

The Church as Therapeutical Community

Paper proposal for the COV&R 2010 Conference on
Transforming Violence: Cult, Culture, and Acculturation

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With the detection of the so-called mirror-neurons the Italian Neurophysiologist Giacomo Rizzolatti celebrated a scientific success which was especially exciting also for those working with Mimetic Theory. Building on his insights and developing them further, the German molecular biologist and medical scientist Joachim Bauer recently pointed out the strong interdependency between health and illness, mental condition and interpersonal relationships. Based on physiological tests he believes that experiences made in interpersonal relationships can not only modify the functioning but even the structure of our brains. Very similar findings are reported by neurobiologist Gerald Hüther.

For us this seems especially interesting because both scientists are convinced that learning and transformation of one's behavior are only possible on grounds of new, alternative experiences. Hüther holds the opinion that persons will develop best and be most adaptive when they experience love. I.e. in relationships where they experience at the same time two things which at first sight seem to be quite contradictory: the experience of belonging, of being connected; and the experience of being allowed to develop, to be free.

For the question raised by this year's conference a hypothesis could be generated based on these insights: a transformation of violence, an "unlearning" of aggressive mimetic patterns is only possible within a therapeutical community, which opens spaces for the experience of alternative, nonviolent relationships. As a theologian my question is to what extent the church can and wants to be such a therapeutical community. In the middle of the last century, the French theologian Henri de Lubac strongly underlined the importance of the social character of Catholicism. Going back to the Church Fathers and their notion of the one human nature he developed a vision of the church that focuses on the social dimension of the salvation process.

In my paper I will inquire for resonances between the views of de Lubac (and the Church Fathers), recent approaches within genetic and brain research and Mimetic Theory. The central question will be, if and under which conditions the Church can and wants to be a therapeutical community where violence is transformed and nonviolent relationships can be practiced.

Biography

Petra Steinmair-Pösel was research assistant at the Department of Systematic Theology, University of Innsbruck until her maternity leave 2007. Presently she works as the women's representative of the diocese of Feldkirch / Austria. Moreover she is engaged in the theological research project "Growing into the Cosmic Christ. Foundations of a universal church practice" with Paul M. Zulehner (University of Vienna).

Her research focused on the revision of the concept of grace from the perspective of Dramatic Theology, and on the potential of the Judeo-Christian tradition for reconciliation and peacebuilding. Apart from the further development of Dramatic Theology, her actual research interest deals with the theological notion of the Cosmic Christ and its relevance for overcoming a Eurocentric and confessionalist approach to pastoral theology.

Publications in English include: *Passions in Economy, Politics, and the Media: In Discussion with Christian Theology* (ed. with W. Palaver) as well as *Original Sin, Grace, and Positive Mimesis* (in *Contagion. Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*, ed. W.B. Johnsen, Vol 14, 2007).