

# The Desire for Contact with the Divine

## A Religious Hermeneutics of the Spiritual Dimension in/of Popular Culture

*Wilhelm Gräß*

“I’m Off Then...”: A Comedian’s Way to Spiritual Self-discovery

Hape Kerkeling’s (2006) travelogue, *I’m Off Then: Losing and Finding Myself on the Camino de Santiago*, entered *Der Spiegel*’s bestseller list as number one right after its appearance and held the position for more than two years – only to be temporarily displaced by Joseph Ratzinger’s *Jesus of Nazareth* (Ratzinger 2007). Kerkeling is a celebrity in Germany, and going on a pilgrimage is in vogue. But the book’s success is based on more than that. The huge public resonance relies on the fact that the book enables the reader to deeply connect and identify herself or himself with the author’s experience.

In comparison to Shirley MacLaine (2001) or Paulo Coelho (2007) – two authors who were of huge importance for many first time pilgrims – Kerkeling is somehow closer to a person’s ordinary world of experience. One does not have to be a spiritual overachiever in order to connect to what Kerkeling is writing. He is as clueless as practically everybody else, but filled with desire. This enables him to relate to a well-established aversion to the elitism of the religious expert. He does not say what is right or wrong – he does not even hide that he himself does not know it. The travelogue does not aim to overpower the reader, but simply to invite the reader to read about someone else’s travel – and subsequently to travel oneself. Kerkeling does not want to be an expert; in contrast, he attempts to be a seeker of things, a religious beginner among others. What for some grumblers may seem like poor preparation is appreciated by others as unprejudiced curiosity and openness. Along the same lines, his cheaply taken pictures stand at a distance from the vanity of high-end technique and state simply: You don’t have to know anything to find god or yourself. Kerkeling identifies himself with the role of a pilgrim. He thus becomes a prototype for the reader, not only concerning the actual pilgrimage but also as an encouraging factor in the reader’s own search for meaning.

Following a traditional pattern of devotional literature and counseling guidebooks, Kerkeling ends each day with a “discovery of the day” statement. A watchword derived from the day’s events is proclaimed and taken as a hint for the days to come. These statements, however, are banal when read separately. Sayings such as *Laughter is the best medicine* (63) or *It’s always good to know who you are* (309) are platitudinous at best. If, however, one takes the context of Kerkeling’s often unconventional experiences into account, even the tritest sayings gain a quality of interpretative power. It is obvious that the main purpose of those statements is not to make generalizations. Rather, when they are kept in their original setting, they lead readers to question why such a statement should be of relevance for someone in a quite different situation. The general

benefit of those statements is less connected to the specific *message* than to the *method* in use, which can be adopted by the reader. This method simply states: Take your life seriously! It's only you who can give your life a new direction.

Those who read the book join Kerkeling on his walk. They follow him and encounter a particular religiosity, an experiential one that transmutes the traveler and generates meaning. This religiosity links divine knowledge and self-knowledge. The huge number of sales and public response may justify seeing *I'm Off Then* as an indicator of contemporary religious trends. The book is mirroring today's attitude towards religion. A comedian shows us what a pleasurable and amateurish attempt to create meaning in a hedonistic society might look like. In addition, Kerkeling's work is full of humor and captivates the reader by using the strategy of a developing novel: the reader feels accepted, involved, and ultimately motivated to believe that the goal is not to get somewhere but to keep going. The only arrival possible is a provisional one, and the arrival points are rather relative. However, from a believer's retrospective view, becoming whole and still being in a fragmentary state are not opposites. The world's escape and rescue are not at stake anymore; the concern is the establishment of shelters of potential life.

The book is not really written for those who already believe but for those who are willing to follow Kerkeling's rite of passage (342). What distinguishes the author from other missionaries is his ironic self-distance, reassuring the reader that he or she won't be pushed in a certain direction or persuaded to accept anything. Kerkeling, therefore, can just dive into things, share his personal experiences and perceptions, and invite the reader to join him. "Those who read the book do not know more about life than they knew before. But they are eager to explore it." (Adorjan 2006, 29)

## Popular films and the quest for meaning

"What is most inherent to man? What can he rely on? Why is he actually surviving? What matters most in life?" These were a young student's answers when asked what the most inspiring aspect in Robert Zemeckis's film *Cast Away* (2001) was for her. The following group discussion was part of a research project dealing with religious motives in popular movies. (Gräß et al. 2006, 47-70)

The movie "Cast Away", starring Tom Hanks, tells the story of Jack Noland, a manager of a shipping company who is the only survivor of a plane crash. After years of loneliness on an island where he starts his life anew, he gets rescued and returns back home. His wife has remarried and he is forced to find his way back into life once more.

This story tells us what it means to be on one's own, to be confronted with the most basic questions in life: What are we depending on? What makes life? What makes life meaningful? The film shows that a crisis can create an opportunity, at least the opportunity to recognize the wonder of life. But a crisis can also reveal that life is not only given but also given to be shaped. But shaped to be what? What am I here for?

Throughout the story, the movie displays use of a traditional religious symbol: angel wings on a parcel washed up on the island. The package had been on the plane in which Jack had crashed, and at the end of the film Jack is finally able to deliver the package to the intended recipient. This traditional religious symbolism is used in a way that

intensifies the movie's message: We do not have ultimate control over those things that concern our lives and there are always higher forces involved we might not understand. But although we cannot understand those forces, we can believe in them.

The movie raises three related questions: What is the core of being human? What actually generates meaning in life? And how can we cope with the experience of deprivation?

The group discussion made evident that the viewer is forced to relate to the contingency of life. One participant stated, "Things happen as they happen and there's nothing to do about that. There's something else having an impact on that and it's not under my control." The group's discussion, then, did not stick to the realm of the movie but engaged the intrusion of the non-definable into one's life and the reciprocity of coincidence and determination. Furthermore, there was mutual agreement about the impact of believing in the unconditional power of love. This strong belief was seen as inevitable in times of crisis. Following up on that, the chance to value the abundance of life and seek its meaning was identified as a specific quality of the phenomenon of crisis.

These reflections show that the symbolism and rituals of the church are a long way off for the experiences of most contemporary people. However, the existential and religious topics of most of our biblical and church traditions are somehow kept in public perception through narrative cinema, literature, and visual arts, rather than through our theological reflections or hermeneutics. To clarify: it is not the biblical references in the movies that give the films a religious significance. What give movies as well as literature and the visual arts a religious sense is the fact that they can stimulate religious feelings and reflections in the recipients. Cultural products like these books and films communicate a religious dimension through their interpretation of human experience by means of an idea of an ultimate and transcendent reality. To recognize this dimension, we have to take the perspective of the recipients.

Furthermore, the modern situation of the relationship between culture and religion demands that we observe the strong tension between aesthetic and religious experiences. A religious experience is usually not more than a religious interpretation of an aesthetic experience. That is, the religious dimension of cultural products is very often a religious interpretation of the aesthetic experience invoked in the recipients. When watching a film or reading a novel or visiting a museum of art, one can undergo an experience of self-transcendence accompanied by reflections about the ultimate meaning of life. The communication of religious presentations of the world found in movies and other cultural products consists not at all in biblical or other explicitly religious references but rather in the ways they consistently motivate people to pursue quests of meaning precisely out of internal interest and longing but without external religious admonition.

Religious meaning aims at the whole of meaning, that is, an unconditional, ultimate dimension of meaning, the interconnectedness of all things. This does not, however, represent the entirety of meaning. One could say that religious meaning is not everything, but without the religious meaning that gives the *whole* meaning, all other meaning is nothing. The implicit dimension of meaning has a consolidating function for all other meaning references. However, it does itself rely on being reconciled with other relative meaning references.

It is important to recognize that the religious dimension of meaning includes and simultaneously exceeds other dimensions of meaning, the sensual-aesthetic as well as the emotional, psychological-spiritual, and moral. By asking for the meaning of it all, the absolute meaning – religion – touches and encompasses all other dimensions of meaning. This meaning, which is perceived beyond our finite existence, is based upon the aesthetic meaning, which we can initially encounter with our senses, by experiencing art and popular music. This meaning is willing to affiliate with the deeper meaning we perceive in our soul, the sense we capture by thorough thinking. In this way, religion, by encompassing absolute meaning, lets us participate in all other dimensions of meaning after all. A religion that keeps alive the sense of the infinite always takes a fancy in the finite, too. It strengthens the assurance and joy of being.

We find this capacity to evoke aesthetic-religious experiences in a lot of contemporary cultural productions, of which *Harry Potter* novels and *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy are famous examples. (Gräß et al. 2006, 181-240) The fascination with *Harry Potter* stems from the fact that the story's main concern is the basically religious question of overcoming death while still accepting our fleshly finitude. In contrast to the power of evil Lord Voldemort, Harry Potter is a mortal human being who gains his identity in no small way *through* his vulnerability and limitations in the fight against death and evil, magical powers notwithstanding. The *Harry Potter* novels also create a space of possibilities, a cultural aim, or more specifically a spiritual space of experiences, which can be utilized in establishing our own world perspective.

In *The Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy, a series adapted from Tolkien's postwar novels, humanity's deepest hopes and fears are addressed and linked with war, terror, political totalitarianism and scientific-technological progress. One encounters old redeemer myths, which were also passed on by Christianity: the sinless redeemer, taking the sin of the world and withstanding the power of evil. Countless further hints regarding mythic metaphors originating from the symbol world of Christianity and the history of religions can be detected: visions of hell, revelations of light, and numerous immanent emergences of the transcendent. We encounter a redeemer figure such as little Frodo, who is carrying the demonic ring of power to the land of Mordor, to Mount Doom, in order to destroy it, an innocent boy, who is also tempted by the dark power of the ring, but yet full of purity.

The trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* brings images of mythic-religious substantiality into contemporary worldwide perception. For those with a background in Christian thought, the story quite frequently shows certain parallels to Christian salvific history: the great narrative of creation and fall, the realm of evil, reconciliation, and redemption. However, to generate religion, popular movies and books are not dependent on those equivalents. The specific quality of these movies and their symbolic worlds is the space they are providing for an individual interpretation of life and world. The medium enables the recipient to make use of the movies' images and narratives independently, to choose selectively in order to create meaning.

The Christian frame of reference itself is irrelevant to the audience's understanding of the salvific themes in these movies. A central piece of my argument is that these productions of popular culture function without teaching and doctrines, and this marks a significant moment in the history of culture production. They act on the recipients only through the quality of their narratives. As already mentioned above, the religious

capacity of their themes lies in their potential to stimulate the desire of salvation in the feelings and reflections of the recipients.

## Pop-songs and the Desire for the Infinite

“Slowly but surely they make a name for themselves, the Cistercian monks from the Stift Heiligenkreuz in Vienna. Their album *Chant – Music for Paradise* is storming the charts in Austria, Britain and, finally, Germany. Their goal: “To bear witness for the people, who are desperately seeking for the meaning of life, for God” (chantmusicforparadise 2012). These are words from an interview with Abbot Gregor Ulrich Henckel von Donnersmark. The monks do not want to do brisk business, but rather promote Gregorian Choruses as plain chanted prayers. “The chanting is nothing special, but their everyday prayer. Monks pray merely because God is worthy to be worshiped”, says the Abbot.

This is one of many posts on the internet discussing the unexpected success of the monks of Stift Heiligenkreuz from the Wienerwald (Pro 2008). It is a noteworthy phenomenon, indeed. The singing of some Cistercian monks with Latin texts from the Requiem (i.e., “Missa pro defunctis” and “Ad Completorium”) recorded not in a sound studio but in their very own church manages – at first in England – to displace Madonna from the charts.

So, why does some choir singing generate such overwhelming public response? It is because the singing, being recorded in an ecclesial atmosphere, emanates a certain calmness and serenity that can instantly be transferred to the listener. The singing, which is rooted in medieval traditions and has been part of the daily monastery service since 1133, provides the feeling of encountering the Holy, as many posts and comments on the internet reveal. The Gregorian singing establishes a spiritual space of experience, even in one’s living room. It leads towards an experience of self-transcendence. The monks’ voices are listened to as if they were not from this world, but somehow otherworldly. Therewith, even those usually not accustomed to Catholic liturgy get a taste of eternity. Those who want to understand the texts can read the translation in the booklet. But even without the text, the singing conveys the feeling of participating in an atmosphere and an acoustic environment that gives a notion of what paradise can be like.

Thus, *Chant – Music for Paradise* is an album for relaxation and meditation, for those precious moments we concede to ourselves once in a while. The chanted prayers open up a space that lays bare one’s heart, maybe precisely because one does not understand the text.

To a large extent, spirituality in our cultural context appears to be such a quest for a meaningful life beyond the obviously non-satisfactory propositions of materialism. Spirituality, in this respect, conveys a desire for redemption that can only be met in the infinite. Although making the most of life is central in our cultural context, there is a sense that one’s personal life cannot be entirely fulfilled in this world.

The magnitude of this desire for participation in the whole of reality can be perceived in a song by a more-than-profane band, Die Toten Hosen, and its accompanying video clip. Their song “Why Can’t I Just be Filled Up” made it to the upper ranges of the charts.

Especially in the video clip, the last chorus of “Why Can’t I Just be Filled Up” gains a somehow frantic urge. The lead singer, Campino, lifts off, hovers through the room, searches for the exit out of the vitreous building to finally scream out his desire for a different spiritual reality. It is virtually an irrepressible craving for the contact with the absolute.

When the most basic questions of sustainment are no longer of relevance, the need grows for an ever-new stimulus that makes life tangible and worth living. But this feeling continues until eternity. And even more, there is always a perception that one is still missing something. The things we consume, the parties and drugs – these things cannot answer the inner question of whether there is meaning in life. It is an insatiable desire for the infinite. And this perspective, at least from the song’s point of reference, is inescapable for all of us: “Why can’t we just be filled up?”

In many contexts, youth in particular are not being reached by traditional church liturgies. Services with organ music, sluggish singing, and long sermons are not touching them at all. There is no timeless, natural way of expressing the religious. Whether or not a religious expression works, whether people are touched in their religious feelings, depends on the performative ability of the religious protagonist. It depends on his or her capacity to enact the religious properly, consonant to the current milieu and its specific longing. Pop cultural staging knows that the performance has to evoke spontaneous reactions if the goal is to be a deeply moving experience for those who take part. Aesthetic experiences are experiences of transformation, mostly combined with flow and *communitas*. The participant gets carried away by enthusiasm, feel involved, and naturally become part of the group.

Young people who are looking for a mode to express this restless urge to declare themselves and the world around them might not listen to Gregorian music. They might turn instead to an album of Die Toten Hosen. Step by step, youth have grown up with a German singing band whose music is characterized by a rigorous gravity, with sober instrumentation, almost lacking any sense of humor. The proximity to contemporary visual arts is most evident in their video clips. The clips display disturbing images, conveying the incoherent and the non-beauty of things, and showing that raising questions is more significant than giving answers. In fact, the band makes use of traditional religious language: there is talk of praying and believing, there is awareness of the need to have somebody who lifts us up when we fall. Moreover, strict church morality is addressed and attacked. The world of Catholic devoutness in particular functions as a somehow appealing semantic background, in conjunction, nevertheless, with a clear denouncement of the certainty of faith and moral limitedness. Campino, as it turns out, spends several weeks each year in a Catholic monastery.

The music of Die Toten Hosen is definitely not considered sacro-pop and their texts are certainly not in line with the Catholic Church’s dogma. Rather, their songs combine music with texts in which today’s dominant attitude towards life find a powerful and stirring expression. With corresponding video clips, such songs articulate a feeling of world-forsakenness and transcendental homelessness. Simultaneously, however, the search for a different reality, a transcendent opposite, is going on. But the expectation is gone that this opposite actually reacts and delivers a conclusive answer to the questions of our existence and of faith.

It is not even necessary to understand the texts. The images of the video clips articulate religious sentiment in an intense manner. For example, in the clip to "Ertrinken" ("Drowning", Toten Hosen 2012), we see Campino in a prison cell as he looks up and out the window and addresses a fictional opposite, more with a question than an answer. Later, Campino is on the ground in the dismal prison yard, and finally he is sprawled out on the electric chair, a reference to the Crucified. The sentiments of the images compress themselves for those who listen to the text. But even those who understand the text do not get any answers to the big questions. On the contrary, the text precisely tries to express that it depends more on the questions, not on the answers. The answers may be found, actually, in forcing oneself even deeper into the questions for happiness, freedom, love, justice.

We are drowning in an ocean of answers. The endless abundance of promises of happiness generates the disbelief in all of them. What is expected? No religious words of comfort. No appeasement. No last answer. No security. No confidence. And yet, the melodies do touch the most basic religious motives and a vivid desire for affinity, for receiving attention, for approval, for feeling understood, even for a lasting safety. Do you speak my language? Do you see my face? Do you read my dreams? I want to trust you, I cannot understand me. I do understand you. What is happiness? Where can I find love? Are thoughts really free? These kinds of questions indicate a steering towards some fictional opposite. Is it my life companion? Is it God? The transcendent seems to remain silent. But without an orientation towards it, our own feelings and existential questions would not find expression. Without the nameless god, the soul would not rest.

That's how it is. God in culture seems to remain silent, but God, still, bears in remembrance these questions with no concluding answers for us. God, nevertheless, is the last resort in all our hardships that keep us trapped.

## Postmodern religiosity as a religiosity of desire

Popular spirituality today is a desire for the reality of the spiritual, for categorical meaning. It is fuelled by a desire for redemption from the one-dimensionality and, at the same time, the complexity of this world. Born of a hope for contacting the divine, it is a spirituality not satisfied with a great moment, with the pleasure that material things provide, with the apparent and manifest. This spirituality longs for redemption from finitude.

Traces of the search for such religious experience can be found in literature and film, popular philosophy and psychology, and further in pop-culture and television. To some extent, the religious today is part of public communication in society. It is by no means limited to churches and religious communities or even esoteric coteries and occult spheres (Gräß 2002). Religious communication today is highly influenced and spread by mass media: books, newspapers, television, and, especially, the internet. The latter has developed into a new authority over cultural communication. If someone is lost, his or her first thought is to go online and check. But television remains as the most central media, in religious matters as well.

If we agree to the theory that the media also transforms the shape of the religious, when we pay attention to those parts of the media culture that generate religion, the range of the secularization hypothesis must be reconsidered. This thesis only accounts for the

loss of church authority. "Secularization" means dispossession, liquefaction, or loss of authority of church symbols and rituals in the media. Their quality as perceptive dogma is no longer accepted. They convert to freely floating cultural material, re-combined and transformed over and over again by the media and selectively integrated into personal needs for meaning and ritual. Secularization means ecclesial loss of authority and power, but not dissolution of religion since a liberalization of religious offers makes up for that.

The media from the eighteenth century onwards, starting with novels and devotional literature, later with entertainment in television and cinema, are the bearer of this transformation of ecclesial authorized symbols and rituals in the free atmosphere of religious semantics. All of this media has given and still gives people the opportunity to cope with individual human limitation and to find one's self and one's meaning in life. They thereby act as religious media and instruments of interpretation.

We encounter today the phenomenon of a vague yet omnipresence of religion and the religious – that is, a dimension of ultimate concern within everyday life (Tillich 1973, 11ff.). It is present in all areas of culture, in popular culture, in football fan culture as well as in the sophisticated aesthetic culture. The religious has immigrated to spaces of experience, which are mostly provided by the media. In this space, each person can choose freely where he or she wants to position himself or herself, whether or not he or she wants to follow a certain religious conduct or not. As part of contemporary society, everybody will be confronted again and again with these religious questions: Is there meaning in life? Does something of me remain? Is there something to rely on? That these are religious questions is evident. However, it is also evident that people are not obliged to search for an answer; they can simply bracket those things out of their lives and only occasionally touch the foundations of religion. It is owing to the media that we have such a distanced and ludic relation to religion.

Countless TV programs have religious motives, but it is up to the person sitting on the couch with the remote, whether and what kind of usage he or she makes of the rich offerings in information, entertainment, education, and, likewise, contemplation. Religion has become a spiritual dimension and form of practice. As such, it is virtually anywhere that one can recognize what is most important for people, anything to which one's heart is fully devoted, anyone in whom one trusts; all that one regards as most holy.

This understanding of religion is indeed something Martin Luther already realized and discussed in his Great Larger Catechism: "Where you set your heart on, that is your God." (Tappert 1959) This definition of religion is still viable today. However, the difference from Luther is that the biblical narrative, focusing on the divine Jesus, on whom a Christian sets his or her heart and on whom he or she can put his or her trust in life and death, is only one of many religious narratives. Whether or not the Christian truth is accepted as such wholly depends – viewed against the background of this new spirituality – on its individually perceived supportive quality as source of trust and meaning. Only then does the biblical word of God construct religious meaning; in people's relation to God, their self-relation is mirrored, and in their adoptive engagement with the word of God, a sustaining certainty emerges. Christian narratives about God and Biblical narratives about sin and fall, reconciliation and redemption have simply become narrative material absorbed into the prevailing entertainment culture.

If the narrative of God is to generate religious sense, personal engagement is always required. The word of God has to be adopted in the individual religious imprint. One's self-understanding has to relate to one's existential dependence on God, and the promise that Christ is the lord in life and death has to be incorporated into one's deliberate self-interpretation. Only then do religious contents shape an individual's attitude of meaning, only then do they enter her or his value orientation. Thus, with regard to the media in contemporary culture, the way that it shapes religious attitudes depends on the extent to which it is becoming an instrument of self-interpretation and world perception.

Churches and communities should extend their spaces and forms of religious experience, if they want to survive in media society. And they should do so in direct connection to present culture. Churches should open their doors wide, in order to let the current religiously-productive culture move in. Movie showings as well as inclusion of the visual arts, pop music, and Gregorian chants – all this can take place in churches. These cultural phenomena can be easily connected to the Christian message of the incarnation of God, of the acknowledgment of the infinite value of each human life, of sin, death and of evil being overcome by godly love. In most cases, the religiously-loaded popular culture of today invites a renewal of the Christian message so that its spiritual and religiously meaning-providing content is accessible and its answers visible to existential-religious questions that bother people today. Intense religious experience as well as more explicit analysis can occur in our churches in the environment of the current aesthetically-infused culture. We can surely come into dialogue in the community about religious experience and explicitly seek a connection to the biblical testimony. And this faith-dialogue, in a Bible group or in the congregation, will be experience related, personal, and healing.

## References

- Adorján, J. 2006. "Das Wunder Hape Kerkeling." *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 27.12.2006.
- Coelho, P. 2007. *Auf dem Jakobsweg. Tagebuch einer Pilgerreise nach Santiago de Compostela*. Zürich: Diogenes.
- Gräb, W. 2002. *Sinn fürs Unendliche. Religion in der Mediengesellschaft*. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus.
- Gräb, W, Herrmann, J., Merle, K., Metelmann, J., Nottmeier, C. (eds.) 2006. *Irgendwie fühl ich mich wie Frodo...! Eine empirische Studie zum Phänomen der Medienreligion*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Kerkeling, H. 2006. *Ich bin dann mal weg. Meine Reise auf dem Jakobsweg*. München: Piper.  
(English translation: *I'm Off Then: Losing and Finding Myself on the Camino de Santiago*. New York etc.: Free Press, 2009.)
- chantmusicforparadise.com (2008). Consulted at <http://www.chantmusicforparadise.com/> (14 August 2008)
- Maclaine, S. 2001. *The Camino. A Journey of the Spirit*. London: Pocket books.
- Pro 2008. "Mönche in den Charts: Zeugnis ablegen für Menschen." *Pro: Christlichen Medienmagazin*. Consulted at <http://www.pro-medienmagazin.de/musik.html?&n> (24 September 2012)
- Ratzinger, J. 2007. *Jesus von Nazareth. Erster Teil: Von der Taufe im Jordan bis zur Verkündigung*. Freiburg im Breisgau etc: Herder.
- Tappert, T. 1959. *The book of Concord. The confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Tillich, P. 1973. *Systematic Theology*, Volume I. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Toten Hosen 2012. *Ertrinken*. Consulted at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NS-gXQ1BEE>