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Christian Empowerment and Secularity: Introduction to a Research Idea

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Abstract

This paper explores the challenges facing Christian churches in Germany amid increasing secularization and societal change. Key issues include the loss of institutional self-evidence, financial instability due to declining church membership, and the erosion of trust following abuse scandals. In response, the concept of empowerment is examined as a theological and pedagogical approach to fostering individual and communal agency. Drawing from interdisciplinary perspectives in community psychology, social work, disability studies and critical pedagogy, the study highlights how empowerment can create new pathways for engaging with the Christian message. Research at the CES focuses on religious communication, missional church development, and church theory in secular contexts, aiming to enhance the relevance of the Gospel through empowerment-driven approaches.

Keywords: Empowerment, Secularity, Germany, community Psychology, Social Work, Disability Studies, Critical Pedagogy, Gospel

1 Introduction

Currently, much is in motion – even in matters of religion. This unsettles many people, including the churches, even though, in principle, it is not a new phenomenon. From a broader historical perspective, change itself appears to be a constant.

The developments currently observable in *rebus religionis* in Germany can aptly be described using the term "changed self-evidence". What was long considered normal in the field is no longer the case for a significant part of the population. These processes are by no means linear; indeed, they often unfold in divergent ways. While the traditional churches face a perceptible loss of relevance unprecedented in recent history, other religious groups – primarily because of migration – are gaining significance. Christianity is experiencing a dramatic decline in relevance, both in Germany

and in much of the Western world. This decline is especially evident in its societal influence. For a long time, Christian religion functioned as the defining medium that shaped collective perceptions of reality. However, this has undergone a marked transformation. The Christian worldview, once dominant or at least influential, has become one perspective among many.

2 The Church in Germany is currently facing difficulties

The existing forms of an institutionalized church are increasingly reaching their limits and coming to an end. These developments are not new and have been accompanying the mainline churches in Germany for a long time. However, at least three things are new:

The money is running out: First, the number of people leaving the church has increased significantly. For the first time, this has led to a significant drop in church taxes. This shakes the financial foundations of the church's work.

Cases of sexualized violence shake the Church: Secondly, cases of sexualized violence raise questions about the harmful and usually unaddressed negative power dynamics within the church. These questions affect not only the church's structure but also its proclaimed message. A victim of sexual violence said to me: "Did God watch when this happened to me? And if he did watch, what kind of God is that? Or did God look away when this happened to me? But if he did look away, what kind of God is that?" This unsettles the substantive dimension of the church's work.

Loss of self-evidence and relevance: Thirdly, these events are embedded in a broader development that shapes Germany and large parts of the Western world, which can be described with the keywords "loss of self-evidence" and "loss of relevance". Christianity has lost significant influence. It is no longer the medium that, more or less unquestioned, shapes the perception of reality. Instead, it has become one option among many. This shakes the societal dimension of church work, because today's dominant medium is secular, and Christianity must prove itself within this context as well.

These three developments are so fundamental that previously unquestioned certainties are shaken. It also becomes apparent how fragile and diverse learning paths are. Approaching the Christian faith is no longer a matter of course for most people. It must be initiated and – just as importantly – repeatedly re-initiated throughout one's life. Faith no longer comes naturally. Moreover, the supportive cultural factors that could long be relied upon in this process are increasingly losing their influence.

This is a challenge that has been given little consideration within German practical theology. At least two overarching questions arise: First, how can the communication

of the gospel succeed under the current conditions of secularity, and secondly, how can people have meaningful experiences of relevance with the gospel?

It is particularly important to understand what encourages people to shape their lives as Christians independently and to use their strengths in solidarity with others. Against this background, Christian forms of communication such as praying, blessing, being blessed, celebrating and acting should be incorporated.

3   A question from Jesus as a source of inspiration

The fundamental direction can be biblically/theologically focused on the synoptically transmitted question of Jesus, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mk 10.51; Mt. 20.32; Lk. 18.41). Here, the counterpart is seen as a conversation partner. Their voice is given space, and their desires and needs are carefully inquired. This basic attitude must be upheld. At the same time, it must be embedded in the broader orientation associated with the gospel. It is not just about self-improvement and increased autonomy in the general sense, but rather about a specific and unique form of self-discovery. This self-discovery is defined by the relationship between humans and God, a relationship in which the human is no longer the same but will be transformed. "He gets out of himself in order to come to himself" (Meyer-Blanck 2012: 411).

The direction associated with this can be described as an event that uplifts and reorients people. Sometimes it emerges as a disruption of the previous frame of reference. This perspective points to questions of empowerment.

4   In search of conversation partners

How can the challenges outlined above be addressed and reflected upon in practical theological terms? The guiding question lies openly on the table: How can approaches be opened which go beyond assumed self-evidence, predefined meanings and anticipated resonances? What does an empowerment-related perspective offer to this discussion?

These questions are not unique to Christian-motivated communication processes, and it is a promising endeavour to listen to other fields and discourses in order to learn for one's own questions and challenges. Other disciplines also operate within this reference framework, where *empowerment* plays a crucial role. Under this concept, one finds discourses offering a multitude of interesting ideas and suggestions. Here, the image of the table might be helpful: the problems are laid bare on the table, and the empowerment-related discourses bring inspiring dialogue partners into the conversation. The concept of empowerment introduces us to broader discussions that point to diverse receptions and perspectives. On the one hand, it

connects to educational theories, which offer preliminary reflections on learning processes beyond the realm of self-evident assumptions. On the other hand, it opens theological discourses that explicitly address questions of power and focus on marginalized groups.

However, as with any reference to non-theological discourses, critical inquiries arise. They cannot be elaborated here but must be taken seriously. They point out that these are not simply adaptations but interpretative mediations between the disciplines (Domsgen 2019, 354–67).

What can we learn from this?

5 Impulses and stimulations from empowerment discourses

I write this as a theologian and have theological theories in my head, such as the communication of the gospel. It reminds me of the dialogical nature of the gospel. And it points me to different forms of fulfilment. Ultimately, it is about allowing ourselves to be touched by the life, work and fate of Jesus of Nazareth. Three basic modes play a role here: learning, celebrating and helping. By talking about God, I introduce a dimension that does not simply dissolve into other discourses. At the same time, we can learn a lot from this about the communication of the gospel.

5.1 Expanding the possibilities to determine your own life

For example, we can learn from community psychology. Julian Rappaport introduced empowerment as a concept in the 1980s to determine the research-driven interest. As a minimal definition of this concept, he describes the goal "to expand opportunities for people to determine their own lives" (Rappaport 1985: 269).

There is no single solution but many solutions, differing regionally and depending on the conditions in various places, contexts and neighbourhoods. Questions of how to live a good live are thus contextualized. The community and the relevance for communal living come into focus. This relates with the discussions about communicating the gospel, because the processes of learning, celebrating and helping are communal ones. Questions of an individual person (e.g. concerning relevance) cannot be separated from the community of people that individual is part of.

5.2 Describing the direction

The theory of social work also features a well-developed discourse on empowerment. For professionals working in this field, the direction set by the empowerment concept is particularly significant. Both personal and structural spheres of possibility and ability must be taken into account. This can be summarized with Georg Bucher in the term pair of *Befähigung* and *Bevollmächtigung*, which could best be translated

as enablement and empowering in the sense of structural authorization. Religious impulses also need experiences of resonance and relevance, both on an individual as well as on a structural level. They can only be achieved within the framework of participation.

5.3 Supporting self-determination, co-determination and solidarity

The concrete implications of this, particularly the importance of self-directed processes in developing life-management capacities, can be explored in the discourse of disability studies. The overarching educational goal here is to "support and develop the ability for 'self-determination, participation and solidarity'" (Theunissen 2003: 79). It is essential to refer to strengths and resources to counteract the often-encountered perspective of deficit. This points to something very important, while at the same time, it must be noted: "Empowerment can only be realized where experiences of powerlessness are not dismissed as unreal" (Liedke 2013: 264).

5.4 Structural aspects play a significant role here

In critical pedagogy, particularly engaging with the works of Paulo Freire, such questions about the connection between education and cultural, social and especially economic structures are bundled and focused on the term "empowerment". Questions of power are addressed here, as well as those concerning encouragement and dealing with conflicts. In his dissertation, Georg Bucher has analysed the discourses mentioned here in an excellent way and made them fruitful for religious education (Bucher 2021: 228–326). The potential of this approach is not yet fully explored, notably when focusing on church theory and church development. More conversation partners must be included. At the same time, interesting and important aspects are already emerging.

6 Impulses concerning church theory and development

Empowerment addresses questions of life conduct. It aims at assistance, that enables people to trust their own strengths and shape their lives independently. In short: it is about enabling and authorizing. It requires specific abilities and competences on one hand, as well as strength, power and courage on the other. Ultimately, the goal is to explore how possibilities and abilities can be expanded for people to live self-determined lives. How can this be made fruitful for religious education and practical theology? How does it fit into the communication of the Gospel?

Very stimulating for this is the method of the "interpretative Vermittlung", which can be translated as the *method of interpretative mediation* strongly advocated by Karl

Ernst Nipkow (Nipkow 1978: 211). This approach avoids aiming for either identification or harmonization between theological and non-theological disciplines. Instead, it asks: What relevance do theological and non-theological perspectives have for their respective practical contexts? We try to bring theological and non-theological perspectives into conversation.

From the lens of empowerment discourses, we reflect on theological considerations and learn much about assisting in the communication of the gospel. For instance, we ask: How do Christian communicative practices sustainably support people in their lives? Or: How can the opportunities of an individual's development be described in light of the perspectives embedded in the gospel?

Conversely, from theological considerations, we engage with empowerment discourses and raise critical questions about the concept of empowerment. For example, we might ask: Where does resource orientation reach its limits? How can an overemphasis on the strength's perspective be avoided?

The overall focus is on empowerment as a description of the directional sense of the communication of the gospel. People should be addressed in their developmental possibilities concerning the perspectives inherent in the gospel. Thus, the focus is also on the inner and outer vulnerability inherent in humans, demanding empowerment in terms of support. The starting point is the fundamental human capacity for agency and freedom.

Ultimately, the gospel reveals itself as something that lifts people up and reorients them. For this to happen, specific abilities and competencies are required, including intrapsychic ones like confidence and courage and structural ones like power. Empowerment looks at both the personal possibilities in form of the individual's resources, as well as at the structural possibilities in form of the resources available. In both dimensions, a practical-theological perspective can and must explore both general and specifically Christian resources.

7   What do we research at the CES?

The *Centre for Empowerment Studies* is part of the Martin-Luther-University in Halle and this context has something to do with the research topics and questions we are dealing with. Halle is the second biggest city of the state of Saxony-Anhalt in Central Germany. In Halle, 8% of the population belong to the Evangelical Church and 4% are Catholic. So, 88% of the inhabitants are non-affiliated. In Saxony-Anhalt 85% of the people are non-affiliated.[4] This can be described as a highly secularized context and

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4   Ökumenischer Kirchenatlas, Bevölkerung und Religionszugehörigkeit, at www.oekumenischer-kirchenatlas.de (10.05.2025).

this environment, we work in, is one major reason why we deal with the topics and questions outlined in this article.

The research at CES happens at three research units, each focusing on different parts of the programme.

7.1 Research Unit for Religious Communication and Learning Processes (RKL)

RKL focuses on studying how non-religious people connect with religious and church activities. We investigate these questions with qualitative-empirical work and reconstruct approaches and learning paths of religiously non-localized people to religious/church frameworks and offers. For instance, currently we are researching how mostly "non-affiliated" students and their parents perceive blessing ceremonies in Halle/Saale, offered by the Catholic and Protestant churches as a "Celebration of Turning Point" from childhood to adolescence (Project Manager: Helene Utpatel). We recently finished a project on how non-religious educators approach religious pedagogical elementary education (Project Manager: Ariane Schneider).

7.2 Research Unit for Missional Church and Community Development (MKG)

The MKG researches under the theological perspective of the *missio Dei* (God's mission) in the field of church innovation and renewal processes in secular contexts. The unit is involved in the scientific support of both the *Erprobungsräume* (spaces of trial) of the Evangelical Church of Central Germany and the *Inititiave Missionarische Aufbrüche* (initiative for missionary ventures) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony.

The MKG works primarily in an evaluative manner, using the dialogue and learning function of evaluation to learn from and with the local actors how the church can develop under predominantly secular conditions. Additionally, the unit offers long-term training for missionary pastors in Saxony and conduct various schools for full-time and volunteer church staff. The training and schools aim to encourage engagement with various topics (contextual mission, innovation and exnovation, impact orientation) and to enable participants to communicate the gospel in a context-sensitive manner.

7.3 Research Unit for Church Theory and Congregational Development: Ecumenism and Knowledge Transfer in the Global Lutheran Context (KÖW)

The KÖW works on how church and parishes can be thought of and shaped in the context of secularity. This involves looking at other denominational and cultural contexts:

– What can we learn from churches and parishes in other highly secularized countries on how to deal with the widespread loss of religious socialization in an emerging minority situation?

– Where are our existing notions of church and community challenged by ecumenical and international perspectives? Where do new think tanks emerge and theoretical as well as practical aspects clear up that can contribute to empowerment in and through the church?

Topics such as need orientation, reduction of barriers, and fluid forms of participation and involvement come into focus.

8   Outlook

The initial reactions to our initiatives have been very positive. It is especially the sense of direction named in empowerment that has attracted a lot of interest. How people can gain strength and courage through engagement with the gospel is very significant for those working in the church, whether they are volunteers or professionals. The expectations placed on us are often very high, sometimes too high. It is important to look at things realistically. Empowerment does not exist as a master plan to solve all or even most of the current problems. However, engaging with the discourses under this term offers many stimulating ideas that enrich practical theology as well as religious pedagogy and can be further developed. Realizing this potential and reflecting on it in the interplay of theory and practice is a worthwhile task. The CES is happy to contribute to this.

About the Author

Michael Domsgen studied theology in Halle, Jena, Bern, Kiel and Tübingen from 1987 to 1993. He completed his doctorate in Halle in 1997 with a thesis on religious education in eastern Germany. In 2004, his habilitation was with a thesis on family and religion. He has been Professor of Protestant Religious Education at Martin Luther University since 2006. In 2023, he founded the Centre for Empowerment Studies, of which he is Scientific Director. Main areas of research: Religious education in secularity, religious education theory of the family, theory of Protestant empowerment, Church-theory. Contact: michael.domsgen@theologie.uni-halle.de

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