sahr, 2015, p. 89), as the blessing celebration mentioned just above in fact does. Thus the Churches consistently act according to the opportunities presented by modernity. What is interesting from the point of view of liturgical history, however, is that here it transforms a ritual that arose in *premodern* ages and that was practised far into the 20<sup>th</sup> century in such a way that it could hinder the free biographisation of many women. What steps were taken within this process of transformation? The diocese of Essen expressly highlights the fact that its celebration emphasises the existing blessings given to parents as they are still provided for in Roman Catholic ritual, for example, at the end of the celebration of a child’s baptism (Bistum Essen, 2018, 21; cf. Paul VI. & Johannes Paul II., (1973/1986/) 2003, No. 70-71.105-106.183-184.246-249, 35.47.77-78.90-92; Kindertaufe, 2007, No. 73-74.116.227-229). However, such blessings did not acquire their consistent (!) character of giving praise and thanks until a baptismal ceremony taking place at a greater distance from the birth and in the presence of the mother became customary. But going even further back, its root is the so-called “*Benedictio mulieris ante partum*”, which also bears within it potential for other meanings. First a quotation which Susan Roll puts at the beginning of her thoughts about this ritual:

My mother had ten children in the 1920s and 30s and after each of the births of the first children she received the Church rite of blessing. This went on until my father, who understood Latin, read the text of the rite and was outraged. ‘You will no longer submit to this in the future!’ he told her (Roll, 2008, p. 176).

This statement by a Belgian woman appears to be confirmed in the conversations that we unsystematically conducted some years ago as part of an accompaniment to

a diocesan process for the further development of catechesis (cf. Bistum Osnabrück, 2010, esp. p. 13–14). The women concerned, who were between 70 and 90 years old, have often classified this ritual as a stressful, sometimes even traumatising experience – structurally because it was arranged by the Church, socially through their belonging to a group defined as mothers, and content-wise because the ritual was part of a values and actions structure which had a degrading and desocialising effect on women in many cases (cf. for a description of such effects of ritual practices in general Staudigl, 2015, p. 151–162).

Such communal attributions of meaning can be deduced from, among other things, the feast of the Presentation of the Lord, which Roman Catholics and Lutherans celebrate on 2 February (Feucht, 2005). Until the Roman Catholic liturgical reform it was called “*In Purificatione Beatae Mariae Virginis* – The Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary” or, in German popular piety as “Mariä Opferung – The Sacrifice of Mary”. The biblical reference is the Lucan narrative of Jesus’ presentation in the Temple, through which the parents are complying with two Jewish regulations (Lk 2:21–38): *Firstly*, the firstborn are to be symbolically redeemed before the Lord because they belong to God (cf. Num 18:14–16); and *secondly*, according to Lev 12:1–8, forty days after a birth (in the case of a girl twice the time!) the mother is required to be rendered ceremonially clean through, among other things, a sacrifice (for more details cf. Arx, 1978, p. 106), in Lk 2, a pair of turtledoves. It was not a matter of moral misconduct that needed to be atoned for – originally. In fact, the provision even served the welfare of the woman in so far as it protected her from heavy physical labour during the period of healing. But according to ancient oriental ideas, the shedding of blood during childbirth is an unavoidable process but one which separates the person from God. In this respect, purification serves to restore the relationship with God. Biblically founded ritual practice thus participates here in a “basic feature of every religion” (Bahr, 2000, p. 150): in pollution, the staining with substances classified as impure and disease-causing, among which menstrual blood was included the world over (Müller, 1987, p. 228). Therefore women were regarded as the “first source of impurity” and were “to be avoided in certain situations, although they gave birth to the most urgently desired offspring [...]. After menstruation, coitus and birth, the woman had to cleanse herself in a special way, had to live temporarily apart and, on top of that, saw herself as relegated in terms of religion and ritual, since cultic acts always require sexually unstained, ‘pure hands’” (Angenendt, 2015, p. 30).

This line of reasoning initially prevailed in many (not in all!) places when interpreting the “blessing” at the end of the postpartum period. The history of that ritual is rather complex (cf. Arx, 1998; Franz, 1909, p. 219–245; Kleinheyer, 1984, p. 152–156; Roll, 2008/2003), which is why only some aspects can be illustrated. A miniature (ibid. p. 107) from a ritual handbook of the 16th century (St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 442; accessible on the Internet (22/01/20): [http://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/de/mirador/csg/0442/csg-0442\\_e005](http://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/de/mirador/csg/0442/csg-0442_e005); cf. Schmid,

1954, p. 142; Scherrer, 1875, p. 143f) shows how this practice (in books written from the 12<sup>th</sup> century on mostly called “Ad introducendum mulieres de puerperio” or “Ordo introducendi mulieres post partu[m]”) took place: the first steps from the parlour were to be made by a woman to the church. There she had to wait outside the door until the priest came out to her, handed her a lit candle and sprinkled her with holy water. The psalms (Ps 121(120) or 24(23), e. g.) and prayers made it clear that through the ritual, which was always conducted by a male cleric, a woman would be given the opportunity to be cleansed and purified externally in order to enter the holy place. The distribution of roles is striking, among other things, because the priest hands the stole to the woman with his left hand in order to draw her officially back into the cultic community by stepping over the threshold into the holy place with her. However, the transformation process to the present blessing of newborns and their families had already begun in this phase of ritual development: mothers were apparently invited here to bring their child to the blessing. Thus – supported by further interventions – the appreciation of the birth found expression. (That aspect was quite present in some traditions from the beginning of that custom, and it was formative for the *Rituale Romanum* from 1614, too; cf. – for example – the last *editio typica* before the Second Vatican Council: Paul VI. & Pius XI., 1925, titulus VII, caput 3, p. 185–186; Kleinheyer, 1984, p. 154.) Nevertheless, the motive of purification remained strongly present regionally until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century in German diocesan rituals and, above all, in the public practices of common religiosity, some of which had a great significance in terms of experience (Grober-Glück, 1977; Roll, 2008/2003).

This condensed overview proves that, with the “Blessing of newborns” the Church, even if only following a longer transformation process, consistently orientates itself towards modern forms of biographical identity formation; elements of earlier stages of the ritual’s development that were denigrating and desocialising and apt to severely curb the free biographisation of mothers were finally excised. Following this exploration of past practice, it is time to take a brief look at the direction in which the new form of celebration points for the future development of the liturgy: *diversification!*

### **Ritual diversification: blessing ceremony and/or full initiation**

The blessing celebrations in the diocese of Essen expand the ritual options of parents and their children, as we saw above. The offer is expressly intended to facilitate an early, “loose” contact with the Church without further obligations: “Families with babies up to about four months of age are invited to celebrate the birth of their child together with other families and to have God’s blessing bestowed on them – regardless of whether they want their child baptised or not” (Bistum Essen, 2018, p. 5). Thus the freedom to decide whether the parents “want more Church commitment for themselves and their child and what this commitment could look like for them” is recognised (Bistum Essen, 2018, p. 6).

The interviews conducted by Thomas Kröger and his team show that there are actually quite different considerations among those celebrating with regard to a possible baptism and that the aforementioned Church intention is valued. Such a form of celebration continues a pastoral and liturgical development in the context of birth, and it has received its decisive impetus from the liturgical reform. Initially, from the seventies onwards the need for various forms of ritual initiation was taken seriously through the development of appropriate rituals and new sacramental and catechetical concepts, in view of the growing plurality of the processes that shape biographical identity (Kavanagh, 1991). Building on this, it was also recognised in many places that, in addition, there is a demand for celebrations which, independently of previous lines of thought within the Church, recognise biographically relevant events: celebrations that “symbolise less the social identity of the actors and their integration into a communal tradition, are not aimed at guaranteeing salvation, primarily, but seek to trigger inner sensitivities, possibly experiences of self-transcendence, and aesthetically express the eventful uniqueness of a relationship, i.e. mark *personal* identity” (Ebertz, 2017, p. 45).

Through such extensions of the ritual repertoire, the Church is building on the ecclesiological groundwork laid by the Council. By succeeding in continuing history in an appropriate way, in which God binds himself to human biographies/narrative identities *in their diversity*, by diversifying the liturgy, the Church learns to understand itself increasingly as united by the Spirit of God to/in “*communio et ministratio – communion and works of ministry*” (*Lumen Gentium* No. 4). “With this [...] self-description the Church has repositioned itself [...] for modern society [and] differentiated itself. It copied, so to speak, basic forms of the social – also found in profane life – into itself” (Ebertz, 2017, p. 49; cf. *ibid.* pp. 48–51). In terms used here: the Church has thus programmatically declared that it wants to open itself up to the growing plurality of biographical/narrative identities, in order to be shaped by them deliberately – possibly, in the long run, with the risk of blurring the lines between different liturgical forms of celebration.

### **3 Biographical/Narrative Identity – Liturgy – Spirituality: Quo Vadis?**

Our aim was to demonstrate how communal and personal identities/memories influence each other, how history and stories intertwine to make past and present ‘habitable’, and how those interactions work within liturgical practices. Some limits to the chosen approach are obvious: with blessing rituals around birth and their relationship to initiation we considered only one example of corresponding interactions, and this only with a view primarily to their development in the Roman Catholic tradition of Western Europe. Further (ecumenical) case studies would have to be used to check whether the approach can prove its worth (on the diversity

of current biography-orientated rituals in different Churches cf. Wagner-Rau & Handke, 2019, e. g.). What might follow from this for basic strategic decisions of the Christian churches concerning their ritual practices in a pluralistic and globalised society? If, however, it is sociologically true that we are *always* at the interface of several communal identities and thus of several modes by which a subject's identity can be formed, then people should do what they can to choose such ways of constituting an individual identity that is life-promoting for them, for others and for the environment in a comprehensive sense. In this context, liturgy – from a normative perspective – can (as an option (!)) offer a specific conception of saving justice (Joas, 2012; Joas, 2016, pp. 29–44; Habermas, 2019, ch. I and II). It can therefore make a contribution to the development of humanity, something which is not to be underestimated in times increasingly marked by a complicated personal and communal struggle for orientation and cohesion. But these processes should be accompanied by interdisciplinary theological reflection. If necessary, this reflection should also help to break through church as well as socio-cultural patterns of thought, action and self-evaluation and create others (Eribon, 2016, p. 47). Theologically speaking, the aim is to design processes of transformation in accordance with the programme indicated in the Constitution of the Second Vatican Council *Gaudium et Spes*: “Motivated by this faith [that it is led by the Lord's Spirit, the People of God] labours to decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this People has a part along with other men of our age.”

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