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God and the ascent of Life

The following contribution picks up a question asked and answered by Miroslav Volf in many of his publications: "How should followers of Christ intend to serve the common good?" It also resonates with vibrant concerns raised in his recent masterpiece on "Flourishing"[1]

In the search for an answer to this question, I will first try to identify ethical possibilities in today's challenging moral communication. The second part attempts to offer a genuine theological account related to this question. It will be based on key insights of the Abrahamic faith traditions in general and on biblical insights into the ethically orienting powers of God in particular. In the third part, I will sketch five aspects of spiritual life in the service of a multidimensional ethical orientation: 1) a great example of shaping cultural and canonic memory; 2) a paradigmatic existential-ethical experience; 3) an impact on a humane social-political ethos; 4) an impact on justice-seeking communities; 5) an impact on truth-seeking communities.

1. Ethical Possibilities and Challenges of Moral Communication Today

Any serious search for ethical orientation has to face the complexity of moral communication in general. In moral communication, human beings influence each other by giving or withdrawing respect.[2] We influence each other's thinking, acting, and behaving by giving or promising respect, by not paying respect, or by threatening to withdraw it. The modes of respect come in a broad spectrum from a sharp short view on each other to vibrant

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[1] Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press 2011; *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World*, New Haven: Yale University Press 2015.

[2] Particularly illuminating: Niklas Luhmann, "Soziologie der Moral," in: N. Luhmann and St. Pfürtner, *Theorietechnik und Moral*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978, 8ff.

admiration. The communication of respect starts in early childhood with seemingly simple operations: “If you do this, your mom will be pleased. If you refuse to do that, your grandpa will be sad.” Moral communication – from seemingly simple attempts to teach a child up to the most elaborated functionalization of complex global media systems to cultivate general moral moods, from adolescent mindsets to the categorical imperative – moral communication is indispensable for common human life. We have to mutually attune our ways of thinking, acting, and behaving. We foster this attunement by moral communication, by giving or withdrawing respect, by promising to give or threatening to withdraw respect. The indispensability of moral communication for social life is the reason why a naïve perspective automatically links moral communication with a positive ethical orientation. Sadly, this is not necessarily adequate.

Whereas many people still regard the processes of moral communication as occurring primarily in groups of interacting individuals, the contemporary situation challenges us to address a broader spectrum, too. As William Schweiker rightly emphasized in the *Companion to Religious Ethics*, media-based global dynamics and “global reflexivity, the ways in which communities appear in ‘the gaze of the other’ [are] of great moral import.”[3] In unprecedented ways, moral communication becomes culturally, politically, and religiously loaded and ideologically vulnerable. This observation should intensify worries generated by lessons learned from the past. We not only know of what one could term robber morals and a Mafia ethos. We have also been shocked to hear of, or witnessed, the brutal fact that vast parts of human societies have been corrupted by ideologies of fascism or apartheid or ecological brutalism. Vast parts of human societies have given respect to evil forms of thought and action, and continue to do so. And they have developed and still develop routinized forms of withdrawing respect from those who speak up against the powers of evil. Theologically, we are dealing with the difficult topic of “the good law under the power of sin” (Rom 7:23ff;

[3] William Schweiker, “On Religious Ethics,” in: *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*, Blackwell Publishing Oxford, 2008, 1-15, 12.

8:2ff). We have to face the sobering fact that the indispensable and formally valuable moral communication among human beings can transport a false and even evil ethical orientation.

The other basic problem associated with talk about ethical possibilities in contemporary situations could be termed the complicated normative texture of pluralistic societies. When most people, even scholars, think and speak of pluralistic societies today, they as a rule still imagine a multitude of free and equal individuals and a multitude of groups and associations with very different backgrounds of education and worldviews, with different political, moral, professional, and religious interests and orientations. In this texture of a vague *plurality* of orientations, some people see an enormous potential for colorful development and flourishing human freedom. Other people evaluate this setting as a chaotic radical individualism and relativism, which endangers or even destroys any normative thinking and any potential for moral education.

The perception of pluralism as a vague plurality of individuals and social formations, however, can only grasp one aspect of late modern societies in the West. It appreciates the affirmation of individual freedom, radical equality, and the human right to participate as a respected voice in all sorts of general and specific moral reasoning at any time. However, this understanding does not see that pluralistic societies are also heavily normatively coded. More than 30 years ago, David Tracy opened our eyes to the fact that all theological and moral discourse has to differentiate among academic, ecclesial, and moral-political publics and their different styles of communication and normative orientation. With his great book *The Analogical Imagination*, he took an important step toward a serious analysis of the culture of pluralism.[4]

Many of us began to acknowledge that in late modern pluralistic societies there are different overt or latent value systems, institutionalized rationalities, and normative expectations that guide or even dominate the different so-called *social systems*, i.e., large

[4] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, New York: Crossroad, 1981.

organizational structures that are indispensable for common life and the common good. They include not only politics, the academy, and religion, the famous Tracy differentiation, but also the legal system, market and media, family and education, even the systems of healthcare and the military and police. All these social systems form a complex pluralistic network of normativity and moral orientation in present-day societies in the West. This network is hard to grasp since healthy pluralistic societies refuse to bring the different value systems under the dominance of just one of these large organizations, institutions, and powers.[5] In the 1930s, the Germans destroyed an emerging pluralistic society in their country by permitting the dominance of politics, technology, and the military (the Nazi *Gleichschaltung*, an enforced alignment) over the other systems. Today, many of us fear that the market, the media, and technology are imposing their rationalities and dominant values on the other domains of our societies and doing so in distortive and even destructive ways.

Late modern pluralistic societies, however, are not only shaped by a general affirmation of individualism and by the powers of diverse social systems. They also develop a multitude of publicly operative associations, interest groups, parties, lobbies, social movements, etc. A significant number of these associations are interested in shaping the flux of power between the large social systems in pluralistic societies. Together, these associations form what sociologists have called *civil society*.[6] Civil society stands between social systems and the plurality of individual identities. If we want to identify ethical possibilities in contemporary Western contexts, we have to deal with the complex configuration of individualism, the highly normative binding powers of the social systems, and the creativity

[5] Cf. Michael Welker, *Kirche im Pluralismus*, Gütersloh: Kaiser, 2nd ed. 2000; idem, “Pluralism,” in: *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*, Vol. 3, Leiden: Brill Academic Publ., 2006, 1460-1464.

[6] An important diagnostic mistake is being made when all associations in a society – from canary breeding and stamp collecting clubs to the churches – are seen as forming the civil society. This mistake results in difficulties in understanding the flux of power in pluralistic societies. Cf. my critique of Habermas’ wishful description of the “democratic process” [Michael Welker, “Habermas and Ratzinger on the Future of Religion,” in: *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63/4 (2010), 456-473]. Cf. Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, ed. Florian Schuller, San Francisco Ignatius Press 2006; Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996, chapter VIII.

of civil societal groups and institutions. We have to identify the different hierarchies of values that govern the different social systems and their moral textures.[7] Thus, for example, for family "love" seems to dominate the other values and virtues, for the law it is "justice," for the media "resonance," for the academy "truth," etc. But it is not the case that a single value alone dominates and rules the whole system. Neither is it the case that just one set of values rules the whole society. The different hierarchies of values are interwoven and interconnected in various ways, giving a complex social and moral coherence and a deep, though often vague, sense that they serve "the common good."[8]

Any realistic search for ethical tasks and challenges in contemporary contexts has to decode the moral fabric of complex pluralistic societies at least partially. It has to ask how the interplays and the conflicts among different value systems shape the character of individuals and their moral visions. Where do the social systems show moral boundaries and even display distortive powers that have a negative impact on promoting the common good? What are their intrinsic strengths that should be emphasized in an individual's upbringing, in public education, in the political, legal, and religious shaping of minds and mentalities? The identification of mutually strengthening interconnections of normative radiations between orienting powers in law, religion, the academy, family, media, the market, politics, and education will be crucial. With this complex texture in mind, we have to ask for theological insights and accounts that have or can have an impact on ethical orientation today.

2. The Orienting Power of God and Theological Accounts in a Finite World

In the academy in particular, we have become used to speaking of *theology* in generalist and relaxed ways. All sorts of metaphysical and popular philosophical God-

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[7] Cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984; idem, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997.

[8] Cf. for different levels of reflexivity and praxis, Raymond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love and Truth and Justice*, New York: Routledge, 2000; Dennis McCann and Patrick Miller, *In Search of the Common Good*, Bloomsbury: T&T Clark, 2005; David Chrislipp and Ed O'Malley, *For the Common Good: Redefining Civic Leadership*, KLC Press, 2013.

thoughts pass as *theological* references to God. Examples are the absolute, the infinite,[9] the first cause,[10] the ground of being,[11] the ultimate point of reference,[12] and the all-determining reality.[13] Many scholars declare this speculative toolbox a theological resource, and they even assure us that real communities of faith can identify in these speculative ideas and thoughts the God in whom they invest their faith and put their trust and whom they worship and adore.

A basic problem with many of these God-thoughts was and still is that the more perfect and powerful the God they presented looked, the more they ran into problems to make sense of the real world that their God-idea was supposed to rule. Think, for example, of Bultmann's and Pannenberg's God "as the all-determining reality" ("die Alles bestimmende Wirklichkeit") – how does this idea relate to a world in which we witness the death of thousands by a tsunami, children dying of cancer, and what are termed "civilized" societies erecting concentration camps and murdering millions of innocent people?

Correspondingly, if we do not deny that nature and life are ambivalent, that all natural life is frail and finite, that natural life must live at the expense of other life, and that, on top of this natural condition of causing decay and death, human persons have enormous powers of sin and destruction – then does this admission not destroy any perspective on God and divine goodness as well as any hope of gaining an ethical orientation from theological accounts?

A first answer to this situation is that we have to differentiate between totalitarian metaphysical accounts and theological accounts that have stood the test of time and experience in communities of faith. Second, we have to admit that realism – i.e., the will to test our insights by relating them to experience in natural space-time – is absolutely crucial for

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[9] Nicolaus Cusanus, *De visione Dei* (The Vision of God), Philosophisch-theologische Schriften, Bd.3, Wien: Herder, 1967, 93ff.; Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany 1300 to 1500*, vol. 4 of The Presence of God, New York: Crossroad, 2005, chapter 10.

[10] In Dionysios Areopagita, Thomas Aquinas and others, cf. Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to their Influence*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

[11] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951, Part II, IIB.

[12] Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993, Part IV; idem, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of Ground*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981, passim.

[13] Rudolf Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen I*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1933, 26ff; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Wissenschaftstheorie und Theologie*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973, 304f; and others.

any attempt to gain sound theological orientation in ethical affairs. Serious theological narratives and symbol systems are aware of the fact that the created world not only offers an enormous amount of fecundity, beauty, and life-sustaining order and many reasons for joy and gratitude, but that the same world is neither divine nor a paradise. Even if we are vegetarians, we have to destroy an immense amount of life in order to sustain ourselves. Alfred North Whitehead is absolutely right in his statement: "All societies require interplay with the environment and in the case of living societies this interplay takes the form of robbery. The living society may, or may not, be a higher type of organism than the food which it disintegrates. But whether or not it be for the general good, life is robbery."[14]

At the same time, natural earthly life is frail and finite and is bound toward decay and death. It not only develops many good and healthy strategies to fight against its own frailty and against the powers of endangerment and death. Intelligent life is also often quite sophisticated in developing strategies to deceive itself and others and to take much more of the life resources than are needed for its sustenance and defense. This is the sober starting point of an encounter with the real world, a starting point that all honest and realistic faith traditions and theologies challenge us to face. When we ask for divine guidance, care, and empowerment, we have to set out from these conditions and have to ask for an *ascent of life* that does not deny the vulnerability and frailty of natural life and the self-endangerment of all cultural life by the powers of sin.

In many faith traditions, the ascent of life is associated with the power of the divine Spirit. This Spirit, however, must not be confused with a merely intellectual power. Aristotelian metaphysics, with its brilliant identification of spirit, self-reflexivity, reason, and the divine, produced lasting distortions on this frontier.[15] Here the biblical traditions with their bewildering figure of the *outpouring of the Spirit* offer a helpful corrective. This figure

[14]Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, New York: Free Press, 1978, 105.
[15] Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* X-XII, ed. Hugh Tredennick (Loeb Classical Library 287/18), Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935, XII, 1072b, esp. 19-32; cf. Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, Eugene: Wipf & Stock, new edition 2013, 283ff.

confronts us with a formative, indeed with a constellation-forming, power. The divine Spirit constitutes complex forms of community. At the same time, it challenges and transforms established natural and political orders of dominance and control. The great vision of the prophet Joel (Joel 2), which is repeated and affirmed by the Pentecost account (Acts 2), describes a constellation in which males and females, old and young people, even maidservants and menservants are brought into a spiritual community with its religious, communicative, and ethical radiations. And this is said in a patriarchal environment, in gerontocratic contexts, and in a slaveholder society.[16]

The Pentecost account quotes this vision of Joel and adds a breathtaking multinational, multicultural, and multilingual dimension. Other constellations of Spirit-created communities emphasize polyphony and mutual enrichment and allow for different hierarchies of values and virtues and for their interplay in complex processes of communication. According to the prophetic visions of the biblical canon in both the Old and the New Testaments, the constellation-forming work of the divine Spirit is quite subversive, even revolutionary.

At least in what is known as the Abrahamic faith traditions, central values of the spiritual interplay attributed to God and divine creativity and seen as ennobling human communication in the light of divine wisdom, are correlated with the *law of God*. The central interwoven values of the law are the care for justice, the care for mercy, and the search for truth in the solemn encounter with the divine. The Messianic visions in Isaiah 11, 42 and 61 see “the Chosen one of God” on whom the Spirit rests as exercising justice, bringing mercy to the weak and the poor, and communicating the true knowledge of God to Israel and also to the Gentiles.[17]

This cluster of values – in justice, mercy, and truth-seeking communities – runs against the necessity of earthly natural life to sustain itself at the expense of other life. Particularly revealing is the intrinsic correlation of justice and mercy in both witnesses to

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[16] M. Welker, *God the Spirit*, 147ff. and 228ff.
[17] Cf. M. Welker, *God the Spirit*, 108ff.

God's creative guidance and normative ethical expectations. In a counterintuitive way, the power of mercy – that is, the care for the weak – causes people to exercise a *free and creative self-withdrawal in favor of another life*. Embedded in family life and in parental love, this tendency even appears natural to us. But what brings human beings to exercise mercy and loving care beyond their helpless children, their sick family members, and their old and frail parents and grandparents? The *ascent of life* envisioned by the divine law and by the divine spirit *sees a gain of life* for persons who exercise this merciful creative self-withdrawal in favor of others, a gain of life that to common sense thought can appear paradoxical. In mercy and in love with its added dimension of joy in free and creative self-withdrawal in favor of others, there are an ascent and growth of life that work against the powers of decay and death. This ascent of life has many dimensions with strong impacts on ethical orientations.

3. Spiritual Life and Multidimensional Ethical Orientation

The power of the divine Spirit not only constitutes a polyphonic community, centered on interconnected core values and practices such as the search for justice, the care for the weak, and the search for truth. The power of the divine Spirit also opens the individual and communal human spirit and personal identities in shaping most impressive realms of memories and imaginations. The relation to the living God offers individual persons an enormous extension of the horizons of experience. They stretch far beyond the relations of family life and the relations to good neighbors and friends. One's own identity is seen with the eyes of God in broad historical perspectives. And this can bring an enormous sensitivity and capacity for empathy and responsible action in favor of other human beings in need.

The *first* dimension of spiritual life highly relevant to multidimensional ethical orientation can be illustrated with reference to the biblical traditions by what is called the *motive clause* of Old Testament law. It offers a great example of shaping cultural and canonic memory. The *motive clause* says: *"For you yourselves were once foreigners in Egypt,"* and it

says in its expanded form, *"you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners"* (Ex. 20:2; Ex. 23:9; cf. Ex. 22:21). This clause can (with characteristic variations) be found throughout the Old Testament's legal corpora.[18] But why does this theological orientation not violate theological realism? Why do people who were never in their life in Egypt allow themselves to be addressed as those who were slaves and freed by God's hand? Why do they allow themselves to be embedded into time-spanning networks of experience and in public collectives that transcend any realm of personally attainable experience? Why was this double identity ("You were foreigners, yet now you are free") not abandoned and lost? Why were these legal and moral impositions of the mercy code not rejected with a Nietzschean furor? How did *the law* come to serve as the bearer of paradigmatic cultural and canonic memory?[19]

We have to deal here with a discovery of greatest spiritual and religious relevance and explanatory power.[20] At each discrete point in time and space, people are incredibly unequal. This perspective changes when we try to see ourselves with the eyes of God on an extended timeline and see both young and old, sick and weak people as not only *with and among* us, but also *in* ourselves. We then gain a sensitivity for the fragility of *all* human life, and this in turn can promote a respect, even an admiration for the co-evolution of the religious, legal, and compassionate moral codes that we encounter in the biblical law. With the motive clause, Israel expands a basic and undeniable experience of natural life to an historical dimension and the historical dimension to a religious and normative framework of experience. It elevates the sensibilities of familial solidarity into an historical, sociopolitical dimension. This generates the mutual normative strengthening of the mercy code and the juridical code in the biblical context, but also in many cultures in general.

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[18] Deut. 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 11:7; 26:8 and Lev. 19:34; 26:13. Cf. also Deut. 5:6, 15.

[19] Cf. M. Welker, „Kommunikatives, kollektives, kulturelles und kanonisches Gedächtnis", in: *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie*, Bd. 22: Die Macht der Erinnerung, Neukirchener: Neukirchen-Vluyn 2008, 321-331.

[20] I elaborate the following in detail in: "The Power of Mercy in Biblical Law", in: *Journal of Law and Religion* 29/2 (2014), 225-235.

With the first explanation of shaping an individual and communal religious identity in favor of ethical orientation, we have related to Jewish and Christian faith traditions, to biblical orientations. My main concern in this line of argument, however, was and is a realistic approach that does not overrun and overrule the hard experience of frail and finite life, the intrinsic stigma of natural life that it must live at the expense of other life, and the frightening potentials of self-endangerment and destructive behavior connected with this creaturely condition. I try to strictly avoid getting involved with images and ideas of God that invite us to ignore or even deny these experiences. Given this background, I attempt to focus on a non-illusionary ascent of life in the middle of robbing, finite, and death-bound natural life. The spiritual realms of memory and imagination, however, differ in the diverse communities of religious and moral communication. So for people in other religious and secular traditions, my first point might fail the claim to be a realistic theological approach. It can only serve as an invitation to discover and develop cultural memories that sustain differentiated and empathetic individual and communal identities.[21]

A *second* set of counter-powers against the tendency of natural life to sustain itself at the expense of others can offer a systematic claim: the interconnection of justice and mercy and the powers of love are experienced as ennobling beyond the circles of family, friends, and tribes – an ascent of life in the middle of the ambivalent flux of natural life. In mercy, that is, the care for the weaker, and in forgiving, both in the relation of God to humans and in inter-human relations, we witness and experience *a creative self-withdrawal in favor of the other – and this is not to be understood as a loss of life but as a somewhat strange gain and growth of life*. These very down-to-earth spiritual experiences come with an existential broadening and deepening of the individual identity involved, which does not depend on broad cultural and canonic memory. It can be strengthened by such memories but it can also be seen as a general paradigmatic existential-ethical experience. In many inconspicuous emergent ways we

21 Cf. the Introduction to Miroslav Volf's groundbreaking work *Flourishing*, (FN 1).

witness the constitution of an emergent "community of the Spirit" that exercises empathy and compassion and generates moral standards beyond the realms of members of family, friends and, good neighbors.[22] The theological strengthening of the development of this rich personal and social identity can counter reductionist forms of subjectivist faith and existentialist mindsets, forms that George Lindbeck identified as a stale standardizing "experiential-expressive model" of religious self-awareness.[23] Human beings who are able to experience and exercise a free and creative self-withdrawal in favor of others move beyond the pervading perspectives of self-sustenance and self-preservation. They move freely and realistically beyond what biblical traditions call a merely "fleshly existence."

Third, the interconnection of juridical law and mercy law found in all Biblical law-corpora, most clearly elaborated in the Book of the Covenant in Exodus, sustains values of social welfare, freedom, and equality. It has a shaping impact on a humane social-political ethos. Even as a latent pattern, it gains important educational and political functions and enables the juridical law and thought to become a *moral and cultural teacher.*[24] The mercy law not only shapes moral and political moods in formative ways, but it also draws impulses from, and recursively strengthens, the family ethos. In biblical times, this ethos was certainly connected to patriarchal structures. But even perspectives critical of the remaining role of patriarchy in the shaping of normative expectations should appreciate the fact that "the merciful father" replaced the king as the premier executor of mercy and clemency appeals. The sensitivities against patriarchal, gerontocratic, defensive tribal, racist, and classist structures cultivated by the working of the Spirit are badly needed to cultivate and promote this ethos of justice and mercy also in contemporary environments.

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[22] Cf. the contributions of Kathryn Tanner, "Workings of the Spirit: Simplicity or Complexity?", and John Polkinghorne, "The Hidden Spirit and the Cosmos", in: M. Welker (ed.), *The Work of the Spirit: Pneumatology and Pentecostalism*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 2006, 87ff and 169ff.

[23] George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984, 31ff.

[24] This is the argument in: Cathleen Kaveny, *Law's Virtues: Fostering Autonomy and Solidarity in American Society*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2012; cf. also John Witte's "Introduction" in John Witte and Frank S. Alexander (eds.), *Christianity and Human Rights: An Introduction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Fourth, in a direct impact on the juridical law, the mercy law and human morals with a normative claim to care for the weak has a strong impact on justice-seeking communities in religious and secular contexts. No case of a person in need and distress is imaginable that could fall in principle below the competence of the law. No person, however weak, poor and miserable, will fall below the levels of the outreach of the law. In the other direction, the systematic and systemic orientation of the law toward mercy and compassion demands the continual refinement of the legal culture and its directedness toward institutionalization and universalization. Beyond this drive toward a universal outreach of the law, the mercy code of the law helps us in dealing with a paradox that creates deep problems for all legal and moral evolution. This paradox is that on the one hand we want to improve and develop the juridical law and our ethical standards, and on the other we want to provide legal and moral security of expectations.[25] How can we take on this difficult, yet unavoidable task of transforming and improving important normative potentials without in this process destroying their binding force?[26] Here the mercy code has a balancing function: subtle and sensitive dynamics as well as normative stability are enabled when justice and mercy, law and compassion, are put in a creative tension and in cooperation.

Fifth and lastly, the readiness for joyful, free, and creative self-withdrawal in favor of others is important for an *ethos of truth-seeking communities* – in education, in the academy, and in communities with serious cultural, religious, and moral communication. All too often the search for truth is reduced to the search for personal certainty or communal consensus. These perspectives on truth, however, are not sufficient. Obvious moral distortions teach us how dangerous the reduction of truth to subjective self-righteousness can be, or, particularly in large publics, a consensus that immunizes itself against any critical perspectives on it. The

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[25] Cf. M. Welker, „Security of Expectations. Reformulating the Theology of Law and Gospel", in: *Journal of Religion* 66 (1986), 237-260.

[26] On this function of religion, see Jan Assmann, Bernd Janowski, and Michael Welker, "Richten und Retten. Zur Aktualität der altorientalischen und biblischen Gerechtigkeitskonzeption," in: idem (eds.), *Gerechtigkeit. Richten und Retten in der abendländischen Tradition und ihren altorientalischen Ursprüngen*, München: Fink, 1998, 9-36.

search for individual certainty and for consensus is important for the search for truth, but it has to work on its constant growth and on the constant critical correlation with the search for correctness, coherence, and rationality.

Particularly in academic contexts, however, we find the other side of the problem, the reduction of truth to adequacy to the topic, to coherence and rationality. And here again we have to work toward improvement and the growth of coherent and rational insight into the encounter with sensitivities for certainty and consensus in non-academic experiential realms. In order to promote this double process – the growth of certainty and consensus and the growth of correctness, consistency, and coherence – the search for truth requires the willingness for free and creative self-withdrawal in the communication in truth-seeking communities.[27] The openness for the joyful, free, and creative self-withdrawal in favor of another person materializes here as the openness and eagerness for the better, healthier, deeper, more convincing, more subtle, and more illuminating insight. And this ascent of life in the search for truth is also highly relevant for the flourishing of religious and ethical life.

[27] Cf. J. Polkinghorne and M. Welker, *Faith in the Living God: A Dialogue*, SPCK: London 2001, chapter 9; M. Welker, *God the Revealed: Christology*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids and Cambridge 2013, 304ff.