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The Impact of Religion

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

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Christian Religion, the Formation of Character, and the Communication of Values

Michael Welker

Part one of this chapter discusses two widespread forms of liberal theology and religiosity in the West that I believe are not really capable of influencing in any meaningful way the formation of character and the ethical communication of values.

Part two addresses the notion of human character, which in classical conceptions is generally viewed as in some way the bearer of distinct individuality or as distinguished by ethical constancy or stability. Here I will pay particular attention to human emotionality and the human spirit, especially as the latter is itself shaped by body-based emotions, the intellect, and an exchange with its social surroundings.

Part three illuminates, on one hand, the breadth and expanse of human existence and, on the other, the power of both the human spirit and the divine Spirit. Both divine Spirit and human spirit constitute the foundations of the charisma and vibrancy of any substantive theology and religiosity.

Part four considers the theological and religious elements that are constitutive for the formation of character and for the ethical communication of values, namely, comfort (or consolation and peace), freedom, justice, and truth.

Forms of the Western Christian Religion Incapable of Influencing Character

Certain dominant forms of Christian theology and religiosity in the West, rather than promote, sooner *block* or *thwart* the potential for religion to influence the formation of character, the shaping of ethical disposition, and the communication of values. Such theologies and theologically emptied forms of religiosity, by masking or concealing the unique *content* of religion, thereby also systematically blur or screen God and the divine powers. They generally declare God to be "wholly other" or to be somehow equated with transcendence or the numinous, and then develop conceptual models in which God's living quality, God's revelation, God's

supporting, saving, judging, elevating, and redemptive activity either have no place at all or at least no possibility for further elaboration. Examples of such theologies include rigorously apophatic theologies, negative theologies, many metaphysical theologies of the absolute or of the *deus simplex* and the "ultimate point of reference," (Gordon Kaufman and others) as well as multiple variations of mystical theology.

The propagation of such theologies—some of which, of course, have traversed a lengthy and sometimes complex history—can probably be attributed to a twofold set of intentions. On one hand, religion itself is to be situated with as low a threshold as possible to render it easily or, indeed, even arbitrarily accessible. Inconveniently static or stipulated content would merely constitute a hindrance. The goal is instead what one might call "cheap devotion." On the other hand, however, this tactic is quite capable of relieving religion of many potential critical objections, that is, objections and doubts invariably provoked by the complexity and copious fields of tension inherent in much of religion's content. The familiar but uncomfortable question of theodicy is one such inconvenience that these theologies especially single out for such "sedation." Wolfgang Huber and I maintain that such theologies conceal within themselves a religious trap that for us evokes the notion of a "self-secularization" of religion, which in its own turn is generally accompanied by "self-banalization" as soon as this emptied religiosity, unable to bear its own emptiness, seeks relief by sucking up all sorts of ostensibly entertaining and distracting content and objects, including every conceivable "personal story," then also candles, rocks, flowers, scarves, light, water—truly, such symbolic kitsch knows no boundaries. Unfortunately, such "religion lite" offers nothing of substance for the formation of character, for the shaping of a person's ethical disposition, or for any serious communication of values.

At least to a certain extent, a second common worldview veils the full wretchedness of such emptied and banal religiosity that sinks below the level of common sense. This particular form is found in the alliance of theology and religiosity with philosophical (ultimately Aristotelian) metaphysics and morality. Let us duly acknowledge that such metaphysics and morality do indeed promote at least to a limited extent the formation of character, the shaping of ethical disposition, and the communication of a spectrum of values, albeit only within the parameters of a kind of rational piety concerned primarily, if not exclusively, with a cultivation of the intellect and an increase or enhancement of knowledge.

Aristotle—quite ingeniously, by the way, and with particular trenchancy in book 12 of his *Metaphysics*—situated the unity of reason and spirit within human thought itself. Whenever the activity of human thinking relates to objects, surroundings, and situations, it is also always relating to *itself*; the result, not surprisingly, is a mutual enhancement or augmentation of cognition, self-knowledge, and the corresponding disclosure of world. That is, thinking unfolds precisely in its cognitive disclosure of the objects and world around it, and the enhanced elaboration of self in this sense similarly enhances its disclosure of reality. The vanishing point of this perpetually advancing or higher development is allegedly nothing less than the divine itself.[1] Theology and religion that are content with an intellectualized and rationalized concept of the spirit are certainly capable, within these parameters, of allying themselves effectively enough with simple educational programs, lending a quasi-religious aura to the previously mentioned striving for a maximization of cognitive self-knowledge, knowledge of world, and their concomitant developmental hopes.

Over against blockades of the sort posed by emptied and intellectualized religious forms, how, in late modern, pluralistic societies, is one then to assess the potential significance of religion for the formation of character, the shaping of ethical disposition, and the communication of values? For these societies are characterized not only by the cultivation of a bewildering multiplicity of individual points of view and value hierarchies, but also by a resolute defense of their individual import and dignity. Late modern pluralistic societies, moreover, also require that a limited majority of value hierarchies be respected that are to a high degree viewed as normative. We encounter these hierarchies in the social systems and larger organizational forms that are indispensable for the health and growth of these societies, namely, in economics, politics, the media, education, science, legal systems, medical systems, and military and defense systems. Does religion today have more to offer than merely catalytic contributions to questions concerning personal intellectual development and—sharing a certain natural interest in such development—families, or more than perhaps occasional contributions with respect to politics, law, science, and media?

Character, Emotionality, and Spirit

Among the various considerations used to determine or assess character throughout history and up into the present, attention has consistently been paid both to value-neutral perspectives on "the uniquely individual mode of experience and behavior"[2] as well as to evaluative interpretations of "qualities such as strength of will, reliability, and steadfastness with respect of principles."[3] These considerations respect, on one hand, the absolute uniqueness of every individual human existence (that is, every person is to develop his or her own unique character!)

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1 Aristotle, *Metaphysik XII*, Klostermann Texte: Philosophie, ed. H.-G. Gadamer, 4th ed. (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1984), esp. 31–35; Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmayer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994; reprint Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), section 5.1.

2 *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Vol. 1 (Basel: Schwabe, 1976), 991.

3 Ibid. See also William Schweiker's contribution in this volume, chapter 5.

and, on the other, the sort of ethical constancy and stability that separate a person's character from mere "individuality" or from a more or less utterly idiosyncratic personality. Religion, too, should neglect neither of these two guiding perspectives in addressing its concerns with respect to the formation of character.

Many contemporary societies protect and promote the development of a person's "uniquely individual mode of experience and behavior" through the politically and legally guaranteed freedom of opinion (the right to freedom of expression), of the media, of the arts, and of science. By contrast, the development of ethical constancy cannot be addressed merely individually and is instead dependent on a culture of reciprocity. That is, it presupposes the development of a moral (and legal-political) continuum in which all individuals are accorded participation in the communication of mutual respect. This moral continuum is tied to an ethos of equality and to the notion of serving the common good. This arrangement ascribes to all participants a sense of responsibility, on one hand, and unconditional personal dignity on the other. What, however, is left for religion to contribute above and beyond these admittedly valuable and impressive attainments with respect to the formation of character, the shaping of ethical disposition, and the communication of values? One contribution from religion whose value should by no means be underestimated is of a catalytic nature and consists in the tenacious or even dogged commitment to the freedom of religion and in the emphatic support of the other broad social institutions that defend the freedom and equality of all human beings.

Within this same context, and moving one step further, it is important to see that religion, with its enormous wealth of formative and educational possibilities, of concepts, ideas, imagery, texts, memorable personalities and events recounted in countless stories, dialogues, liturgies, and rituals, similarly also in the celebration of rites of passage and through the structuring of the year itself, and all this together with the shared remembrance of significant events across the centuries—that with all these things, religion cultivates not only our thinking and ethical judgment but also, and to an extraordinarily high degree, our emotions.

Indeed, religion addresses not merely our understanding but above all our hearts and spirits. In the "profundity of its being," the heart combines cognitive, emotional, and volitional forces, and the human spirit in its own turn provides the power to activate—or commit to latency—a whole ocean of memories, expectations, and imagination, and is, moreover, a communicative force across immense spatial and temporal expanses.[4]

Influential theologians such as Friedrich Schleiermacher explicitly emphasized the connection between religion and feeling. Unfortunately, religious feeling was then often abstractly juxtaposed to thinking and related to pure "subjectivity" and/or to some vaguely conceived "totality" (Schleiermacher writes that "religion is sense and taste for the infinite," an "intuition of the universe," etc.). Picking up and expanding on the findings of more recent discussions of "embodied cognition,"[5] we are better able to assess the various interdependencies between thinking and feeling within the human spirit, and thus also the human spirit itself. The human spirit is significantly richer and more complex than the customary, largely bipolar notion of thinking in relation to object and self, something that comes to vivid expression in a consideration of the seemingly simplest deictic operations of early childhood.

In the ninth or tenth month of life, infants begin using deictic gestures, among which one might single out the gesture of pointing with an outstretched arm and index finger. What is happening here? An incidence of concentrated perception, that is, a selection from out of the plethora of optical stimuli, is but one of the many processes that must be adduced and connected. This optical selection and concentration are joined here by a differentiated, partial control of the body in the form of the raised, extended arm and the hand with the outstretched index finger. A repetition of this operation is, as a rule, accompanied by bodily movement within natural space (for example, the child runs back or at least turns its head and body to point yet again). This repetition is likely also accompanied by powerful operations that anticipate the representation itself and recollect previously successful engagements of such gesturing. One might certainly also anticipate some precise vocalization associated with acoustic self-perception—nota bene *preceding* any more clearly differentiated linguistic articulation: "There!"

Optical, acoustic, and tactile operations must be coordinated. In our hypothetical deictic "There!" the optical, acoustic, and haptic perception is, as it were, thrown into relief against the weave of other sense perceptions (for example, gustatory and olfactory), which in other contexts may be precisely the ones that do indeed acquire relevancy. Even at this early stage, however, we should acknowledge such preliminary forms of mental operations. The orchestra of sense perception demands that the operations of both association *and* differentiation continually come to bear. Prodigious processes of abstraction and psychosomatic synthesis must be engaged before even allegedly "primitive" deictic operations can be successfully performed.

If we now trace further the personal development of the child through its acquisition of language and its construction of a linguistic world, its participation in social interaction and the shaping of the social sphere of even quite small children, its assumption of differentiated perspectives and roles, its elaboration of additional spaces of individual and shared memory and of imagination and planning—if we survey this entire array of developmental stages, we become vividly

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4 Michael Welker, "Flesh-Body-Heart-Soul-Spirit: Paul's Anthropology as an Interdisciplinary Bridge-Theory," in *The Depth of the Human Person: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, ed. Welker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 45–57.

5 Cf. the contribution of Gregor Etzelmüller in this volume, chapter 2.

aware of the extraordinary power of the individual and social spirit, and we are called to assess the (in many senses) breathtaking *multimodal power of the spirit in organizing what we call the "person" (and its social spheres).* And although cognitive processes and rationality doubtless play a considerable role here, they are nonetheless permeated, spurred on, and also checked by an enormous wealth of emotional impulses and affective psychosomatic interdependencies.[6]

Whereas many classical forms of philosophy and theology reduce the spirit (and, broadly, "mind," German *Geist*) to mental operations and intellect, it is not merely in the admiration of graceful beauty (so Friedrich Schiller) that culture at large has discovered the fascinating power of a body shaped or influenced by spirit or mind. Today electronically mediated competitive sports and electronically mediated musical entertainment attain almost religious-like resonance. Here the singularity or uniqueness of individual psychosomatic existence couples with universal charisma and potential for identification. As is the case in intellectualism, however, here, too, the formation of character and ethical disposition (self-discipline, the will to achieve, in part also team spirit) along with the communication of values is restricted to an often extremely narrow spectrum. What can religion offer above and beyond this? What in the way of specific contributions between intellectualism and the spirit of Olympic achievement might one expect from religion that might address the formation of character and the shaping of ethical disposition?

The Breadth of Human Existence and the Power of the Spirit

A religion that would once again contribute in a way worthy of consideration to the formation of character, the shaping of ethical disposition, and the communication of values in our societies must acknowledge and take measure of the entire scope of human existence, and at the same time rediscover and facilitate the discovery of the dynamism and attractiveness of the human spirit and the divine Spirit.

The remarkable breadth and expanse of human existence for which theology and religion raise our awareness come to vivid expression in passages in the biblical Psalter. On one hand (NRSV), "For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust" (Ps. 103:14). "When you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust" (Ps. 104:29; see also Eccl. 3:20; Sirach 10:9; 17:32, et passim). Human existence is an existence from dust to dust. On the other hand: "Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor." "You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet" (Ps. 8:5.6–7; cf. Gen. 1:26–28; Heb. 2:6–8; 1 Cor. 15:27; Eph. 1:22): here, of course, the human being is understood as the very image of God, as *imago Dei.*

Even the dust from which we human beings are made and to which we return, however, is quite an affair, for the natural sciences have taught us that according to present calculations, it took 13.8 billion years of cosmic existence for galaxies to come into being, which, however, had to disintegrate into the cosmic dust of which all life on earth consists. "Every atom of carbon in every living being was once inside a star, from whose dead ashes we have all arisen."[7] Certainly no less impressive, however, are the formative forces of nature and culture that have flowed into the grand ocean of the–individual and sociocultural–human spirit with all its power of memory, representation, and orientation and its astonishing communicative and formative potential.

Religion focuses on the formative powers of the divine Spirit and the human spirit and on the vast, expansive scope of the individual human person–from a person's individual finiteness, mortality, and the accompanying feelings of fragility and misfortune, to the definition of the human being as the image of God, to the attendant promises, powers of blessing, and lofty expectations. One rather gloomy contemporary theology, addressing this powerful arc of human existence from dust to the image of God, speaks about a "consciousness of ambivalence" that must be borne and collectively endured,[8] a position that begs the question whether its advocates are not, on one hand, concealing both religion's commission and charge to contribute to the shaping of character and ethical disposition, and the value systems received and cultivated by religion, and, on the other hand, shying away from the labor and effort required for critical and self-critical assessment of this commission and its implications. The careless imprecision of references to such "consciousness of ambivalence" that human beings are somehow to "endure" becomes oppressively clear in light of the numerous perils attaching to any resigned, fatalistic, cynical, or simply obscurantist mode of dealing with human misery and suffering, and the illusory, irresponsible forms of dealing with human greatness.

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6 I elaborate this in Michael Welker, *In God's Image: A Spirit-Anthropology*, The Edinburgh Gifford Lectures, 2019/20 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), second lecture; (= *Zu Gottes Bild: Eine Anthropologie des Geistes*, Leipzig EVA, 2021).

7 John Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist: Reflections of a Bottom-Up Thinker*, The Gifford Lectures for 1993/94 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 72.

8 Michael Klessmann, *Ambivalenz und Glaube. Warum sich in der Gegenwart Glaubensgewissheit zur Glaubensambivalenz wandeln muss* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2018); Anja Kramer and Freimut Schirrmacher, eds., *Ambivalenzen der Seelsorge. Festschrift für Michael Klessmann zum 65. Geburtstag* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2009); Walter Dietrich, Kurt Lüscher, and Christoph Müller, eds., *Ambivalenzen erkennen, aushalten und gestalten* (Zürich: TVZ, 2009).

The foundations of human character development, the self-elaboration of human freedom, and the equality of all human beings within the context of ethical constancy are constantly being threatened and even self-threatened. Such threats are countered, however, by the unconditionally good divine Spirit with its myriad gifts and powers, which strengthen and refresh the human spirit through its cognitive, emotional, volitional, and communicative powers. Indeed, the influence and effects of the divine Spirit extend into the innermost depths of the human personality, bestowing energy and hope when a person is oppressed by feelings of futility and impotence, and providing orientation ever anew with respect to the values of freedom, justice, and truth.

Comfort, Freedom, Justice, and Truth

The Heidelberg Catechism, one of the most famous and globally widespread expressions of faith from the Reformation period, begins with the question, "What is your only comfort in life and death?"[9] The German word *Trost* (comfort, consolation)—the word translated as "comfort" in the passage from the catechism—exhibits an astonishing semantic spectrum, and certainly not just in German, variously conveying the notions of security, confidence, trust, courage (in life), and hope. It is equated with enduring reliability, help, support, counsel, saving, reassurance and repose, strength, backing, shielding, and protection, though also with sympathy, empathy, and encouragement. The most comprehensive dictionary of the German language since the sixteenth century, *Das Deutsche Wörterbuch* by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, remarks that the German word *Trost* had in more recent times increasingly come to refer to the "steadfastness or firmness given or received as spiritual reinforcement through reassurance and encouragement."[10]

Within this development, the semantic background related to religion, family, friendship, and general psychological considerations has come to predominate over that associated with military protection, defense, and other contexts. The notion of comfort or consolation has come to be associated with a source or resource from which one can draw certain types of succor, for example, a source such as light, peace, joy, or even salvation and redemption. In Christian contexts, references to the comfort provided by God, God's word, Jesus Christ, the cross, and the Holy Scriptures are almost always associated with positive, affirming reassurance, even without references to specific applications in daily life, which is also why references to comfort and consolation emerge so naturally and plausibly in connection with the love associated with parents, children, life partners, and good friends.

The Heidelberg Catechism maintains that we human beings cannot through our own power give ourselves the inner steadfastness that comfort bestows "in life and death," regardless of how hard we try. This catechism understands human life to be profoundly threatened from both within and without. We are finite, and we must die. Deliberately or not, and with or without our own actions, we are constantly at risk, in danger, and ensnared in tangles of guilt and fate from which, somehow, we must be freed.

The grand purpose of comfort—its function, if you will—is liberation from the powers of evil and from the myriad open and often concealed feelings of impotence and even aggression that this power sets in motion. God provides such comfort to us through his Spirit and, according to the conviction of Christian faith, in Jesus Christ, in whose life and ministry this Spirit acquires content, clarity, and definition. This comfort enables people to live liberated lives by providing security, confidence, trust, courage (in life), and hope, even in the most difficult life situations, and does so by disclosing forces of dependability, succor, support and counsel, stability and protection. God's activity on our behalf, however, comes about not in some abstract fashion, but rather always also through our fellow human beings, who are either consciously or unconsciously moved and filled by God's word and Spirit. And God bestows these powers precisely that we ourselves might become persons who provide comfort to others. Thus, while God does provide reassurance and repose, God also prompts sympathy and empathy, so that we ourselves, in our love of neighbor and in humanitarian benevolence, can dispense comfort round about us.

Love of neighbor, which does no harm to our fellow human beings and wishes them only good, strengthens their own freedom. Such love lives and flourishes in liberating freedom by restricting its own self-assertion in life and by embracing a free and creative self-withdrawal on behalf of one's fellow human beings. In Christian perspectives and convictions, the profoundly charitable existence of Jesus Christ reflects these liberating forces of the Spirit through the forgiveness of sins, healing, table fellowship, and liberating education. Love of neighbor thus embraces a concomitant striving for justice, which in its own turn prompts resolute engagement on behalf of the protection of the weak. Justice, mercy, and love of neighbor are the bearers of freedom and the basis for a dynamic ethos of equal rights for all human beings.

Love of neighbor, however, also actively embraces a search for truth that cannot be reduced to certainty and consensus, correctness, coherency, and rationality. Although all these elements are doubtless essential for any search for truth, the engagement on behalf of truth of which we are here speaking emerges only, on one hand, through mutual stirring up and enhancement of certainty and con-

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9 Cf. Michael Welker, "What Profit is the Reign of Christ to Us? The Heidelberg Catechism and its Potential for the Future," in *Remembering the Heidelberg Catechism in Southern Africa Today: Essays on the Occasion of the 450th Anniversary of a Reformed Confession*, *Acta Theologica*, Suppl. 20 (2014): 280–92.

10 Vol. 22, col. 903.

sensus and, on the other, through contextual correctness, coherency, and rationality. Engagements on behalf of freedom, justice, and truth are necessarily set in contexts of mutual strengthening and consolidation and are indispensable for the formation of character and ethical communication of values. And as gifts of the divine Spirit, they consistently prevail against myriad obstacles and interference.

Human beings, however, yearn not only for consolation and liberation in earthly life, along with personal and social support structures and the energy to assert oneself against threats from both within and without; they also yearn for blessed and eternal life, for firmness and stability that also provide comfort, reassurance, and support in death and beyond transient life. In this respect as well, an element of what one might call joyous pneumatological discovery must be developed. Such joy can be elicited within the context of a sensitive yet realistic assessment of the spiritual wealth that is, on one hand, inherent in all human beings and, on the other–in Christian contexts–resident in and received from the divine Spirit as mediated by Jesus Christ and shaped by his person and ministry.

Religion not only promotes the development of character that, over the entire breadth of its varied individual complexity, yet remains steadfast, grateful, responsible, and quick to become engaged; religion also elicits trust in the power of the divine Spirit, which with the hunger for truth and wisdom, justice and mercy, freedom and peace does not merely bestow the powers necessary for successful earthly life along with comfort and consolation in times of distress and affliction. Even more, it is through the sort of love of neighbor and God so eloquently attested to by this striving for freedom, justice, and truth that the creative Spirit also mediates the powers of eternal life.

But this Spirit that inspires and fills human beings is not even remotely to be understood as infinity or the Absolute or the Numinous or some similar metaphysical monstrosity. Biblical texts refer to the remarkable wealth of its gifts and blessings with the image of the "outpouring of the Spirit." Indeed, in the twentieth century, the largest faith movement in human history–namely, the Pentecostal churches and charismatic movements with half a billion members–has located the very center of its faith in this outpouring of the Spirit or baptism in the Spirit.[11]

Nourished by the Enlightenment, on one hand, and by an envisioned reactivation of biblical and spiritual training on the other, a Christian religion that seeks to apply itself to the shaping of character and ethical disposition, and to the communication of values, should concentrate on the divine and human powers of the Spirit. In this connection, orientational help can be found in the fields of Christology, anthropology, and the theology of law, the latter of which, of course, is crucial in the quest for justice.[12] We are currently investigating many promising alliances with scholarly and scientific disciplines both inside and outside theology that can offer critical and constructive support to religion in fulfilling this task. We are anticipating fresh insights and considerable help in this context from the multisystem investigation of value hierarchies in our late modern societies of precisely the sort we are envisioning and striving to actualize within our own shared research project.

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11 Frank Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit: A Global Pentecostal Theology* (New York: Zondervan, Harper Collins, 2009).

12 Cf. John Witte's contribution in this volume, chapter 17.