

Balázs Siba

LIFE STORY AND CHRISTIAN
METANARRATION

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS
OF NARRATIVE IDENTITY TO PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

*Megjelent a Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem
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Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem • L'Harmattan Kiadó

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FOREWORD



In the spring of 2002 I had the opportunity to participate in a conference organized for religious teachers and preachers in Montreat, Appalachia Mountains. I met a storyteller who taught us the “theory” of storytelling for many days. One afternoon he said that Jesus’ parables are understandable only if we add our life stories to the biblical story, if we answer Jesus’ question with our whole lives. Since then I am very concerned with this notion to correlate God’s story to our life stories. What are the impacts of these stories, how do they interact with each other?

From this question sprang many others. Why do we find stories interesting? Is there a logic in these stories? What makes a story a good one?

In my work I often use the words narration, narrative, recital, fiction, but to understand the essence of the stories we have to understand these words in a different way than their normal, everyday meaning. These words do not refer to mere imagination, to the non-existent, but are ways to approach and understand the truth. For there are many things in life that can be best told by using symbols and metaphors. It is a special way to grasp reality, to which rational, scholarly parlance is not suitable.

In my book, I invite the reader to a journey, during which we can add our life stories next to God’s, like the Samaritan woman did when he met Jesus at Jacob’s well (John 4:5-42).

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1. THE POSTMODERN SEARCH FOR A WAY AND THE CHRISTIAN IMITATION

“Show me the way I should go”

Psalms 143: 9

1.1. INTRODUCTION

When we think of our life story or the huge story of Christianity, we can conclude that there is a very difficult question behind each story. The question of the common story is: “Where is God in this world?” and the question to ourselves is: “What will become of me? Do I do well this thing called life?”¹ At the first sight, it seems the two questions have nothing in common, but in reality they are inseparable. God’s presence has an immediate effect on what our life would become, and during our journey (in the world) God’s ways of being present in the world is of utmost importance. But it is very hard to find a definite answer to these questions. They are in a way unanswerable, nevertheless it is worth thinking about them, because they compel us to reflect to ourselves, and thus help us to make good use of the destined time of our lives.²

In this book I analyze the relation of these two questions and of the two stories sprung from them. The first chapters seek the answer of why these two stories are worth examining together, and in the latter chapters I examine the ways our story connects with God’s story in theory and in the specific life stories.

The main precept of my argument is that amongst today’s social challenges, the conscious nurturing of the stories of our life and faith

¹ Capps, D.: Parabolic Events in Augustine’s Autobiography. *Theology Today*, 40.1983;260-73. 262.

² Jetter, W.: *Die Theologie und die Lebensgeschichte*. In Drehsen, V., Henke, D., Schmidt-Rost, R., Steck, W. (ed.): *Der „Ganze Mensch“ Perspektiven lebensgeschichtlicher Individualität*. Berlin, New York, 1997, de Gruyter, 191- 217. 193.

can be a useful tool in the forming of our Christian identity. This precept appears from chapter to chapter heading from the universally human towards the specific, and in the last, summarizing chapter I close up the circle and articulate the conclusions concerning Christian community. To interpret the processes of the ever-changing world to understand the changes happening in human soul it is important to examine first the age we live in, the human we address and ourselves whether we gave adequate answers to the existing questions. After describing the society, I explore where in theology the place of work with human subjects and their life stories is, and what kind of paradigm shifts we need to have in order to broadcast our beliefs in a language understandable for people of our days. Thereafter I examine how a life story is composed, and the way it is connected into the big, common story of Christianity, and how the search for God appears in specific human stories, and what hyperlinks we can find between Christian faith and the questions of the human life.

The study of narrative identity is a recent task (and it is quite timely in our postmodern era) that by uncovering the new interconnections of identity can help to understand ourselves and our belonging to a community. Because of the interdisciplinary character of the topic in order to map the entire subject we must occupy ourselves not only with theological disciplines, but with certain topics of psychology, sociology, pedagogy, philosophy, literary, and historical studies.

With this work I aim to shape attitudes and thus secure a theoretical basis for life story projects in the Christian church.

1.2. CENTRAL-EUROPEAN LIFE AFTER THE REGIME CHANGE

In the last one and a half decade we have witnessed rapid changes in the whole world, and in Eastern Europe particularly. In Hungary the regime change did not mean political and economical changes only, but the majority of the population had to reevaluate their lives as their basic ideas apparently turned out to be fraudulent. The situation was not only one of economical insecurity and political vacuum, insecurity and vacuum invaded also the deeper dimensions

in human life: masses were left bereft of a working ideology.³ If we take a closer look at the sociological system of the western societies, we can see that the type of “wild” capitalism Eastern Europe is racing to build at the same time disappearing from the west where common welfare and social responsibility go hand in hand. The scale of values in Eastern Europe is much more indistinct. The society is not as open as in the west and people do not know how to form an independent opinion about different ethical and social situations. Still, in spite of these divergences we can assert that our world undergoing such enormous changes we can make good use of the results of western sociology and theology, for they are both diagnosis and prognosis to us: diagnosis because we live in the postmodern era, and prognosis, because our world –east and west both– changes. When we focus on postmodernism and evaluate its effects, we have to consider an important fact: not every social class is exposed to these effects. Even in one society there exist a plethora of worlds. People who lived through World War II, and treaded muddy roads have a different view of life: for them installation of electricity or listening to the radio were huge achievements, but other, more recent developments like the Internet, the cell phone, the i-pod, or chatting, have no forming power on their worlds. Younger generations can feel more the impact of postmodernism on their lives, and their children and grandchildren might grow up in a completely postmodern world.

1.3. MEANING OF POSTMODERNISM, AND ITS EFFECTS

What is postmodernism? The answer can vary with different situations, for we can meet the phenomenon of postmodern in philosophy, arts, or even architecture.⁴ In talking about postmodernism, Lyotard’s philosophy is often mentioned, who as early as the 1960’s foretold the end of all ideologies, and in certain respect he was proved to be

³ Cf. Keupp, H, Ahbe, T., Gmür, W., Höfer R., Mitzscherlich, B., Kraus, W., Straus, F.: *Identitätskonstruktionen – Das Patchwork der Identitäten in der Spätmoderne*. Hamburg, 1999, Rowohlt, 144.

⁴ Cf. Pethő, B.: *A posztmodern*. Budapest, 1992, Gondolat, 49.

right.⁵ The man of the 21st century does not believe in development, is skeptic about general truths, and cannot imagine the world in other twenty or thirty years. But contrary to popular belief, postmodernism is not an era, rather it is a collective term of different tendencies. Some call it “the second modern”⁶ or “the late modern,”⁷ but one can meet “the post-postmodernism”⁸ label as well. All these names tend to express that during the two centuries of seemingly consistent modern era, there was a kind of evolution, society and human life had a certain finality. But by now everything has changed. The wall of the building of the unified world seems to have cracked. The post-modern as the cracked modern shows us a life with relativized ideas and values. No one can own the sole truth.

From the point of view of the religion one of the most important questions is the change of the world perception. In praemodern times people lived in a magical world. Human was a part of the unified universe where religion originated reality. Believing in god was part of the human thinking process, people grew up into a religious practice. But since the Renaissance the center of life gradually swiftd from God to human. By the end of the Middle Ages it was not only the feudal order that disintegrated, but the human individual also was emancipated, and in it, the Reformation played a vital role.⁹ Still, modern era is the product of the ideals of the Enlightenment. In modern thinking, worldview broke up in two different parts: objective reality and subjective idealism. The owner of objective truth is science, which “creates” a world where everything can be known and demonstrated, and it is directed by the belief in constant development. The center and the measure of the universe is the enlightened human in whose thinking there is no room for anything “unscientific.” Modern people

⁵ See Lyotard, J.-F.: *Das postmoderne Wissen*. Graz, 1986, Edition Passagen, 52kk.

⁶ Cf. Beck, U.: *Risikogesellschaft – Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*. Frankfurt am Main, 1986, Suhrkamp,

⁷ Cf. Kraus, W.: *Das Erzählte Selbst – Das narrative Konstruktion von Identität in der Spätmoderne*. Herbolzheim, 2000, Centaurus Verlag,

⁸ Pethő, B.: *Poszt-posztmodern, A kilencvenes évek – Vélemények és filozófiai vizsgálódások korszakváltásunk ügyében*. Budapest, 1997, Platon Kiadó.

⁹ Cf. Keupp, H.: Riskante Chancen – Das Subjekt zwischen Psychokultur und Selbstorganisation. *Communication Research*, 28, 2001. 251 – 274. 251.

do not believe in foggy ideas, for them religion is a mere ideology, a superstitious longing for an ideal world. We can see that many still nurture these modern ideas. But there are more and more people for whom “irrational” and “true” are not mutually exclusive categories.

Where are we now? What changes occur in the thinking of the man of today? László Ropolyi gives an answer to these questions: “The modernist project is abortive – or successful, it depends on *my* understanding: by all means it is about my experiences, my ideas, my life, my reality: I, I, I, I, and I – the center of a centerless universe.”¹⁰

Naturally in earlier times there were always incalculable things in life, as people were exposed to illnesses, epidemics, starvation, life expectancy was shorter. However today the objects of fear are different: „the very frames of identity became problematic: either they disappeared completely, or they are in a way of a rapid and accelerating transformation...”¹¹ Giddens describes four dilemmas of our age which characteristically are simultaneously present. We experience the phenomena of unification and fragmentation at the same time. The other huge contrast in the societies is the simultaneous presence of powerlessness and exploitation. The biggest dilemma of our age is the simultaneous presence of autonomy and insecurity both in personal and communal level. Next to them there is the other everyday contrast of personality and individuality versus being one in a crowd.¹²

1.3.1. Postmodern Man

One may ask what kinds of strategies are used against postmodern influences. For in postmodernism, we do not meet the rebellious, optimistic, autonomous human, quite the contrary, we talk about

¹⁰ Ropolyi, L.: *A virtuális valóság természetéről*. In Pléh, C, Kampis, Gy., Csányi, V. (ed.): *Az észleléstől a nyelvig*. Budapest, 2004, Gondolat, 30-55. 35.

¹¹ Pataki, E.: *Élettörténet és identitás*. Budapest, 2001, Osiris, 20.

¹² Giddens, A.: *Modernity and Self-identity – Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991, 4.

weak subjects,¹³ and fragmented selves.¹⁴ “Postmodern personality is born into the process of inflation of personality, where it becomes ‘global’ but never prominent.”¹⁵ The term “weak subject” does not refer to a weak, downcast group of people who cannot answer the challenges of our days, but rather to an effect that affects all of us. Postmodernism weakens human subjects since globalizing industry needs mobile manpower that can be applied in every part of the world and flexible enough to adapt to the given circumstances.¹⁶ But the whole concept is more than a question of mobility, it is an insecurity that affects everybody in the cultural settings¹⁷ Sigmund Bauman, a sociologist of Polish origin calls this phenomenon “life in a state of flux.”¹⁸ Postmodern humans find themselves in such a stream of events where they cannot find handholds, the current is ceaseless thus their insecurity is permanent. The “weak subject” is actually a survival strategy. Instability, going with the flow renders people able to survive, to adapt to their environment.¹⁹

What are the traits intensified most by Postmodernism? According to Lasch’s famous theory one of the inheritances of modern societies is the intensified narcissistic personality.²⁰ Narcissistic humans live their lives as if they could do many things, as if they had the chance and freedom to set and achieve aims. The illusion of chances against real aims one would be able to achieve deepens the gap between the “ideal” and “real” selves. Culture encourages us to “be

¹³ Cf. Welsch, W.: *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, Weinheim, 1991, VCH Verlagsgesellschaft, 316.

¹⁴ Cf. Luther, H.: *Religion und Alltag – Bausteine zu einer Praktischen Theologie des Subjekts*. Stuttgart, 1992, Radius-Verlag, p. Luther, H: *Leben als Fragment – Der Mythos von der Ganzheit. Wege zum Menschen*, 43. Jahrgang, 1991, 262-73. 160.

¹⁵ Ropolyi, L.: *A virtuális valóság természetéről*. In Pléh, C, Kampis, Gy., Csányi, V. (ed.): *Az észleléstől a nyelvig*. Budapest, 2004, Gondolat, 30-55. 52.

¹⁶ Cf. Beck, U.: *Risikogesellschaft – Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*. Frankfurt am Main, 1986, Suhrkamp, 89.

¹⁷ The system of ways of life is changing in the society, e.g. the number of singles is increasing. Cf. Bohrmann, T.: *Lebensalter als Thema der christlichen Sozialethik. Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift*, 2004: 3-15. 8.

¹⁸ Bauman, Z.: *Liquid life*. Cambridge, 2005, Polity Press, 2.

¹⁹ From this point of view we can be considered *postmodern nomads*.

²⁰ See Lasch, C.: *The Culture of Narcissism – American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. London, 1979, Norton/Abacus, 31.

bold and have dreams,” for everybody in the world of superstars and success stories can actualize themselves. On the contrary what the media tell us, chance the few, not of the majority. But the illusion of chances comes at a price. Narcissistic traits do not only make people overvalue themselves, but cause their self-esteem to weaken, to become fragile. Narcissistic human is in a constant state of need, and is always anxious about himself. They do not dare to give or share with others, to accept responsibility for their environment, since they always feel left behind, and are never satisfied of what they have (love, appreciation). Moreover, they are less and less brave enough to make decision for they are afraid to miss an opportunity thus with every decision a certain number of chances as a matter of course is eliminated.²¹ And living in a culture questioning every value one can never be sure of themselves. One of the possible defenses against that is to have some back-door escapes or resign to half measures.²² According to Fukuyama ours is the age of ordinary men, or, as the world advertises it: “You do not have to be a hero!”²³ Postmodern men is benevolent and tolerant nevertheless. Still, accepting others’ “otherness” comes not only from being able to see the root of the problems but from not being committed to a specific system of values. Another trait of such man is the constant wanderlust and living for the moment. “Ordinary man can draw only one conclusion from the basic thought of our Zeitgeist: in this world of insecurities we can only have one certainty — that is pleasure. For it is absolutely impossible no to derive pleasure from something in which I have already found pleasure, or for the pleasure I can feel to be unreal. [...] For the man left alone with the experiences of meaningless existence and absurd death there remained only one thing to make him sure about his mere existence: the moment.”²⁴

²¹ Cf. Pohl-Patalong, U.: *Seelsorge zwischen Individuum und Gesellschaft*. Stuttgart, 1996, Kohlhammer, 259.

²² Cf. Popper, P.: *Felnőttnek lenni... : a “létező” és a “készülő” ember*. Budapest, 1999, Saxum, 35.

²³ See Fukuyama, F.: *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York, 1992, Free Press, 300.

²⁴ Bíró, B.: Preposztmodern. *Korunk*. 1999; 6 75-83. <http://www.hhrf.org/korunk/9906/6k16.htm> (mirrored on 19-04-2011)

1.3.2. The Church's Relation to the Social Changes

What can the Church do with these postmodern influences and people? Even Christianity struggles with the questions posed by Postmodernism, and it found answers in different ways. One strategy is to ignore the changes²⁵ as if the Church should be engaged with eternal questions only, and does not have to take people She was sent seriously. Another way of coping is the fundamentalism thought system which tries to slow down processes.²⁶ The third strategy is “compassion” with the world.²⁷ This is an attitude that endeavors to understand the changes and takes them seriously. On the other hand strives to capitalize on the responsiveness of Postmodernism to irrationality and spirituality, and through them to determine the course of those changes. Postmodernism in this relation is not an unstoppable or incalculable phenomenon, but rather shapeable. Tamás Nyíri writes about the connection of Christianity and the world:

“If we want to be true to our calling, if we want to know our place and tasks in the world, it is not enough for us to generally describe the world in a couple of words, but we should call attention to its characteristics of this specific historical moment. Every movement, trend, or religion which ignores the changes that have occurred in the human mind is doomed to death. That was the reason of those failures that tried to restore ancient religions in the first Christian centuries. And even Christianity has to learn, that wherever it ignores the changes in the people’s minds, the specific characteristics of the world of today, it will perish accordingly.”²⁸

²⁵ Cf. Németh D.: A posztmodern jelenség teológus szemmel. *Református Egyház*, 18. (7-8), 2006, 154-159.; Németh, D.: A lelkigondozás feladatai a posztmodern világban. *Embertárs*, II/2. 2004, 120-7.

²⁶ Cf. Ramminger, M.: Fundamentalismus – Religion und Moderne. *Wege zum Menschen*, 54. 2002, 317-30.

²⁷ Cf. Hall, D.J.: Finding our Way into the Future. *Cloud of witnesses – An Audio Journal on Youth, Church, and Culture. Princeton Theological Seminary, Institute for Youth Ministry*. 2007; 10: track 3.

²⁸ Nyíri, T.: *A keresztyén ember küldetése a világban*. Budapest, 1996, Akadémiai Kiadó, 15.

Christianity indeed has a message for postmodern man. But we should see the differences between the worldview of Postmodernism and Christianity. Postmodernism is an open, shapeless “system.” It has no real view of the future or of the man. Christian worldview on the other hand is a closed system, it has an ontological center, and it is endless at the same time, for God can integrate all human life stories, and situations into one, rational whole, the cosmos. For Christianity, the world is complete, humans have their place and calling in it, and it has the answers to the three biggest questions of human existence: where are we coming from, “why are we here?”, and “where are we going to?”. But it has many other answers to less important questions, too. This is why Christianity can be attractive for postmodern man. Since “humans cannot live on sand dunes”²⁹ the absence of values, the general relativisation, the feeling of “we cannot be sure of anything” cannot be tolerated for long. “Nobody can tell for sure how postmodern era will look like, but quite probably it will not be the era of incensed secularization and religious meltdown, rather an era of religious revival and the return of the sacred.”³⁰ In fact the signs seem to show reverse tendencies.³¹ In the Postmodern, there is and will be a demand for Christianity to turn to people. In the next pages, we intend to consider how that can be.

1.4. CHRISTIAN BELIEF AND REFLECTION TO LIFE STORIES

Modern man seems to have wanted to rule the world, but the system slipped out of his hands. We can witness phenomena unknown for previous historical ages. Our selves are overcharged in this “social jungle.”³² “Tinker-existence (Bastelexistenz) means that

²⁹ Poláková, J.: *Perspektive der Hoffnung – Transzendenzsuche in der Postmoderne*. Paderborn, 2005, Schöningh. 102.

³⁰ Cox, H.: *Religion in the Secular City – Toward a Postmodern Theology*. New York, 1984. 20.

³¹ Cardinal Karl Lehmann said in an interview that in Germany, after a long time more people join the Catholic Church than those who leave. See Lehmann, K: *Interjú a kereszténység helyzetéről. Világóra*. 2007.05.06 ed., 2007, Kossuth Rádió.

³² Pataki, F.: *Élettörténet és identitás*. Budapest, 2001, Osiris, Luther, H: *Religion*

individualized human is continuously exposed to the multitude of self-styles and interpretational options, and they have the chance to choose 'freely' from among them – but this chance is compulsory at the same time. Freely or forcedly, in every situation individual lives according to socially prepared activity and relativity patterns, and adopts prepared, thematically limited world-interpretation models.³³ Thus in the Postmodernism we meet the exposed human who has already begun to realize his own limits.³⁴

Human is doomed to cross limits.³⁵ Humans of our age feel it even more than anytime before, for people change jobs or living places more often than previously, even family roles have been changing. They feel they must subjectively re-construct themselves every day amongst their multicolored existence and the ambiguity of the happenings. They experience their limits, their limited existence not only in crisis situations, but every day. There are situations and crises when these final questions emerge openly, but there are times when our quest for reason is not conscious. It is a self-evident need for humans to sometimes look upon their existence from a certain perspective.³⁶ If Christianity desires to find a linking point to people through this need, it has to prompt them to self-reflection. We can only answer the big questions of life, if we first help people to ask those questions. Interpreting life and life events is not a simple task. It is a knowledge we have to attain, because there are paradoxical and critical situations in life we cannot understand by ourselves, and sometimes we just do not have the proper words to describe the events

und Alltag – Bausteine zu einer Praktischen Theologie des Subjekts. Stuttgart, 1992, Radius-Verlag, 285.

³³ Hitzler, R., Honer, A.: *Bastelexistenz – Über subjektive Konsequenzen der Individualisierung.* In Beck, U, Beck-Gernsheim, E. (ed.): *Risikante Freiheiten Individualisierung in modernen Gesellschaften.* Frankfurt am Main, 1994, Suhrkamp, 309.

³⁴ Cf. Pohl-Patalong, U.: *Seelsorge zwischen Individuum und Gesellschaft.* 254-255.

³⁵ Cf. Morton, A.R.: *A határon élni. „Hálával áldozzál...” – A Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem Hittudományi Kara tiszteletbeli doktorainak tanulmányai a 150 évforduló ünnepén.* Budapest, 2005, KRE, 377-89. 387.

³⁶ Cf. Fuchs-Heinritz, W.: *Biographische Forschung – Eine Einführung in Praxis und Methoden.* Wiesbaden, 2005, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 17.

happening around us.³⁷ Questions concerning the meaning of life are the point where human needs and Christian teaching meet. For we are telling a continuous tale to our friends and acquaintances, we send self-messages about ourselves and our experiences, and through these narratives we try, as from the outside, to interpret our place in the world. And this is precisely what Christian anthropology teaches: human being is an eccentric being, he can only understand himself, find the meaning from an external perspective.

1.5. LIFE STORY WORK AS A POSSIBLE MODEL

Postmodern man places himself in networks when thinking and accordingly, he requires handholds.³⁸ As a consequence of the insecurity felt in life people need more and more handholds in life: friends, value systems, traditions. They can help to find their way in life. In my opinion, in our age two contrasting processes have been gaining momentum: one is the growing need (conscious or unconscious) to reflect to the life we live, what and why we do things. On the other hand, there is not enough space and time for self-reflection to ourselves. This is a serious problem, more and more people have no place and time to talk.³⁹

But reflection to our life stories requires place and time. Apart from the fact that the Church's mission is to testify about God among people, it has more possibilities to help people reflect on themselves and their lives than any other non-governmental organizations or movements. If we consider the number of people going to church every week, or of children participating in religious education, we can see that the Church can address hundreds of thousands of people from

³⁷ Cf. Rosenthal, G.: *Erlebte und erzählte Lebensgeschichte – Gestalt und Struktur biographischer Selbstbeschreibungen*. Frankfurt am Main, 1995, Campus, 104.

³⁸ Cf. Castells, M.: *The Power of Identity – The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol. 3*. Oxford, 1997, Blackwell, 5.

³⁹ Cf. Fodorné Nagy Sarolta: Igehirdetés a posztmodern korban – szószéken és katedrán. Református Szemle. *Az Erdélyi Református Egyházkerület a Királyhágómelléki Református Egyházkerület és az Evangélikus – Lutheránus Egyház hivatalos lapja*, 99. évf. 2006; 387-400. 387.

week to week, and if we even add the other occasional church services, this number is much bigger. Churches can potentially become the largest appliers of life story work, so it is obvious why churches in the western world show interest in this topic. But there is no unified conception which could help the isolated, occasional initiatives into a broader and more systematic application form. The Church has always taken care of people's life stories, but we have to elaborate this approach to complement and add color to church education, to the dialogue between generations, to show how can become a part of liturgy, of the casualia, of pastoral care, of mission. In the following chapters, I would like to provide a theoretical basis for this kind of work.

2. THE QUESTION OF HUMAN SUBJECT IN PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

„Story, subject, and religion are common topics
of both postmodern theories and theology.”

(Albrecht Grözinger, 1987)

2.1. INTRODUCTION

Practical Theology is more than simple application of the results of Systematic Theology into life with the help of social sciences. Practical Theology is more than a mere praxis of a theory – it is a praxis that must reflect the church’s mission.⁴⁰ This reflection must be completed further by adding of today’s man, his life and experiences to the object of reflection of Practical Theology, so to say “Practical Theology has to examine the meaning of contemporary human experience in relation to God.”⁴¹ In this chapter I deal with the *raison d’être*

⁴⁰ Cf. Schleiermacher, F.: *Die Praktische Theologie nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt*, Berlin, 1850. 12. Schleiermacher separated Practical Theology from “historical” or “philosophical” theology thus not only creating it, but subordinating it to the other two. For it is true that the crown of “Schleiermacher’s tree” is the practice of the theory, and the others only serve and support it, in reality Practical Theology became only their application science, a technique that uses the results given, but does not add anything to them – a consumer science, not a creator. This paradigm began to change in the 1980s, and there is a growing demand for Practical Theology to be not only a science of church praxis, but a science reflecting to sociology, culture, and human life as a whole. Theology does not only open conversation with arts and social sciences, but beyond interdisciplinary interest, it has to assess them, “Contrary to church praxis, the primary task of Practical Theology is to ask about basics, causes, effects, mehtods, purposes, and feasibility, and to critically interpret them.” Rössler, D.: *Die Einheit der Praktischen Theologie*. In Nipkow, KE, Rössler, D., Schweitzer, F. (ed.): *Praktische Theologie und Kultur der Gegenwart – Ein internationaler Dialog*. Gütersloh, 1991, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 43-55.

⁴¹ Friedrich Schweitzer quotes the American William B. Kennedy. Schweitzer, F.: *Praktische Theologie und Kultur der Gegenwart – Bericht über ein internationales Symposium*. *Theologia Practica*, 26. Jg, 1983; 48-57. 49.

of this statement, because it is not obvious to set subjective human worldviews, religious experiences, and individual philosophies as an object of theology. Is it theologically valid to place human life stories next to God's story? In the first chapter, I stated the necessity of asking the big questions of life and finding answers to them. In the second chapter, I demonstrate the necessity of dealing with life stories even in theological approaches.

2.2. THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL CONTEXTUALITY IN PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Theology must not be treated as a static science, for it is most of all about conversing among people. „Late-modern Practical Theology is not a doctrine, it is conversation.“⁴² Instead of the examination of a cult of imaginary people, Practical Theology needs to occupy itself with real life situations of real humans..⁴³ Practical Theology has to ensure a theoretical background for the different forms of Christianity, but at the meantime, it has to pay attention not to detach itself from reality, not to concentrate only on hypothetical humans and circumstances, conversely it has to examine life critically, in the light of the Christian mission and message.⁴⁴

We do not have to consider the Schleiermacher and Barth schools as mutually precluding each other. The task of Practical Theology today may be to live and represent our particular Christian view of life according to the human life situation of this late-modern age. It is not enough to examine the religiosity of people and to establish that humans are basically religious beings who strive to find the reason for the things in their lives, we must be aware of our Christian identity. The task of Practical Theology is not only to find the meeting

⁴² Fechtner, K.: *Praktische Theologie als Erkundung – Religiöse Praxis im spätmodernen Christentum*. In Hauschild, E., Schwab, U. (ed.): *Praktische Theologie für das 21. Jahrhundert*. Stuttgart, 2002, Kohlhammer, 55-67. 2002. 59.

⁴³ Ibid. 55-67.

⁴⁴ Cf. Lämmermann, G.: *Praktische Theologie als kritische oder als empirisch-funktionale Handlungstheorie? – Zur theologischen Ordnung und Weiterführung einer aktuellen Kontroverse*. München, 1981, Chr. Verlag, 137.

points between people and religion, but to show what it means to be a Christian today, where Christian teaching is different. We must not force our system of values onto people, it is more an identity-work through which the particular Christian image can become distinct (even for ourselves). Jesus says in his high priestly prayer: “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world” (John 17:15). According to this mentality, Practical Theology should offer help for the church to be able to grow in its Christian identity as proper for its context, and thus be able to answer the challenges of its time.

2.2.1. The Empirical Turn

In the history of theology of the 20th century we can notice a whole process of paradigm shifts. Even already in the beginning of the past century, Friedrich Niebergall put forward the idea of a Practical Theology built from the bottom, from the human subject. But the dialectic theology that emerged in the ‘20s rejected this idea.⁴⁵ But after the cataclysms, the effect of social changes could not be ignored. In the ‘60s, the Practical Theology underwent through a so called “empirical turn.” Practical Theology became less scholarly, and turned to the ordinary human wishing to help them in their orientation.⁴⁶ Thus the fall of the centuries-old pastoral theology paradigm which assigned Practical Theology as one to be occupied with the work of ministers. Dietrich Rössler already built his theological system according to the three existing forms of contemporary Christianity. In his view, Christianity does not survive only inside the walls of the churches, but it has certain social aspects and other individual,

⁴⁵ Friedrich Niebergall is one of the representatives of liberal theology, his contemporaries are, Paul Drews, Otto Baumgarten, Richard Kabisch, Martin Schian. Cf. Luther, H.: *Religion, Subjekt, Erziehung – Grundbegriffe der Erwachsenenbildung am Beispiel der Praktischen Theologie Friedrich Niebergalls*. München, 1984, Chr. Kaiser, 278.

⁴⁶ Cf. Nipkow, K. E.: *Praktische Theologie und gegenwärtige Kultur – Auf der Suche nach einem neuen Paradigma*. In Nipkow, K.E., Rössler, D., Schweitzer, F. (ed.): *Praktische Theologie und Kultur der Gegenwart – Ein internationaler Dialog*. Gütersloh, 1991, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 132-51.

non-ecclesiastical characteristics as well.⁴⁷ For that very reason, Rössler amplified the responsibilities of Practical Theology, in his opinion it has to support not only church practice, but the other two fields as well. He called for a program for the examination of the life of the individual and the society: “Everything Christianity does is for the individual. Whatever made in the name of the Christian Church is subordinated to a sole, common purpose: that is to toil for the salvation of every human, irrespective of their definition of salvation.”⁴⁸

Rössler’s contemporary, Gert Otto likewise thinks that Practical Theology does not only reflect the religious practice of the church, but of the society as well.⁴⁹ However in order to offer our interpretational system, we have to speak the language people understand: “In today’s circumstances, religion is not something natural. Its language, images, and content is becoming obsolete, and loses its connection to the way people percept reality. In this sense, religion is out of date.”⁵⁰ Practical Theology has to ensure a theoretical background for the

⁴⁷ Our culture and way of thinking is determined by our European, Christian worldview. Our views of time and history—or we can mention the great ideas of the Enlightenment, liberty, equality, fraternity—are basically products of the Christian culture. In other religious systems, the uniqueness and oneness of human life did not play such an important role as in Christianity. As the American Fowler, J.W.: *Faithful Change- The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life*. Nashville, 1996, Abingdon Press, 201.

⁴⁸ Rössler, D.: *Grundriß der Praktischen Theologie*. Berlin, 1986, de Gruyter, 64. Grözinger thinks along the same line as Rössler when he writes, “Experienced faith is more than Christianity seen in the churches. But at the same time it is not clear how Christian tradition as a religion experienced in plurality can become relevant for the life story. For me, this is the first and foremost question of Practical Theology.” Grözinger, A.: *Gelebte Religion als Thema der Systematischen und Praktischen Theologie*. In Gröringer, A., Pfeleiderer, G. (ed.): „*Gelebte Religion*“ als Programmbegriff Systematischer und Praktischer Theologie. Zürich, 2002, Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 13-20. 14.

⁴⁹ Cf. Schwab, U.: *Wahrnehmen und Handeln – Praktische Theologie als subjektorientierte Theorie*. In Hauschild, E., Schwab, U., (ed.): *Praktische Theologie für das 21 Jahrhundert*. Stuttgart, 2002, Kohlhammer, 161-75. 163.

⁵⁰ Rössler, D.: *Die Religion und der „Sinn“ des Lebens*. In Preul, R., Scheilke, T. C., Schweitzer, F., Treml, A. K. (ed.): *Bildung, Glaube, Aufklärung – Zur Wiedergewinnung des Bildungsbegriffs in Pädagogik und Theologie*. Gütersloh, 1989, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 275-84. 278.

different forms of Christianity, but at the meantime, it has to pay attention not to detach itself from reality, not to concentrate only on hypothetical humans and circumstances, conversely it has to examine life critically, in the light of the Christian mission and message.⁵¹ If we want the church's message to reach people, we need two things: we have to know to whom we want to communicate the gospel, and we have to know precisely what we want to communicate.

2.2.2. Hermeneutics Coming to the Fore

Wolfgang Huber described the paradigm shifts that occurred in Practical Theology: Church is *with* the people prior to *being for* the people.⁵² The "empirical turn" of Practical Theology emphasized the thought that the intention of both the church and her theology was "being for" the people.⁵³

The American theologian, James Fowler, spoke expressly about the "victory of hermeneutics"⁵⁴ in Practical Theology. It is not a coincidence that ethnographers, religion sociologists, and theologians are all interested in the phenomenon called "experienced faith." The "everyday dogmatic" attempts to track which part of the church's

⁵¹ Cf. Lämmermann, G.: *Praktische Theologie als kritische oder als empirisch-funktionale Handlungstheorie? – Zur theologischen Ortung und Weiterführung einer aktuellen Kontroverse*. München, 1981, Chr. Verlag, 137.

⁵² Huber, W.: *Auftrag und Freiheit der Kirche in der pluralistischen Gesellschaft*. In Weth, R. (ed.): *Was hat die Kirche heute zu sagen?* Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1988, Neukirchener, 11-30. 21.

⁵³ Though the close connection Practical Theology has to hermeneutics appeared in Schleiermacher's works, the interest of Practical Theology turned towards hermeneutics only recently. Cf. Heimbrock, H.-G.: *Welches Interesse hat Theologie an der Wirklichkeit? Von der Handlungstheorie zur Wahrnehmungswissenschaft*. In Failing, W. E., Heimbrock, H.-G. (ed.): *Gelebte Religion wahrnehmen*. Stuttgart, 1998. 11-36.

⁵⁴ See Fowler, J. W.: *Praktische Theologie und Sozialwissenschaften in der USA – Chancen und Grenzen der Zusammenarbeit*. In Nipkow, K. E., Rössler, D., Schweitzer, F. (ed.): *Praktische Theologie und Kultur der Gegenwart – Ein internationaler Dialog*. Gütersloh, 1991, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 155-67. 159. Cf. Browning, D.: *A Fundamental Practical Theology – Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*. Minneapolis, 1991, Fortress, 50-52.

teaching is present in people's thinking; what they know, how they reason about theological questions, how sermons shape the people interpret the world; and for those outside the church, how they live their everyday lives and how they perceive their place in the world. Wolfgang Steck maintained that our perception of reality is more than a simple analysis of experienced things and their descriptions: in the background there is always an interpretational web which helps us to understand the events.⁵⁵

The goal or purpose of Practical Theology was to help us to discover knowledge about how we interpret our lives, how our worldview develops, and what the place of the transcendent is in this process. Fundamentally, this is a kind of hermeneutics which values and reinterprets events in the light of transcendent reality.

It is not enough to describe religion as a mere map of particular social milieus. Our task is to evaluate human life from a theological point of view. "Religious psychology inquires about the reality of the human subject, and about the way religion works. In Practical Theology, we cannot draw only practical conclusions from the results of life-story researches; we have to have our opinions about the topic."⁵⁶

Gräb interpreted this theological surplus as such: "Practical Theology—unlike society of religion—cannot allow itself to be engaged only with the theoretical approach of religion. Practical Theology has to interpret religion in its real manifestations so that it can grasp the meaning people consider (or may consider) its ethical-religious nucleus."⁵⁷

In Don Browning's view, Practical Theology has become a pragmatic hermeneutical orientation. By this he meant that a theology should describe and interpret the phenomena of its age, and it evaluates these phenomena on the basis of its Christian inheritance. "Basically, we are

⁵⁵ Cf. Steck, W.: *Praktische Theologie*. Stuttgart, 2000, Kohlhammer, 100. Cf. Schwab, U.: *Wahrnehmen und Handeln – Praktische Theologie als subjektorientierte Theorie*. 163.

⁵⁶ Evers, R.: *Alter, Bildung, Religion – Eine subjekt- und bildungstheoretische Untersuchung*. Stuttgart, 1999, Kohlhammer, 46.

⁵⁷ Gräb, W.: *Sinn fürs Unendliche – Religion in der Mediengesellschaft*. 41-44.

engaged with different interpretations that more or less adequately, or sometimes contradictorily, serve to direct Christian testimony and everyday Christian life among the challenges of the present.”⁵⁸ We have to see, however, the limits of a hermeneutical approach. If we understand Practical Theology as hermeneutics, we use hermeneutics to analyze the events of the present in proportion to the already existing theological interpretation of reality. It sees human life and the changes of society through a specific, theological “glass.” This general approach helps us to understand the way our faith works, but it does not support the conception or the idea of how faith is experienced in human life. Since culture and religion correlate, our church is fundamentally defined by the world in which we live.

The Schleiermacher tradition struggles against being locked up in the ivory tower of theology and therefore speaks a language people do not understand. At the same time, theology must be engaged with timeless questions not determined by any given social environment, and theology also must be a prophetic voice coming from God’s perspective as it reflects back to present circumstances. If we, as theologians, too strongly attach ourselves to the present, we can become excessively anthropocentric in our vision. By sympathizing too deeply with the situation of modern man, theologians cannot see the eternal God standing simultaneously outside and inside our present-day system. If we toil to prove the presence of religiosity in our culture and thinking, we still cannot find answers concerning God’s plan and our lives’ vocation.

2.3. HUMAN SUBJECT AS THE POINT OF ORIENTATION IN PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

In the following pages, we examine we examine what happens when a person and his viewpoints or opinions are influenced by the theory of Practical Theology. Henning Luther regarded Christian religion of our

⁵⁸ Browning, D. S.: *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care*. Philadelphia, 1983, Fortress Press, 27.

age not as a “universalism from above,” but as a “lateral universalism.”

⁵⁹ In times past, religion as used to transfer meaning for people to everyday events in their lives. Religion was seen as hanging a “sacred, suspended ceiling”⁶⁰ over them to give them an interpretational frame to view the world, which was divided into a sacred and a profane sphere.

Religion is at the very confines the very heart of everyday life – we only face it when our limits and the paradoxical character of our lives compel us to do so, when situations derail our lives from their usual routine. “It is the experience when the self-evidence of the usual way of life comes into question, and the possibility of a completely different One appears.”⁶¹ We are dealing with a new paradigm here, and this is the subject as the center of theology: “instead of examining the individual from the Whole’s (the Church’s) point of view, Practical Theology has to see the Whole (religion and church) from the individual’s point of view.”⁶² Henning Luther criticized the traditional “church-theoretical objectivism”⁶³ of Practical Theology, which was chiefly concerned with the role and tasks of the minister; whereas the knowledge of the congregational members was founded on mere folk beliefs. His theology was concerned with real-life humans, and examined the way religion and Christian faith appeared in concrete lives, places, and situations. Consequently, he inquired about how and in what measure Christian faith could help people to grow up (Subjektwerdung) in faith.⁶⁴ Yet, when Luther wrote about the subject, he did not mean an egocentric identity. Quite the contrary: in his

⁵⁹ Henning Luther was a pupil of Gert Otto whose works – as well as the theology of Friedrich Niebergall and the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas – were critical in his theological works. Henning Luther was professor of Practical Theology of the university of Marburg from 1986- to his death, for almost five years. His main fields of research were grief and the question of the subject and the individualization.

⁶⁰ Cf. Klein, S.: *Theologie und empirische Biographieforschung – Methodische Zugänge zur Lebens- und Glaubensgeschichte und ihre Bedeutung für eine erfahrungsbezogene*.107.

⁶¹ Luther, H.: *Religion und Alltag – Bausteine zu einer Praktischen Theologie des Subjekts*. 246.

⁶² Luther, H.: *Religion, Subjekt, Erziehung – Grundbegriffe der Erwachsenenbildung am Beispiel der Praktischen Theologie Friedrich Niebergalls*. 295.

⁶³ Ibid. 286. Cf. Lott, J: „Religion und Alltag“ Henning Luthers „Bausteine zu einer Praktischen Theologie des Subjekts“. *Theologia Practica*, 27. Jg.,1992, 231-239.

⁶⁴ See Luther, H.: *Religion und Alltag – Bausteine zu einer Praktischen Theologie des Subjekts*. 254-256.

theory, the presence of the Other is indispensable in our quest to find ourselves.⁶⁵ This Other (that can be another human, our environment, or the transcendent, or God) can serve as a basis from which we can compare or define ourselves.

We become subjects by perceiving the “me” reflected from the other’s eyes. Though our subjectivity is realized through the Other, it does not depend on him. Life story is not a succession of identifications, but of comparisons. The leading principle of life stories is not individuality and identification, but subjectivity and becoming subjects to the One.”⁶⁶

In Luther’s opinion, this “lay perspective” in theology does not mean the further individualization of religion, but rather, it can be a direction towards becoming subjects: “The Practical Theology of the subject is not a theory of personality, and thus it does not only examine what it means to be sinful and yet pardoned. Instead, it is the theory of the self breaking loose from former categories and typologies.”⁶⁷ In the process of character development, Henning Luther explored the process by which humans search themselves in order to form their “personal cosmos,” and the role that the transcendent plays in this progression. Contrary to Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development or Mead’s theory of identity, Luther perceived the “process of self-forming” not as a “success story,” but as a story of accepting fragmentation. Human life does not lead towards fullness, but rather towards a self able to integrate diversity. He coexists with the knowledge of his own finiteness, with the limits of his possibilities, and his only aim is to find harmony and balance among his partial identities.⁶⁸ The price of this flexibility is that human identity is now a more central problem for him than it was previously. The individual torn among the multitude of places and roles and identities he has to fill, sets a high value and priority on perceiving himself as a coherent whole.

⁶⁵ The philosophical roots of this approach can be found in Emmanuel Lévinas’ works. Ibid. 62-88.

⁶⁶ Evers, R.: *Alter, Bildung, Religion – Eine subjekt- und bildungstheoretische Untersuchung*. 127.

⁶⁷ Luther, H.: *Religion und Alltag – Bausteine zu einer Praktischen Theologie des Subjekts*. 17.

⁶⁸ See Luther, H.: *Leben als Fragment – Der Mythos von der Ganzheit. Wege zum Menschen*, 43. Jahrgang, 262-73.1991, 262-273.

In Henning Luther's thinking, the "turning to the subject" means the simultaneous turning towards the everyday human life." Opportunities for theology exist or are present in everyday life, because our lives are complex. Theology cannot lose sight of this phenomenon—life is not just the experiences of death, illness, tragedy, etc; but life also consists of everyday and ordinary occurrences that can induce self-reflection.⁶⁹

Henning Luther, being an offspring of late modernism, represents the Postmodern concept which lacks the individuality of modern age. Postmodernism believes that modern man will increasingly achieve a fuller and perfect worldview. Whereas Postmodern man knows that his perspective of the world is just one of many possible perspectives, he does not want to find the final, irrefutable truth. He does not want to solve everything alone, and he knows he needs others' help in life. He experiences this fragmented existence from two sides. On the one hand, his past is not only a success story, but also an inventory of losses. On the other hand, his future will not only bring what he hopes and desires also the experiences of pain and hopelessness.⁷⁰

The role of religion is connected with this fragmentation of life: "Pain and desire are but another way to experience everyday life."⁷¹ Pain or desire directs us towards the practice of everyday religion:

"Religion is the contradictory itself, the experience of the fragmented world, but at the same time, it means taking a particular promise seriously. Religion always contradicts the world. this contradiction is the word of criticism and hope."⁷²

Henning Luther's thoughts brought a new paradigm and opened the way to understanding Practical Theology as a subjective science.

⁶⁹ See Luther, H.: *Religion, Subjekt, Erziehung – Grundbegriffe der Erwachsenenbildung am Beispiel der Praktischen Theologie Friedrich Niebergalls*. 294-295.

⁷⁰ See Luther, H.: *Religion und Alltag – Bausteine zu einer Praktischen Theologie des Subjekts*. 168.

⁷¹ Ibid. 251.

⁷² Ibid. 27.

2.4. SUBJECTIVE THEOLOGIES

Exploration of the human subject and the subsequent experiences and life stories is one theme in Christian theology. The history of the relationship between God and man comes forth from personal events, individual or personal experiences of faith, and from the testimonies told that are born in life stories of people living in a covenantal relationship with God. Subsequently it becomes a message, a doctrine which then helps to shape the monumental history of God's kingdom. The different theological disciplines track the many thousands of years old message to man, but these disciplines deal much less (perhaps because it is not scientific) with how God's monumental history becomes one small story in people's lives. If the human subject is the focus of the theological examination, we must deal with these small, everyday stories, too.

Sparn developed or wrote about two approaches to achieve this. One is following Schleimacher's approach of the "transcendental reduction of empirical religiosity," which claimed that there is a connecting point between man and God, and that this connection can be seen in each and every life story. The other approach is the "poetic transformation of empirical religiosity," of which Sparn thought to have originated in Kierkegaard's and Ernst Troeltch's works. The poetic transformation of empirical religiosity considered religion as a byproduct of human language and culture. It tracked the signs of religiosity in the communication process amongst people, in the language, and in the culture.⁷³ In the first case, our life story's self image is independent of the empirical reality, since it draws conclusions about itself from the transcendent. In contrast, in the second case, the identity is the "narrated Me" (how I tell my life story) as the poetic grasp of reality. Albrecht Grözinger (together with Henning Luther) followed the paths of

⁷³ See Sparn, W.: *Dichtung und Wahrheit – Einführende Bemerkungen zum Thema: Religion und Biographie*. In Sparn, W. (ed.): *Wer schreibt meine Lebensgeschichte? – Biographie, Autobiographie und Hagiographie und ihre Entstehungszusammenhänge*. Gütersloh, 1990, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 9-29. 56.

poetic transformation, while Wilhelm Gräß evolved transcendental reduction in his works.⁷⁴

The following sections discuss these concepts, which represent important aspects in understanding life stories.

2.4.1. Poetic Transformation

In Grözinger's opinion, Practical Theology considered interpretation as an art to be used in understanding human perception.⁷⁵ As the art of interpretation, it does not endeavor to be objective; the art of interpretation always has a subjective element, the "scientific poesy."⁷⁶ Because of the objective criteria that the scientific method uses, we are inclined to forget the significant roles that intuitive experience and fantasy play in religious thought which cannot be described by mere data alone. In religion, as in life, many things are "poetic." Only a small part of the reality can be perceived consciously and can be measured by physical tools. Intuition, anticipation, and mysticism have great roles in the way we interpret the world around us: "being religious does not mean to have talent to be able to see a different world, but to see and interpret this world in a different way."⁷⁷

Practical Theology in Grözinger's work is the art of interpreting reality. Still, he made a sharp distinction between a general understanding of arts and aesthetics and the specific understanding of theology. The task of Practical Theology is to differentiate between random transcendental experiences and events from Christian experiences and phenomena. Theological aesthetics, for him, is not

⁷⁴ Cf. Grözinger, A.: *Praktische Theologie und Ästhetik – Ein Beitrag zur Grundlegung der Praktischen Theologie*. 1991.

⁷⁵ Albrecht Grötzingler was a pupil of Gert Otto, professor of Practical Theology in the University of Basel. He is the chairman of the international Societas Homiletica, editor of *Praktische Theologie*. His main fields of researches are theological aesthetics, and the presence of religion and church in the multicultural society.

⁷⁶ Grözinger, A.: *Praktische Theologie als Kunst der Wahrnehmung*. In Grözinger, A., Lott, J. (ed.): *Gelebte Religion – Im Brennpunkt praktisch-theologischen Denkens und Handelns*. Reinbach, 1997, CMZ Verlag, 311-29. 322.

⁷⁷ Luther, H.: *Religion und Alltag – Bausteine zu einer Praktischen Theologie des Subjekts*. 24-29.

the discipline of understanding experiences through a religious point of view, similar to Gräb's thinking, since he did not think the aesthetic and theology were mutually exclusive. On the other hand, he criticized the instrumental use of arts in the church. He uses the role of the aesthetic in the interpretation of reality. He focused his attention on the theological aesthetic, the presence of religious thought and the church in multicultural society. This view does not examine the human or the divine part of the God-human relationship. Instead, this third viewpoint postulated a space in-between, a "king of the playground" where the connection takes place. This "intermedial space"⁷⁸ is a peculiar place in a person's life since it is a playground which had subjective, but very serious rules.⁷⁹ Grözinger's opinion meant that the leaving the everyday work world, relaxation, and having new experiences and viewpoints are not only attributes of our life, but it are also its vital features. There are many ways to realize this "leaving:" extreme sports, going to the theatre, watching TV, rooting for a football team, or going shopping. The main point is to leave the routine behind and to forget everyday worries.⁸⁰

This space is where arts and religion are simultaneously present Gräb, too, wrote about the connection between the aesthetic and religion: "The aesthetic features of experienced religion cannot be found in religious communities only. They are present in arts, (auto) biographies, cinema, concerts, football stadiums."⁸¹ Aesthetic and religious experiences come into existence in the same in-between

⁷⁸ Winnicott, D. W. : *Játsszás és valóság*. Budapest, 1999, Animula, 2.

⁷⁹ Game is often defined as some exorbitant and light-minded activity, although game has other factors than entertainment, it has many restrictions, frames, rules and purposes. Game from a theological point of view was evaluated by Pannenberg, W.: *Anthropologie in theologischer Perspektive*. Göttingen, 1983, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 312-328.; Moltmann, J.: *Theology of Play*. San Francisco, 1972, Harper. ; Grözinger, A.: *Praktische Theologie und Ästhetik – Ein Beitrag zur Grundlegung der Praktischen Theologie*. München, 1991, 186.

⁸⁰ See Grözinger, A.: *Die Kirche – ist sie noch zu retten? – Anstiftungen für das Christentum in postmoderner Gesellschaft*. Gütersloh, 1998, Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshau, 44.

⁸¹ Gräb, W.: *Lebensgeschichten Lebensentwürfe Sinndeutungen – Eine praktische Theologie gelebter Religion*. Gütersloh, 1998, Chr. Kaiser / Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 44.

place. the difference between them is not their experiencing, but in their different interpretations.”⁸² “When free play is connected with God, aesthetic experience becomes a religious experience we feel gratitude towards God, who in his endless grace and goodness, granted us this positive experience.”⁸³

Grözinger applied the “all the world is a theatre”⁸⁴ metaphor to religion. The stage is a strange playground where an ordinary place becomes a room of dramatic events, where occurrences lift us above the everyday world. About theatre he wrote:

The writer has to know who an actor is, what he can or wants to perform. The actor has to know what the writer wants from him. In this “*theatrum mundi*” model God is the writer, the director, and the spectator at the same time. The man’s role is to play his role at the best of his abilities. Only through this cooperation can the audience be captivated.⁸⁵

The play calls a new reality into being in a manner that at the same time is not separated from the existing reality. In spite of the fragmented nature of life, this new reality does not remain mired in the hopelessness of the visible world. It is not only the hermeneutics, but also the reconstruction of life.

Grözinger linked the aesthetic to ethics.⁸⁶ This playing field not only provides new perspectives, but it also shapes our lives as well. Aesthetic praxis brings consciousness and reflected play into a person’s experienced life. However, aesthetic praxis is more than mere play. As it poetically or aesthetically rewrites reality, a particular way and praxis of life comes into being. A new awareness emerges that one can interpret and experience the events of his life in relation with God.⁸⁷

Thus, this “place in-between” can have a particular function:

⁸² Ibid. 111.

⁸³ Ibid. 118.

⁸⁴ Shakespeare, W.: *Vizkereszt, vagy amit akartok*. Budapest, 1984, Európa.

⁸⁵ Grözinger, A.: *Praktische Theologie und Ästhetik – Ein Beitrag zur Grundlegung der Praktischen Theologie*. München, 1991. 201.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 211.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 193.

“The particularity and task of the church is not to let her surplus, originating from her relationship with God, become an abstract, alien postulate, but integrated into a specific story into the story of human experiences with God.”⁸⁸

The task of the theological aesthetic is – against the blurring tide of Postmodern pluralism – to be a distinctive carrier of the “God story.” For, in the Christian religious experience, it is the God story which must be present.⁸⁹

2.4.2. Transcendental Reduction, Religion as an Answer to the Meaning of Life

With his cultural hermeneutical conception, Wilhelm Gräb followed the Schleiermacher tradition.⁹⁰ In his opinion, religion has a central role for the human to find meaning of his life in an aesthetic manner, beyond the horizon of experienced reality. He needs an outer perspective to “look on” his life. When Practical Theology examined this “beyond horizon” existence of the meaning of life, it found itself in a paradoxical situation. The object of its examination is something beyond human capacity to examine—it is indescribable and invisible, yet very real, and its importance can be felt in every minute of every day. We transcend our lives.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Grözinger, A.: *Die Kirche – ist sie noch zu retten?* 47.

⁸⁹ See Grözinger, A.: *Gibt es eine theologische Ästhetik.* In Müller, W., Heumann, J. (ed.): *Kunst-Positionen- Kunst als Thema gegenwärtiger evangelischer und katholischer Theologie.* Stuttgart, 1998, Kohlhammer, 35-43.

⁹⁰ Wilhelm Gräb is professor of Practical Theology, and director of the religious sociological institute. His main fields of interests are other than the presence of the church in the society, the problem of the human quest for meaning, and the question how Christianity can address the man of our time.

⁹¹ I mean transcendent here from a religious sociological point of view, “I call ‘signs of the transcendent’ the natural phenomenon it literally means. [...] The concept of transcendent in this sense is not a philosophical concept, but the literal act of crossing a border, of leaving the world of everyday life.” in, Berger, P.: *Auf den Spuren der Engel- Die moderne Gesellschaft und die Wiederentdeckung der Transzendenz.* 1991, Herder. 79.

In everyday occurrences, we can often hear people referring to fate or luck in interpreting an event. We often have difficulty in trying to understand our lives, because our world is not intelligible through experience alone. We try to understand complex life events that are often beyond our control, by interpreting them in a way that carries meaning for us. This leads us to look for answers in a final intelligence—that of God’s. “Religion is, most of all, the attempt to answer the final questions of life.”⁹² Religion is but a searching for meaning in the personal, religious mind. In Gräb’s opinion, in a society that is alienated from the church, the people still have a minimal religious orientation in that people are still looking for an answer to the meaning of life.⁹³ This is a question everyone has to ask, for each person seeks to find answers to the big questions of life. In order for the world to become a consistent, rational place, it is important to examine what conceptions, what signs and symbols, what strategies, preferences, and limitations people use to understand the final horizon of meaning.⁹⁴

Gräb used G. Schultze’s term, “culture sociology,” to help in understanding the problem.⁹⁵ In interpreting everyday life, it is the culture that gives us schemes by which we orient ourselves in different subsystems of society. These milieus have “game rules” of their own: they define the behavior, thinking, and dressing habits of those who live in them, and through these milieus, they convey a kind of philosophy as well. Dependent on a chosen lifestyle, Schultze differentiated from among standard, harmony, integration, self-realization, and entertainment milieus.⁹⁶ One chooses a milieu according to his

⁹² Gräb, W.: *Sinn fürs Unendliche – Religion in der Mediengesellschaft*. Gütersloh, 2002, Chr. Kaiser/ Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 245.

⁹³ In Gräb’s opinion when we evaluate our world, we have to realize that religion will never return to people’s lives, for it never left them. The desire of meaning was always there, the only change is that the theoretical interest in religion has grown. See Ibid. 70.

⁹⁴ See Gräb, W.: *Lebensgeschichten Lebentwürfe Sinndeutungen – Eine praktische Theologie gelebter Religion*. Gütersloh, 1998, Chr. Kaiser / Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 99.

⁹⁵ See Gräb, W.: *Religion in der Alltagskultur*. 30-43.

⁹⁶ Schulze, G.: *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft – Kulturosoziologie der Gegenwart*. Frankfurt, 1992, Campus. The important role of milieus can be understood if we consider

inherited tradition, age, financial situation, or qualifications. Our position in society defines not only the surroundings in which we live and the friends we have, but also the things we value in life.⁹⁷ When we say that everyday culture has an interpretational code system, we discover that religion always appears as part of that culture. Religion is a part of culture, because we use religious thinking and answers to interpret and answer the big questions of life.⁹⁸

Religion, however, interprets life from a transcendent point of view, and creates a system in which every phenomenon of our life can be placed; where birth, death, suffering, and illness are given meaning. The formation of this worldview is the religiosity of everyday life, the life which consists of more than just physical data. This worldview becomes a metaphor of our feelings, pains, expectations, and dreams. Our life, on one hand, is a biological organism which can be kept artificially alive by machines; but on the other hand, it is an "auto poetic system" full of subjective elements that help to find meaning and to develop a life direction.⁹⁹

The Christian dogmatic is able to interpret every aspect of human life, not only because it is a Christian thought system, but also because it belongs to a certain community. Community allows the sharing and interpretation of our life story and experiences with others. Gräß saw the church as an interpretative system which gives an explanatory frame to our limited experiences. It is a collective

that Christianity was originally the religion of burghers, or that the Reformed denomination was the carrier of middle-class values in Hungary before WW2.

⁹⁷ Grözinger, A.: *Die Kirche – ist sie noch zu retten?* 34.

⁹⁸ In Gräß's opinion when we give the absolute intelligence a name, we talk about God. But substituting God with a concept is an unduly simplifying idea, because even though we can see similar identifications of God and Wisdom in wisdom literature, identifying God with absolute intelligence would reduce the existence of a personal God into a philosophical thought, as if God were a "tangible," logical, human phenomenon. See Gräß, W.: *Religion in der Alltagskultur*. In Grözinger, A., Lott, J. (ed.): *Gelebte Religion – Im Brennpunkt praktisch-theologischen Denkens und Handelns*. Reinbach, 1997, CMZ Verlag, 30-43. 33.

⁹⁹ Cf. Korsch, D.: *„Leben“ als Thema gelebter Religion*. In Grözinger, A., Pfeleiderer, G. (ed.): *„Gelebte Religion“ als Programmbegriff Systematischer und Praktischer Theologie*. Zürich, 2002, Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 191-207.

search for meaning.¹⁰⁰ He wrote about the church: “It is the place where people can understand the driving force of their lives. A place where they can retire to a safe distance from their own selves and the world’s effects on them, a place that where through the threats from wounds, faults, and death, they can hear the comforting words of the Gospel.”¹⁰¹

From this point of view, Martin Luther’s doctrine of justification may become very important to us. It teaches that everything we have is not a result of our own actions and talents, but that it is dependent upon God’s mercy.¹⁰² People attempt to justify themselves and their actions; but from a theological viewpoint, this is an impossible task. Man is not able to justify his life before God, let alone before himself or others. Thus the church’s task is to challenge people with God’s justifying grace. The Gospel critically assesses human life and offers the chance for justification.¹⁰³ When the Christian interpretation of reality gives meaning to life, the Lutheran doctrine of justification gives us freedom from sin’s realm through God’s mercy. Through His forgiveness, God is able to make whole and heal our fragmented existence.

The task of the church is to represent this doctrine of justification. Practical theology is the communication theory of this belief. The church is not the contradiction of the world, but the place where a human can receive a whole life. As Bonhoeffer wrote: “Our spiritual self remains a torso, but we should not complain about our fragmented life, we should be happy for it.”¹⁰⁴ One result of fragmentation is that people seek authentic role models for themselves who, as mentors,

¹⁰⁰ See Gräb, W.: *Lebensgeschichten Lebensentwürfe Sinndeutungen – Eine praktische Theologie gelebter Religion*. Gütersloh, 1998, Chr. Kaiser / Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 93.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 25.

¹⁰² Cf. Sparn, W.: *Autobiographische Kompetenz, Welchen christlichen Sinn hat lebensgeschichtliches Erzählen heute?* 64.

¹⁰³ In Gräb’s opinion the church is inclined to forget one important aspect of casualies, namely that they connect the world of divine grace with individual ways of life. In Grözinger’s theology it is the concept of Trinity that fills this role. See Gräb, W.: *Rechtfertigung von Lebensgeschichte – Erwägungen zu einer theologischen Theorie der kirchlichen Amtshandlungen*. PTh 1987; 76. 32.

¹⁰⁴ Bonhoeffer, D.: *Widerstand und Ergebung*. München, 1952. 53.

can embody an ideal. We do not see the modern, autonomous man to be the ideal, but rather, the ideal is the solitary man, altruistic man rooted in his environment, and having social connections and handholds. That does not contradict that other basic demand for recognition.¹⁰⁵

The Christian answer to the Postmodern world's challenges, thoughts, and feelings can be found in (a. the doctrine of justification or b. experiencing God's grace or mercy as presented in the doctrine of justification. From this point of view, Christian churches are responsible for the way Christian values and meanings are taught in society. The examination of how Christianity is present in society is increasingly becoming more imperative as a result of our Postmodern religion's abandonment of the ecclesiastical frameworks. In understanding and interpreting the processes, we need to speak the language of the man of our age. Gräb's claim is thus justified, for he endeavored to evaluate the communication of the Christian worldview from the present day, secular viewpoint. By the examination of certain aspects of both Grözinger's and Gärb's Practical Theology, we can explore how studies of the human subject and life stories can add to the valid statements of the theology of God's revelation to mankind.

2.5. THE ROLE OF LIFE STORIES IN PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Many reasons exist for life stories to come to the forefront of social-psychological researches. These narratives offer unique data unobtainable through objective measures or tools. Moreover, life stories are impressions of individual and social reality interpretations, and through them, the connection between individual and communal identity can be examined. Practical Theology discovers the questions found in life stories by focusing on the human subject. "Humans process everything they experienced in their present life stories; through these life stories, people interpret their past and voice their

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Keupp, H.: *Subjektsein heute – zwischen postmoderner Diffusion und der Suche nach neuen Fundamenten*. 102.

expectations about their future Human can be understood only in this frame of narrative construction.”¹⁰⁶ Both human identity and the nature of their faith can be understood from the viewpoints seen in life stories. Everyone experiences the Gospel according to his or her personality. Life story, for Barth, is the redemption story on a small scale, which, in his opinion, “is the reflection of the central message of Christianity. It cannot contain it, it always remains but a testimony about the truth.”¹⁰⁷

In his criticism of dialectic theology, Henning Luther maintained that it misses the importance of life stories. It is true that no one can really know his or her own life and be able to make a fair judgment about himself or herself.” This does not mean, however, that these subjective reports of human lives are of no importance for theology. Subjective reports are important in at least three ways:

1. From a religious or church sociological point of view, the changes which occur in life stories help to map the role church and religion play in people’s lives.
2. From a religious, pedagogical point of view, life stories are important, because they show the growth and development of faith and belief.
3. These narratives are important to understand the work of God: “We construct our individual life stories in the belief that, for God, my life is not only one among the many. In the light of this promise, theological examination cannot underestimate any life story.”¹⁰⁸

As the human subject came to the fore, the pursuit of human life, self, belief, and world interpretation became impossible to avoid while looking through the lens used in Practical Theology. As we will see in the following chapters, all these aspects form a particular mix in the life stories. People generally do not create big theories and abstract interpretational systems about their lives. But each person does

¹⁰⁶ Evers, R.: *Alter, Bildung, Religion – Eine subjekt- und bildungstheoretische Untersuchung*. 65.

¹⁰⁷ Barth, K.: *Kirchliche Dogmatik, IV/3* Zürich, 1957, Zollikon, 773.

¹⁰⁸ Luther, H.: *Religion und Alltag – Bausteine zu einer Praktischen Theologie des Subjekts*. 42.

prepare a certain kind of a narrative system, a “personal myth”¹⁰⁹ for himself or herself. People string together everything they understand about the world and themselves as beads on their life strings or stories. Our life stories reflect our experiences and nuances, our search and struggles to find meaning, the use of imagination, signs, and symbols—all of which are viewed through the lens of Practical Theology.

2.5.1. The Religious Dimension of Life Stories

In human life we find a wide spectrum of religiosity and of the relationship they experience with God, though people generally do not think about God in theological categories. Humans knowingly or not knowingly use patterns that bind them to the thinking and value tradition of their cultural environment. The widely used patterns create further associations and layers of meaning we can only detect by reading between the lines; they are there but in the actual narrative, they are not mentioned.¹¹⁰ From this point of view each and every life story contains religious elements, thoughts. As Mautner wrote:

“There is a mythobiography behind every biography that directs the way of life. Without the connection with the basis of life, with the powers of the unconscious and the transpersonal, real life remains fragmented and unreal.”¹¹¹

There are times and events in every human’s life when they have to face the limits of their own existence, with its paradoxical character. There are situations we cannot comprehend in the inherence of our world. There are moments in the everyday struggles “when we do not

¹⁰⁹ Cf. P. Tóth, B.: *A személyiség átalakulása – életutak lélektani vizsgálata az “élet-érteleme” kérdés összefüggésében.* Budapest, 1988, MRE Zsinatának Tanulányi Osztálya,

¹¹⁰ Cf. Evers, R.: *Alter, Bildung, Religion – Eine subjekt- und bildungstheoretische Untersuchung.* 20.

¹¹¹ Mautner, J.: *Das zerbrechliche Leben erzählen ... : erzählende Literatur und Theologie des Erzählens.* Frankfurt am Main, 1994, Lang, 341.

have single problems in our lives, but life itself becomes a problem.”¹¹² In the course of our lives these are the moments we seek support and suppose that life has a meaning – even if we do not know what it is. This supposition cannot be grasped rationally. When we begin the search for the meaning, we do a basically religious thing, even if its content non-religious.¹¹³ First, we understand our lives as a whole having a meaning, second, we maintain a particular position in life for ourselves, third, we seek to understand ourselves from the outsider’s point of view:

a. Since Gräß considers the search for meaning as a basically religious phenomenon, he thinks the imprints of this search for self can be found in life stories as well. Namely, we do not divine the meaning of our lives, but we find it as a meaning outside us. We cannot find an interpretation to the course of our life, to its events, but we expect (and receive) an acknowledgment from an outsider (transcendental) point of view.¹¹⁴ The interpretation of our lives is actually the result of a continuous self-transcendence.¹¹⁵ Religion does not serve for the objective description of events, rather it is self-reflection. Because of the variety of life stories, the interpretation of human life can be consistent only on a transcendental level.¹¹⁶

b. The other religious feature of our thinking is the conviction we have a special place in this world. The uniqueness and specialty of human life is the central question of life stories, since in the creating of our identity we have to see the things we have in common with our surroundings and the things are our characteristics only.

c. The real connecting point between theology and human life can be found in the fact humans relate to the Whole, connect themselves

¹¹² Ebeling, G.: *Dogmatik des christlichen Glaubens*, Tübingen, 1979, Mohr, 108.

¹¹³ Cf. Drechsel, W.: *Lebensgeschichte und Lebens-Geschichten: Zugänge zur Seelsorge aus biographischer Perspektive*. Gütersloh, 2002, Gütersloher/Chr. Kaiser, 241-242.

¹¹⁴ See Gräß, W.: *Der hermeneutische Imperativ – Lebensgeschichte als religiöse Selbstausslegung*. In Sparn, W. (ed.): *Wer schreibt meine Lebensgeschichte?*. Gütersloh, 1990, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 79-89. 89.

¹¹⁵ See Gräß, W.: *Lebensgeschichten, Lebentwürfe, Sinndeutungen – Eine praktische Theologie gelebter Religion*. Gütersloh, 1998, Chr. Kaiser / Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 66.

¹¹⁶ See Gräß, W.: *Der hermeneutische Imperativ – Lebensgeschichte als religiöse Selbstausslegung*. In Sparn, W. (ed.): *Wer schreibt meine Lebensgeschichte?* Gütersloh, 1990, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 79-89. 83.

to the Whole, and from this viewpoint, they interpret their place in life. It is interesting to realize life stories always have a special audience. Every biography has Somebody it is written to, to whom the protagonist reveals his true identity.¹¹⁷ We need an outer point of reference to interpret or justify our lives, our decisions.

Friedrich Schweitzer –like Gräß– maintains life stories are a kind of system of reference for our religion. First, because we reflect to our religiosity from the viewpoint of our life story, second, because the successfulness or unsuccessfulness of our search for meaning asks questions of religious character, and third, because when our life story is connected to inherited faith stories, it becomes a religious conviction.¹¹⁸

Henning Luther finds the essence of story creating in a different place. Because of the fragmented state of life, humans are compelled to find interconnections among past, present, and future events. During our lives, we create a lot of stories in order to bridge the gaps between events and their interpretations, to see ourselves as a coherent whole. The role of religion can be found precisely in the fragmented nature of life.¹¹⁹ Pain, desire, curiosity all lead to the everyday religion.

2.5.2. The Presence of God in Human Lives

The connection between the self and God is formed by remembrance. We can learn about the living God through stories. When God allowed humans to participate a story with him, it also meant that God

¹¹⁷ Cf. Sparr, W.: *Autobiographische Kompetenz, Welchen christlichen Sinn hat lebensgeschichtliches Erzählen heute?* 1990, MJTh III., 62-63.

¹¹⁸ By so doing Friedrich Schweitzer holds an opinion opposite of that of Donald Capps. Cf. Schweitzer, F: *Lebensgeschichte – Bildung Religion: Rekonstruktionsfähigkeit als Bildungsziel*. In Drehsen, V, Henke, D., Schmidt-Rost, R., Steck, W. (ed.): *Der „Ganze Mensch“ Perspektiven lebensgeschichtlicher Individualität*. Berlin, New York, 1997, de Gruyter, 431- 47. 431.

¹¹⁹ In Ritschl's anthropology the similar two models are the "Athenian model" (the greek ideal of man, the perfect man), and the "Jerusalem model" (the biblical image of man, where man is a sinful being and in need of God). Cf. Ritschl, D.: *Zur Logik der Theologie – Kurze Darstellung der Zusammenhänge theologischer Grundgedanken*. München, 1984, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 86.

revealed himself to his people through stories. God is the one who is with us even in the deepest suffering of our lives. Jüngel analyzes the presence of God in our lives from the following perspective: “A story is not just a succession of life events, but the fusion of passing time and individual life into one story that defines the identity of the person. Thus God becomes a person for us in the stories.”¹²⁰

If we accept Jüngel’s statement as true, we face a very particular theological problem. “The thought that God makes his story with humankind a concrete one in the story of the chosen people was always very provocative. But it is even more provocative to state God connects himself with the individual.”¹²¹ While reading the Scripture we meet stories: life stories, and Israel’s story, and we interpret them as parts of God’s story. We do not do that automatically with our own lives. The protestant reservation to identify elements of the so-called “civil” religiosity with God’s work is understandable, but we must still notice God’s work in human lives.

How, then, do human life stories point to God? How is the interpretation of our life connected to the invisible, incomprehensible and still real “transcendental Somebody”? Is there any principle, though which pattern people weave and interpret their life stories? And where is in their opinion the imprint of God, the Final Reality, the Always Present on this fabric? What is the *mysterion* that accompanies us on the paths of our lives?¹²²

¹²⁰ Jüngel, E: *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt – Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus*. 5 ed. Tübingen, 1986, Mohr Siebeck, 101.

¹²¹ Grözinger, A.: *Erzählen und Handeln – Studien zu einer trinitarischen Grundlegung der Praktischen Theologie*. München, 1989, Kaiser, 19.

¹²² Cf. Buber, M.: *A próféták hite*. Budapest 1998, Atlantisz, 284.

3. THE MAN LIVING IN HIS STORIES



“Thus I claim that the structural aspects that constitute the matrix of faith do embrace – or constitute- a theory of the self, as well as a story of the self. But it is a theory (story) of the self through time, as constructing meanings and being constructed, in the matrix of relationships and meanings that faith involves.”¹²³

3.1. INTRODUCTION

In examining the human and Christian meta-narratives, it is important to learn the thinking structure in which these stories were formed. In this chapter, we compare paradigmatic and narrative thinking structure, and inspect the relationship between the language of storytelling and that of religion. The models of the schematic patterns of faith and religion are formed in light of modern scientific theories about man; but what happens if we endeavor to interpret man from the point of view of the theory of narrative identity?

Sociological models are used to give a frame to everyday events and phenomena. Theory is a map of reality, and it always offers a narrower cross-section of what happened in the world of man, in his macro- and microcosm. It can never contain or describe the complete reality. Still, it is important for us –scientifically and personally– to create theories to explain our experiences, because it helps to systemize the knowledge we obtain about life, and to orient our actions. Science always has to address the people of its era, so it always has to update its theories, or it has to turn to the eternal present, and offer eternal answers. The same goes for theology. On the one hand, we search and provide answers to eternal human questions by interpreting God’s message. On the other hand, we have to offer these answers in the language of the people of our age. And since the theologian –like any other scholar– is an offspring of his era, the actual intellectual

¹²³ Fowler. J. W.: Faith development theory and the postmodern challenges. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 11 (3), 2001, 159–172. 164.

tendencies present in peoples' everyday life have their effects on him as well.

The task of the theologian –apart from seeking God's will– is to help his contemporaries to interpret their lives in this world, to create their own theory about life, their own "theology." There are many different ideas about how people orient and understand themselves in life. Jerome Bruner sees two basic versions of thought patterns by which we understand ourselves: "Narrative psychology maintains there are two complementary and yet rival versions of human mode of existence by which people systemize their experiences: one categorical, the theoretical, based on semantic hierarchies, and one personal, time-related, contextual, and having a narrative episteme."¹²⁴

In this chapter, I will evaluate this statement from a theological point of view. Furthermore, I will examine where religious thinking can be placed in this dual system, how paradigmatic and narrative structures can describe religious thinking patterns, and how can the mystical-imaginative thinking characteristic of religiosity can be inserted in their theoretical frames,¹²⁵ since belief has epistemological, axiological and ontological elements as well: "belief has its roots in our deepest self, but still, it refers to the final meaning."¹²⁶ Belief expresses our relationship to our closer and wider environment, to ourselves and to God: "belief rests in the net of systems of relations. Language appears in this system of relations, so belief also appears in language structures. Indeed, the structures of languages are in fact the structures of belief."¹²⁷ Belief cannot be explained though scientific perspective, because its symbolic language and its thought system cannot be defined by science; it is built according to a different logic.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Pléh, Cs.: *A mai lélektan. Magyar Tudomány*. 2004; 2004/11: 1225.

¹²⁵ As compared to sociological models, religion has a special role, because religiosity is a bonding agent of the theories one devises about himself, but religious thinking still remains outside of the thought systems of social sciences. But it is exactly its excluded state and mysticism that makes it able to describe phenomena scientific theories cannot, but still present in modern and postmodern people's life.

¹²⁶ Korsch, D.: *Dogmatik im Grundriß – eine Einführung in die christliche Deutung menschlichen Lebens mit Gott*. Tübingen, 2000, Mohr Siebeck, 9.

¹²⁷ Ibid. 20.

¹²⁸ Moseley, R.: *Education and human Development in the Likeness of Christ*. In Seymour, JL, Donald, E. M. (ed.): *Theological Approaches to Christian Education*.

3.2. THE MODERN THEORIES OF HUMAN IDENTITY AND BELIEF

In order to ascertain the role of religious faith in life stories, we first must outline the modern and postmodern theories of identity as well as, the shift of stress occurring in consequence of the social model changes and their effects on the theories of the evolution of belief.

Identity comprises many different layers which are connected to our sex, or age, or our social or national affiliation, but we can also define ourselves by belonging to a group or a church. Because of these many definitions, the concept of identity has a peculiar identity crisis.¹²⁹ Identity is one of the concepts we use in everyday life without knowing what it really means. Although many people presume to know what it is about, it is still very difficult to put into words. As Maurer says: "Identity is the result of the interpretation of our own, individual story being recreated over and over...Analyzing our past questioning the meaning of life until the end of our days. Humans search for their real selves oscillating between past and present, suppressed and conscious, certain and uncertain."¹³⁰ The notion of identity being a tool to differentiate ourselves from others has been part of the philosophical thinking since Plato and Aristotle,¹³¹ but it became an independent idea only in the post-Enlightenment period. Idealist philosophy, following Kant's thinking, regarded identity as the development of self-conscious and autonomous personality. The role of identity was to secure consistency, continuity and stability

Nashville, 1990, Adbingdon Press, 152. Cf. Groeschel, J.: *Spiritual Passages – The Psychology of Spiritual Development*. New York, 2003, Crossroad Books, Benkő, A.: *Bevezetés a valláslélektanba*. Róma, 1979, Teológiai Kiskönyvtár, 45.; Oser, F.: *Genese und Logik der Entwicklung des religiösen Bewusstseins – Eine Entgegnung auf Kritiken*. In Nipkow, KE, Schweitzer, F., Fowler, J. W. (ed.): *Glaubensentwicklung und Erziehung*. Gütersloh, 1988, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 29-47. 79.

¹²⁹ Cf. Marquard, O.: *Identität – Schwundtelos und Mini-Essenz-Bemerkungen zur Genealogie einer aktuellen Diskussion*. In Marquard, O., Stierle, K. (ed.): *Identität*. München, 1996, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 347.

¹³⁰ Maurer, F.: *Lebensgeschichte und Identität*. In Maurer, F. (ed.): *Lebensgeschichte und Identität Beiträge zu einer biographischen Anthropologie*. Frankfurt am Main, 1981, Suhrkamp, 8.

¹³¹ Cf. Balla, P.: *The Child-Parent Relationship in the New Testament and its Environment*. Tübingen, 2003, Mohr Siebeck, 42.

for the individual.¹³² Yet the consistency of this consciousness is questionable. The Chicago school models an ever-changing identity existing in social interactions.¹³³ The most widespread Erikson model envisions an epigenetic structure of human identity.¹³⁴ This approach is permeated by the ontological view and latent optimism of idealist philosophy, like modern theories. The question is whether or not we should rethink these theories in order to help people better understand themselves and their ever-changing world.

3.2.1. The Reflection of the Modern Image of man in the Identity Theories

In the Enlightenment, not only the society, but the image of man became secular. Evolution in the modern age does not mean reaching the ideal of *servus servorum*, but consists of efficiency, or succeeding in the workplace and social hierarchies.¹³⁵ One of the key concepts of the modern world are ways in which evolution and the “religion of

¹³² Cf. Lübke, H.: *Identitätsphilosophie*. In Galling, K. (ed.): *RGG*. Tübingen, 1986, Mohr, 565-6. 25.

¹³³ Cf. Bögre, Zs.: Élettörténeti módszer elméletben és gyakorlatban – Feldolgozási javaslat és illusztráció. *Szociológiai Szemle*, 2003: 155-68. 156.

¹³⁴ Erikson, E. H.: *The Problem of Ego Identity*. In Steinberg, L. D. (ed.): *The Life Cycle: Readings in Human Development*. Michigan, 1996, Grand Rapids, 196.

¹³⁵ Development is not part of every culture, but it is of Christian thinking, and even the church helped in its handing down. “Theories of human development, once accepted into the prevailing culture, no longer operate simply as descriptions of human nature and its growth. By their nature, as accepted cultural representations, they, rather, give a social reality to the processes they seek to explicate and, to a degree, to the ‘facts’ that they adduce in their support.” (Bruner, J.: *Valóságos elmék, lehetséges világok*. Budapest, 2005, Új Mandátum, 134.) Naturally, in a given culture there can be more than one metaphorical explanation of life. Christianity also has another metaphor, the image of the way that intends to grasp life in its very essence. In early biblical narratives the thought of being on the way occurs very often, and even the first Christians perceived themselves as being on their way to the heavenly Jerusalem. (McGrath, A.: *The Journey – A Pilgrim in the Lands of the Spirit*. New York, 2000, Doubleday, 7-8.) History of Christianity is a very wide stream of events where many traditions amalgamate, and for being part of European culture and tradition, even postmodern man can find patterns in it to help building his identity.

evolution” have played important roles in the secularizing of natural sciences. But behind every evolution theory, there is an idealized image of man. Modern man believes in evolution, that his life will get better and better. The models of developmental psychology are actually reflections of the modern world; thus, these models map the world in which modern man lives.

In sociology, there are two classical models to describe our “symbiosis” with our environment. One is George Herbert Mead’s identity model of symbolic interaction, and the other is Erik Erikson’s ego-psychology model. The first examines the synchronic dimension of the forming of the identity, the second is more diachronic in nature.

In the model of symbolic interaction identity appears as a construction created through the interaction of the individual and its surroundings. It is based on the presupposition that a man becomes a person only in a relationship, our self-awareness, self-sense, is formed by our interactions with our environment, though they are not totally determined by them. “Ego is something developed. It cannot be found in the person, but is formed in social relations. Self-awareness is shaped in the person’s social web, through interaction with other people.”¹³⁶

During the process of the self seeking itself, Mead distinguishes two types of “me”-s. One is the social “me,” they way I see myself in the mirror of my social context.¹³⁷ The other “me” the “I” as I view myself. “Me” is the aspect of personality that is formed by socially determining traditions, by answering written or unwritten rules, and expectations. “I”, on the contrary, is the aspect of our wish for renewal. Finding the balance between these two poles (I – me) gives a dynamic to our identity building. Mead accentuates the interaction characteristic of this process: man can only arrive to a self-awareness if he learns to see himself from others’ points of view. Society shapes

¹³⁶ Mead, G. H.: *Geist, Identität und Gesellschaft aus der Sicht des Sozialbehaviorismus*. Frankfurt, 1968, Suhrkamp, 135.

¹³⁷ Contrary to Erikson, McAdams does not consider adolescence and young adulthood the main phases of identity formation, rather it regards a process spanning through the whole life. Cf. McAdams, D. P.: *Power, intimacy, and the life story: Personological inquiries into identity*. New York, 1985, Guilford Press, 18.

us like a second nature. Our personality is created between the two poles of “me” and society, and identity is a permanent passage between the inner and the outer world.

Erikson writes about identity as a basic sentiment: “The feeling of self-identity ... is a conviction based on collected experiences, and is maintained by the notion that I am viewed by my social environment as unique and continually the same person. It is possible that even inside us, a feeling of uniqueness and continuity is formed.”¹³⁸ Erikson’s notion of identity came from the development of the psychoanalytic tradition. As he examines individual development from a psychosociological point of view, Erikson claims that “no man is an island,” but is formed in social interactions.¹³⁹ In the midst of these interactions, identity appears as a tangible, construed “something,” like a stable inner nucleus. One of Erikson’s important ideas is “crisis” which “does not mean a catastrophic threat, but a turning point, or a crucial stage of life characterized by growing volatility and stress that can be a source of both creative force and instability. The solving of the crisis leads to development but failure to solve the crisis leads to regression.”¹⁴⁰ Development is a life-long process where

¹³⁸ Erikson, E. H.: *Identitat und Lebenszyklus*. Frankfurt am Main, 1973, Suhrkamp, 107.

¹³⁹ See Erikson, EH: *Life History and the Historical Moment*. New York, 1975, Norton & Company Inc., 19.

¹⁴⁰ Erikson, E. H : *Identitat und Lebenszyklus*. Frankfurt am Main, 1973, Suhrkamp, 11-55. Concerning identity, Erikson distinguishes the identity we endeavor to build and identity crisis which is a characteristic of adolescence. In Erikson’s opinion, in order for the adolescent to develop in a healthy way, he needs ideology and integrity belonging to the identity. Ideology is a basic need that offers the adolescent values and handholds in the world. From the point of view of religion the period of identity–identity diffusion. While trust is an “ability of faith,” ideology gives the content of this faith. For that very reason, in the solution of the identity–identity diffusion stress the devotion to an already obtained identity, to already accepted values plays an important role. Finding said ideology in religion is not more childish than finding ideology elsewhere. Religion is the “regression serving the self,” a kind of “second naivete” needed in everyday life to help adults to return to an “inferior” thinking level, and be able to live and examine the world naively, not only rationally. By it, religion helps to form self-balance, and can be a sign of maturity. Cf. Erikson, E. H.: *A jelenkor kerdesei: az ifjusag*. In Kardos, K. (ed.): *Fejlodeslektani Olvasoknyv*. Budapest, 1997, Terta, 109-21. 118.; Wikstrom, O: *A kifurkezhetetlen ember*. Budapest, 2000, Animula, 39.

every age (or development stadium) has its evolutionary crisis to be solved. He distinguishes eight psychosocial stages in life, all built on a basic contradiction. However, the two poles of contradictions are not antagonistic. They are mutually exclusive. The purpose is not the defeat, but the balance.¹⁴¹ Every life stage can be described with the crisis characteristic to the said stage, and finding the solution is decisive in the development of the personality. At the end of these developmental stages, internal forces are released, which can be called, according to Erikson, self-virtue. These are: hope, willpower, purpose, competence, faithfulness, love, care, and wisdom. Identity, though changes during the crises, can be grasped as a unit of a particular structure.¹⁴²

Erikson, E. H.: *Az emberi életciklus*. In Bernáth, L.: Solymosi, K. (ed.), *Fejlődéslélektani olvasókönyv*. Budapest, 1997, Tertia Kiadó, 27-58. 27.

¹⁴¹ Erikson distinguishes the following dilemmas, (1) Trust against distrust, the infant can trust the world around him, in the meeting of his basic needs his parents are consistent. (2) Autonomy against shame and doubt, the child learned to trust or distrust his parents and thus reaches autonomy. It is important to show patience towards him, otherwise the child may begin to doubt his abilities. (3) Initiative against guilt, the accent is on the active, self-initiated action. If the parents are patient to answer the apparently unexhaustible row of questions, the tendency of initiative strengthens, if they are not, the child feels guilt, because he experiences his parents' disapproval against his own ideas. (4) Accomplishment against valuelessness, if the child receives praise and approval in his tryouts, his urge to accomplish grows, if he is ridiculed he feels of being lesser value. (5) Identity against role uncertainty, the formation of self-identity. It is important for the adolescent to be able to integrate his roles, for his selfsameness to be formed, or his role uncertainty will be strengthened. (6) Intimacy against isolation, aspiration to form social and intimate relationships. If the individual is unable to it, he will be isolated and lonely. (7) Creativity against stagnation, efforts to found the new generation, founding of a family, if it does not happen, the feeling of stagnation will follow which influences every interpersonal relation. See Erikson, E. H.: *A jelenkor kérdései: az ifjúság*. In Kardos, K. (ed.): *Fejlődéslélektani Olvasókönyv*. Budapest, 1997, Tertia, 109-21. 119.

¹⁴² Marcia examined the theory of identity following Erikson. He performed his examinations with the help of an "Identity Status Interview" questionnaire. In the quest for identity, Marcia distinguished four stages, 1. Stable stage, practically a borrowed identity the adolescent receives from his family. He is adaptive and dependent, but tries to form his own self. 2. The stable self-image disintegrates rapidly in the beginning of adolescence. The next stage is the diffuse identity that is defined by the actual relationships. The switch to this free stage can be a conversion-like experience. The adolescent apparently enjoys the disintegration

3.2.2. Conceptions in Developmental Psychology and the Piaget Fundamentals

Beyond the aforementioned identity theories, in order to expound Fowler's theory of belief development, we must discuss the theories of Piaget's cognitive development and Kohlberg's ethical judgment.

Piaget did not examine identity itself, but the mechanism of human cognitive development.¹⁴³ The basic principles of his theory were critical not only in developmental psychology, but in religious pedagogy as well. In his theory, human cognitive ability has a developmental arch and can be divided into stages that are well distinguishable from one another. "Each of the transitions from one of these levels to the next is therefore characterized both by a new co-ordination and by a differentiation of the systems constituting the unit of the preceding level."¹⁴⁴ In every developmental stage we meet a different "me". The thinking is clearly different from the preceding stage and, there are separate structures to build and interpret the world.

Kohlberg developed Piaget's results connected with moral judgment into a comprehensive system. Kohlberg intended to map the different developmental stages of moral judgment to adulthood. In his opinion, development consists periods of construction and change. The changing periods are painful and stressful times in every human's life. This transitional period cannot be connected to a specific event. It occurs with a decrease in emotional pressure to aggressively pursue answers to burning questions of one's current life situation, and it finishes when the decision making capacity returns

of frames, the freedom, but there is still a longing for stability in him. 3. The next stage of identity development is the so-called moratorium. It is a transitional mood-stage, when the young are torn between commitment and independence. He should commit himself, but he is afraid and procrastinating. 4. The next phase is the *elaborated phase*. The integrated, life-long conviction was born. Cf. Haußer, K.: *Identitätspsychologie*. Berlin, 1995, Springer Verlag, 79-84.

¹⁴³ See Piaget, J.: *Az értelem pszichológiája*. Budapest, 1997, Kairosz 119-166. Cf. Crain, W.: *Theories of Development – Concepts and Applications*. Englewood Cliffs, 1999, Prentice Hall, 110-146.

¹⁴⁴ Piaget, J.: *Az értelem pszichológiája*. Budapest, 1997, Kairosz, 167.

along with the preparedness to accept the consequences of forming a new life structure.

The background of Piaget's and Kohlberg's theory is a philosophy that maintains basic categories as *a priori* parts of human thinking; thus, they are universal, and follow a specific, epigenetic inner code everyone follows.¹⁴⁵ The other important principle of their theories is that said stages follow a determined sequence, and though at different speeds, everyone develops along the same pattern, systems building on one another.¹⁴⁶ In consequence, each stage follows a qualitative growth, thus forming a hierarchical system from which the value-based classification of ethical questions cannot be excluded.

In examining values, one inevitably faces religious questions, but the ways in which religious phenomena fit into these systems is far from clear. It is not surprising that Kohlberg arrives at these religious questions: "the seventh level is the orientation of faith which postulates universal moral principles, though the approach in this part of the theory is metaphorical in nature. Orientation of faith does not change the basis of the universal principles of human righteousness of the sixth level, but connects it to the ultimate questions of life."¹⁴⁷

Conversely, Oser maintains that religious perspective is present on every decision-making level.¹⁴⁸ In Oser's theory all of the following dilemmas can be found on each level:

1. Feeling completely free and capable of finding the meaning of things – or feeling completely dependent and vulnerable (freedom – dependence)

¹⁴⁵ See Piaget, J.: *Biology and Knowledge*. Chicago, 1971, University of Chicago Press, 81.

¹⁴⁶ Scheme is an organized structure that involves our knowledge and expectations about the world, we remember the new happenings with the help of these structures. Human memory is schematic and reconstructive, because the recording of new information is directed by a scheme system that can be changed by the same information.

¹⁴⁷ Kohlberg, L.: *Moral Development, Religious Thinking, and the Question of a Seventh Stage*. In Power, C., Kohlberg, L. (ed.): *Essays on Moral Development*. San Francisco, 1981, Harper & Row, 14.

¹⁴⁸ See Oser, F.: *Gmünder, Der Mensch- Stufen seiner religiösen Entwicklung*. In Nipkow, K. E., Fowler J. W., Schweitzer, F. (ed.): *Glaubensentwicklung und Erziehung*. Gütersloh, 1988, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 48-90. 49.

2. Feeling that life is pointless and absurd, or being able to hope (absurdity – hope)
3. Feeling existential fear facing death or being able to accept it (fear – trust)
4. Being able or unable to tell sacred and profane apart (sacred – profane)
5. Core values appearing transcendent or immanent in everyday life
6. There are or there are not eternal values (eternal – temporal values)

Depending on the decision-making, level one has different answers to these questions. In decision-making we can distinguish five levels.

The first is the age of *Deus ex machina*, when one feels being completely dependent on outer forces and his only role is to execute the will of the Final Reality, or to suffer its intervention in human life. God is mighty and we owe him obedience; should we fail in it, he will punish us. God's work in human life is obvious, yet his world stands apart from ours.

The second is where the principle of *do ut des* prevails. The connection with God is practically a business relationship. One feels able to influence the Final Reality. God is still omnipotent, but our actions influence him. If we give to him, he will give to us; if we are good, he will be good to us. This decision making is directed by the principle of mutual goodwill.

On the third level God has only a limited influence. Here, the human is an autonomous, self-responsible being. Transcendent and immanent worlds are completely separate. One can make his own decisions and is independent of God. This is more or less the *deist* way of thinking.

On the fourth level, one can preserve his inner freedom, but his life is reconnected with the Final Reality. Human freedom is made possible by God. Freedom here is a basic element of religiosity. God is a final cause and power, but he works in the world through created beings.

The last, fifth level is characterized by unconditional intersubjectivity. There is a direct connection and communication between God and man.

In Oser's opinion, humans do not relate to ultimate questions with their intellect only, but with their whole personality.¹⁴⁹ This relation is present in the speech, the way of thinking, the feelings and in the actions alike. "We have to understand transcendent to be present without being obvious, namely in good deeds, in life style, in the hearing the revelation, in taking responsibility for others, in free choices, and in the way one interprets his own life as a part of the divine plan, or a stage of human responsibility."¹⁵⁰

Like Oser, Fowler also seeks to answer how we relate to the ultimate environment of our horizon of our lives.¹⁵¹ Every human has a world they perceive as reality, and in this stage the image we create of the Ultimate Reality goes through an evolution. We fill it with different pattern systems according to the developmental level. In the course of our life, the patterns of our belief system undergo structural changes. On the basis of his empirical examination, Fowler demonstrates the similarities in the many different ways of belief, so we can discuss belief structures and levels.¹⁵²

The stages can be describes as follows:

Stage zero: in infancy, until 1-2 years of age. Belief is still undifferentiated. The infant lives in a life where he is under someone else's care; the start of the growth of fundamental trust appears in this age.

Stage one: the age of intuitive-projective belief lasts from 2 to 6 years of age. The child can express his thoughts with words, but only on the level of cognitive egocentrism. The "other" is present in his life, but the child can only see the "other" through "infantile glasses", rich in emotion and imagination. The impressions of this age have a deep impact on the child's inner life and they can affect his life in later stages.

Stage two: mythical-literal belief. It generally lasts until 12, but there are also adults stuck on this level. This is a faith having a

¹⁴⁹ See Oser, F.: *Wieviel Religion braucht der Mensch? Erziehung und Entwicklung zur religiösen Autonomie*. Gütersloh, 1988, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 74.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 50-51.

¹⁵¹ See Fowler, J. W.: *Stages of Faith – The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. 117-211.

¹⁵² Cf. Streib, H.: *Hermeneutics of Metaphor – Symbol and Narrativ in Faith Development Theory*. Frankfurt am Main, 1991, Peter Lang, 37.

consistent worldview organized in time and space. The child can tell imagination and reality apart. He is capable of concrete operational thinking, but unable to think abstractly: he has an anthropomorphic image of God, and he takes the Bible literally. Naïve moral reciprocity is a characteristic of this age: God punishes the wrong, but the good earn the deserved reward.

Stage three: synthetic-conventional belief. The adolescent is capable of formal operational thinking and understanding abstract principles. He is able to see himself from the outside and to reflect on himself. In his moral judgments, he is motivated by interpersonal expectations. The confines of his social awareness are widening – though his environment contains only the groups he is personally a part of. The world is becoming more and more complex. In order to be able to orientate himself – lacking a complete value system – he needs role models and community to which he is prone to relate to in a conventional manner. His ability to consider things independently grows, but he still does not change the inherited belief system, – he considers its values and worldview as given. His value and belief system depends on the groups and people he thinks highly of. But these systems are not mature, the interconnections are defined in general or symbolical terms, and he gives answers to the questions of life in a particularly emotional way. The symbols on this level – religious symbols included – are more complex than their literal meanings; they have the power to create meaning.

Stage four: individual-reflexive belief system, the level of reflective, individual faith. The capacity of formal thinking is evolved, and relativism becomes a characteristic of the individual's judgment process. On this level, one examines his inherited worldview and principles, and turns them to subjects of criticism. He only accepts those sharing his worldview as possible authorities. He chooses communities whose norms he can agree with, and whose worldview he can identify with. On this level, identity is defined independently others. He professes and accepts things he is personally convinced of. He formulates his thoughts about the world through ideologies. For the individual-reflexive belief system, symbol and symbolized are separated. Their strength comes from their meaning.

Stage five: conjunctive faith. The missing pieces puzzle fall into place, and one realizes that paradoxes have their part in human life, and they make life complete. It is the level of “second naivety”, which makes him able to maintain a personal relationship with the Reality passed down by the tradition.

Stage six: universalizing faith which can see life from above in its complexity, able to love and accept unconditionally, and able to self-sacrifice.

In the following table, we can examine the different developmental theories and their connections, synchronizing identity, cognitive development, judgmental development and faith development.

In the different developmental scales, different worldviews are reflected: “the opinion that the structural levels of religious judgment are independent of the worldview is groundless.”¹⁵³ Neither the other models nor their authors are exception of that rule. If we have a closer look at the theories of Kohlberg, Fowler or Oser-Gmüder, on the last level of their scale, on the top of value-hierarchy, we meet an idealized image of man. Behind all these theories there lies the belief in evolution, which takes the optimistic view of that a man matures and grows stronger through crises, and they are idealistic in their presupposition that man can be whole, or “complete.” Evolution ends in the world of the ideas. There are only a few people (if any) on the upper levels; they are those who are committed to righteousness and love, are independent from social conventions, and think in an autonomous way. Friedrich Schweitzer considers the modern idea of man with criticism:

“Evolution in this sense always means an evolution of abilities and talents. On the basis of these theories, children may seem to be unable to do things because of their lack of ability; thus, childhood becomes a mere stepping stone to real life. The other criticism, connected closely to the previous one, is related to the idealization of the upper level. Although it is true that social theories of development do not propagate the perfection of

¹⁵³ Fetz, R. L., Reich, K. H.: *Weltbildentwicklung und Gottesvorstellung*. In Bucher, A, Reich K. H. (ed.): *Entwicklung von Religiosität – Grundlagen, Theorieprobleme, Praktische Anwendung*. Fribourg, 1989, Universitätsverlag, 101-30. 154.

Age	Erikson's psychosocial stages	Piaget's cognitive development stages	Kohlberg's moral judgment stages	Oser-Gmüder's religious judgment stages	Fowler's belief development stages
0	original trust – distrust	sensori-motor level	Good is what I want and like		
2	autonomy – sense of shame	preoperative thinking	pre-conventional level punishment and reward	„Deus ex machina”	undifferentiated belief (1-2 years of age)
6-7	initiative – guilt	concrete operative thinking	instrumental hedonism and reciprocity	„do ut des”	intuitive-projective belief (2-6 years of age)
11-12	creativity – inferiority complex	formal operative, abstract thinking	conventional level winning the approval of the environment	deism	mythical-literal belief (7-11 years of age)
adult	identity – diffusion of identity		Law and order-orientation	inner freedom	synthetic-conventional belief (adolescence)
	intimacy – isolation		post-conventional level		individual-reflexive belief structure (after 18 years of age)
	productivity – stagnation		benefit of the community, right of the individual		conjunctive faith (after 30 years of age)
old age	integration – doubts		universal ethical principles, self-sacrificing love	unconditional intersubjectivity	universalizing faith

table*

* Cf. Fowler, J. W.: *Stages of Faith – The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. 52.; Fodorné Nagy, S: *A katechézis kommunikációs problémái*. Budapest, 1996, Kálvin Kiadó, 232.

man, they do discuss training appropriate to the developmental level, and do not dissociate themselves enough from the ideology of the perfection of man.”¹⁵⁴

In the 20th century, the work of Piaget and his followers had a deep impact not only on developmental psychology, but also on pedagogy. The practice of catechetics to teach children according to their age level also gained ground in churches. On the basis of Piaget’s theory, a scale is formed to show how a child of given age thinks, what kind of moral judgments he makes (Kohlberg), what the main dilemma or crisis of his life is (Erikson), what kind of belief structure he uses (Fowler). Developmental scales are useful in understanding the dynamics of growth, and factors that determine it, but we must see the limits of these theories as well. The main point is not to “measure” or categorize man, but, as the attitude of the theories suggests, to show him going along a path, a path with stages, and each stage employs a different structure of schemas because each stage has its particular language and symbolic interaction. This view includes the conception that man is “not finished” even when he is adult, and we have to learn to give people more time and support them in their maturing.

Developmental psychology helps to see the similarities among the many ways of life, but byproduct of classification is that it also covers diversities. Even Kohlberg reaches this conclusion when he says: “The price we had to pay for this structural model is the abstraction of the life story.”¹⁵⁵ This is why those of us in church cannot fail to examine man and his faith in the context of individual life. Fowler strived to define universalities, and thus he differentiates between the external structure and inner content of faith – but Christian faith is more than a mere fixative for identity for the individual; it is a view of life, and an integrating power of the community. People always exist in a given cultural and social milieu, and that influences the content of the

¹⁵⁴ Schweitzer, F.: *Religiöse Entwicklung und Erziehung im Kindes- und Jugendalter*. München, 1987. 229.

¹⁵⁵ Kohlberg, L.: *Moral Stages – A Current Formation and a Response to Critics*. In Oser, F, Fatke, R., Höffe, O. (ed.): *Transformation und Entwicklung – Grundlagen der Moralerziehung*. Frankfurt am Main, 1986, Suhrkamp.

cognitive, emotional, and moral levels of belief.¹⁵⁶ And since content shapes form, life story events and factual social relationships must be taken into consideration.

3.2.2.1. *A Shift towards Contextuality*

After the introduction of the modern, theoretical approaches, we turn our focus to the changes in the postmodern shift of our world makes in the theories.

Toulmin sees four tendencies in philosophic and scientific trends. He noted the tendency of postmodern science and postmodern man himself beginning a return to verbalism. The importance of thinking in stories, the importance of language and communication came to the fore, while abstract, alien theories became much less appealing. There is moreover a return to the peculiar, the unusual: “postmodern scientific inquiry will increasingly shift from abstract laws of universal application to particular deciphering of the complex structures and detailed processes embodied in concrete aspects of nature.”¹⁵⁷ Now, the important point is how scientific theories work on a local level in concrete life situations. Moreover, instead of universal or global descriptions, research on local traditions and ways of life became important again. Sharon Parks arrives at the same result in her work on faith development research: “metaphors and religious language are getting more and more emphasis in religious and theological interactions. The language used in these discourses is shifting to the narrative language of meaning construction.”¹⁵⁸ These tendencies are

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Kuld, L.: *Glaube in Lebensgeschichten – ein Beitrag zur theologischen Autobiographieforschung*. Stuttgart, 1997, Kohlhammer, 87.

¹⁵⁷ Toulmin, S.: *Cosmopolis – The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*. New York, 1990, Free Press, 203-211.

¹⁵⁸ Parks, S.: *James Fowlers Theorie der Glaubensentwicklung in der nordamerikanischen Diskussion – Eine Zusammenfassung der Hauptkritikpunkte*. In Nipkow, KE, Schweitzer, F., Fowler, J. W. (ed.): *Glaubensentwicklung und Erziehung*. Gütersloh, 1988, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 91-107. 93.

basically reflections of social changes of our age on the theoretical level.¹⁵⁹

Considering all the aforementioned tendencies, the main fundamentals of Piaget's theory have been called into question: universality, the constant sequence of successive levels, and the hierarchic structure of the levels. The most criticized category was that of universality, but as we are penetrate deeper into the postmodern age, the principles of succession and hierarchic structure are doubted as well.

Since the end of the '70s, the demand for more context-specific, locally applicable patterns (instead of the universal ones modeling abstract people), has been on the rise. The question arose as to whether or not the structural patterns of the western world are relevant to people living in different cultures, and to both sexes. In the works of Gilligan and Levinson, personal maturity and sexual identity, and marriage and family are all factors of development.¹⁶⁰ A slow shift towards contextuality appeared in the theories as well, and the process to interpret them in our environment is ongoing.¹⁶¹ The biggest problem is that universal theories can never be exact since through abstraction, the distance from real life increases. The description of reality in structures always models the average, and can only define tendencies. Therefore, on the individual level there can be huge differences completely dissimilar to the "universal average." Thus we can observe a shift in developmental psychology towards contextuality: "Undoubtedly there exists a similarity among people that make generalization –or at least classification– possible. But man is more than the things these

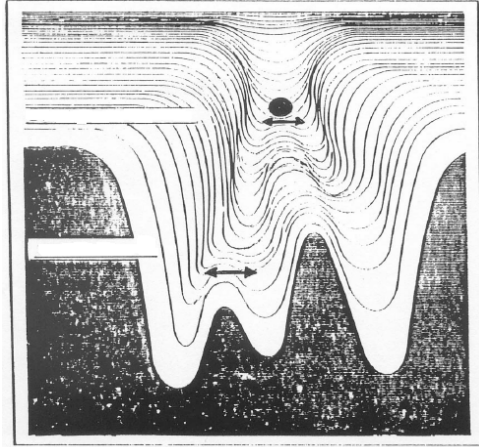
¹⁵⁹ Cf. Flick, U., Kardorff, E., Steinke, I.: *Qualitative Forschung – Ein Handbuch*. Reinbek, 2000, Rowohlt, 31.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Levinson, D. J.: *The Seasons of a Man's Life*. New York, 1978, Ballantine. ; Levinson, D.J.: *The Seasons of a Woman's Life*. New York, 1996, Knopf. ;Gilligan, C.: *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA, 1982, Harvard University Press.

¹⁶¹ Baltes, P. B., Reese, H. W., Nesselroade, J. R.: *Life-Span Developmental Psychology – Introduction to Research Methods*. Monterey, 1977, Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.

methods can tell or discover about him.”¹⁶²

Waddington¹⁶³ describes a model that represents graphically the developmental theories along with the tendencies of our age. His example is as follows: imagine very high, barren mountains, and suppose we let a huge steel sphere go on the top of the highest peak. As the sphere goes



*illustration**

down, it chooses a path at each valley. If we release another sphere, it is possible that it will run a completely different route, choosing different valleys. The same goes for all of us: when we come to crossroads, it is not obvious in which direction we will take. There are many factors determining the course we run (sex, social and welfare situation), and there are also facts that deviate us (death of someone close, illness, etc.) and make our way of life unique. The valleys (directions) can be factors of the social determination, and maps of a random milieu as well.

“The author of a life story is always part of a given social milieu. The identity forming in him is influenced by this milieu, for the individual is part of the milieu. When we get to know the content of somebody’s ambitions, attitude, plans, the most important lines of force of his milieu appear to us.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Nipkow, K. E.: *Bildung als Lebensbegleitung und Erneuerung – Kirchliche Bildungsverantwortung in Gemeinde, Schule und Gesellschaft*. 2. ed. Gütersloh, 1992, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, Gerd Mohn, 575.

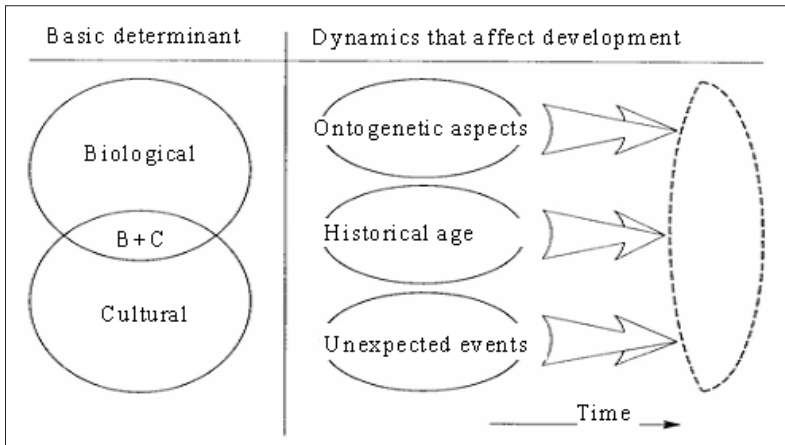
¹⁶³ Dollase, R.: *Entwicklung und Erziehung*. Stuttgart, 1985, Klett, 63.

* See Dreher, E.: http://www.ju-quest.at/jure_downloads/handout_dreher_crossover_270105.pdf, 2005.

¹⁶⁴ Szczepanski, J.: *Die biographische Methode*. Stuttgart, 1974, Enke, 226-52. 243.

Schulze maintains that there are no universal norms or value systems that can be accepted by every milieu. Life milieus work as a “sociocultural gravitational field,”¹⁶⁵ which forms a homogeneous entity dependent on lifestyle, education, and age. This is why Leither discusses identification instead of identity. A given social milieu has a so called “iconographical canon” that defines behavioral norms and offers strict standards.¹⁶⁶

In his theory, Gabriel Moran illustrates the human path as an individual one. The progress of human maturing is also affected by one’s age, the historical time period in which they are living, and various unpredictable events that may occur throughout their lives.



*illustration**

The accompanying diagram represents a common frame of both universal and contextual influences and thus illustrates the path of development related to particular milieu. In Moran’s theory, at each

¹⁶⁵ Schulze, G.: *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft – Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart*. Frankfurt, 1992, Campus, 423.

¹⁶⁶ See Leitner, H.: *Lebenslauf und Identität – Die kulturelle Konstruktion von Zeit in der Biographie*. Frankfurt am Main, New York 1982, Campus Verlag GmbH, 74.

* See Kuld, L.: *Glaube in Lebensgeschichten – ein Beitrag zur theologischen Autobiographieforschung*, 25.

age of a person's life, there is an aspect of our lives has a special effect on us: in the family, we learn the basics of community, in school we learn to study, in our jobs we learn to work, and in our retired years we grow in wisdom.¹⁶⁷ It is evident that as the individual changes, he fills different social roles throughout the course of time. When we choose a living environment, we also subconsciously choose particular life and religious styles.¹⁶⁸ From the point of view of religious maturity, it does matter whether we live in South Korea or Hungary and as well as which social group we belong to.

3.2.2.2. Faith as "Style"

Heinz Streib thinks we have to take not only living environment, but also life themes into consideration.¹⁶⁹ The one-sided concentration on structures misses the significant point of human life being more than the sum of the parts we can perceive cognitively. Streib states (after Merleau-Ponty, against Piaget) that the world surrounding us has bigger importance than our inner world: "Religious development is a complex process of entangled factors: of structural development, the schemata of interpersonal relationships, and themata, which are presented to the individual by experiences—and sometimes traumas—in one's early life. These factors may change and vary as the interpersonal, social, and societal relationships change over a lifetime."¹⁷⁰ Streib's theories presuppose that patterns –schemata– and topics –themata– exercise mutual influence on each other. The faith with concrete content and the universal human religion complement each other. Both are dynamic notions, both grow or are renewed

¹⁶⁷ See Moran, G.: *Religious Education Development: Images for the Future*. Minneapolis, 1983, Winston Press, 157-183.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Hutsebaut, D.: *Some Perspectives on Religious Maturity*. In Lombaerts, H, Pollefeyt, D. (ed.): *Hermeneutics and Religious Education*. Leuven, 2000, Uitgeverij Peeters, 337-55. 350.

¹⁶⁹ Streib, H.: *Hermeneutics of Metaphor – Symbol and Narrativ in Faith Development Theory*. 43.

¹⁷⁰ Streib, H.: Faith Development Theory Revisited – The Religious Styles Respektive. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 2001/3: 144-58. 146.

through interaction with their environment.¹⁷¹ Streib mentions four dimensions that play important roles in one's change of faith: first is our relationship with ourselves (psycho-dynamic dimension), the relationship between me and the Other (related-interpersonal), with the tradition (interpretative-hermeneutical), and with our environment (life-world dimension). Streib endeavours to apply Fowler's theory to the context of human life. Faith for him is a hermeneutical concept that helps us to understand the world around us. Faith contains a web of understanding, and every understanding contains fragments of faith. In Streib's opinion, Fowler did not work with cognitive concepts fitting to the structural developmental theories (Piaget, Kohlberg), but he reached back to the Tillich definition of faith.¹⁷² Thus in faith we find a kind of relational reference to a "common center of values" that includes an interpretational perspective as well. Accordingly faith is knowledge based on specific criteria:¹⁷³ "Faith understood as a knowing implies a 'thick' conception of cognition – one that includes the structuring power of pervasive and deep-going channels of emotions, some of which are early in origin and largely unconscious. It also includes the gradually more conscious constructions we make in the dialectical interaction between our experiencing and the shaping power of the stories, symbols, language, and concepts we are offered in our communities of shared meaning."¹⁷⁴ While Fowler examines the structures man uses to relate to some ultimate center of value, and arranges these pattern systems vertically, Streib endeavors to arrange them horizontally. Streib does not talk about evolution; he places the "levels" side by side. In this way, he questions two of Piaget's basic criteria: the hierarchic arrangement and the sequence of systems.

Streib's criticism against cognitive developmental theories is that they tend to forget a very important aspect of human life: namely that "growth" takes place encapsulated within a human life story.

¹⁷¹ Cf. Fowler, J. W.: *Stages of Faith – The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. 9.

¹⁷² Tillich, P.: *Dynamics of Faith*. New York, 1957, Harper & Row, Publishers, 7.

¹⁷³ Fowler, J. W.: Pluralism, Particularity, and Paideia, in, *Journal of Law and Religion*, 263-307. 294. See also Streib, H: *Hermeneutics of Metaphor – Symbol and Narrativ in Faith Development Theory*. Frankfurt am Main, 1991, Peter Lang, 23.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 47.

Streib agrees with Noam who calls the attention to this very same shift of stress: “It is my view that cognitively based theorists have overlooked the central structuring activities of the self by defining the epistemic self as the sole representative of structure. In the process, I believe, the cart was placed before the horse, life history became content to the structure of the epistemic self. (...) Epistemology replaced life history.”¹⁷⁵ Therefore, form is not independent from the content, and in the formation of faith themata are just as important as schemata. Thus religion cannot be separated from its content, and it has elements of basic narrative characters (e.g. scripts, personal myths, stories). Even in Fowler’s work, the trajectory of to narrated life stories is traceable:¹⁷⁶ A life story is the imprint of continuous interpersonal transactions joined by different life themes. Streib draws the conclusion with regard to religious development that the different appearances of religion are basically of interpersonal origin, and that even in religiosity there are distinct patterns to connect religious identity and life story. “Thus religious styles are rooted in life history; their roots are interpersonal. Inasmuch as interpersonality has a history, beginning with events lying far back, and has yielded certain patterns of religious communication and religious styles elaborated at that time, present styles should not be conceived of as emerging independently and suddenly in the here and now but rather as having their roots in life history.”¹⁷⁷

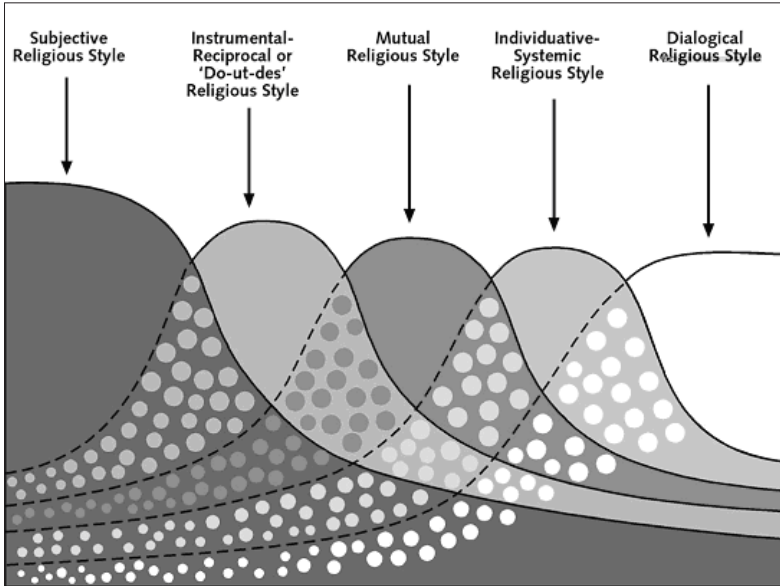
Streib does not question the existence of Fowler’s schemata, but the irreversible sequence of stages in human life, because it suggests that “one level is better than the other.” Thus he does not try to interpret the schemata according to a developmental script, but describes them as different “styles.”¹⁷⁸ The use of the word “style” shows that faith

¹⁷⁵ Noam, G. G.: *Beyond Freud and Piaget – Biographical Worlds-Interpersonal Self*. In Wren, T. (ed.): *The Moral Domain*. Cambridge, MA, 1990, MIT Press, 360-99. 378.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Fowler, J. W.: *Faithful Change- The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life*. Nashville, 1996, Abingdon Press. ; Fowler, J. W.: *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian – Adult Development and Christian Faith*. San Francisco, 2000, Jossey-Bass. ; Fowler, J. W.: *Faith Development Theory and the Postmodern Challenges*. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*. 2001/3: 159-172.

¹⁷⁷ Streib, H.: *Faith Development Theory Revisited – The Religious Styles Respektive*. 147.

¹⁷⁸ “Religious styles are distinct modi of practical-interactive (ritual), psychodynamic



*illustration**

within a certain schemata system does not signify underdevelopment, the proper state, or an advanced state, but a faith form that can occur in any age of life.¹⁷⁹ To illustrate relationships between of the schemata Streib offers a geological parallel. As the different strata of rock and sediment settled on top of one another form the surface of the continents of the Earth, so as in our religiosity there are hidden, subsurface schemata beside our present, dominant schemata. Even if one interprets the world and himself in an individual-reflexive way, the mythical-literal style can still be present in his life and thinking.

(symbolic), and cognitive (narrative) reconstruction and appropriation of religion.”
Ibid. 149.

* Ibid. 154.

¹⁷⁹ The use of the word “style” against “level” shows the importance of themata against schemata, and they play an important role in the individual’s religious life. Oser developed his theory into this direction as well. See Oser, F.: *Genese und Logik der Entwicklung des religiösen Bewusstseins – Eine Entgegnung auf Kritiken*. In Nipkow, K.E., Schweitzer, F., Fowler, J. W. (ed.): *Glaubensentwicklung und Erziehung*. Gütersloh, 1988, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 29-47. 50-51.

The former –or perhaps future– dominant strata are to a lesser or greater extent present simultaneously in human life. They can activate depending on the situation and can influence our decisions. Streib distinguishes five different religious styles.¹⁸⁰

The first is the so-called *subjective religious style*, which appears in infancy and corresponds to the description of Fowler’s undifferentiated, intuitive-projective faith. Its important elements are imagination, emotions, and the basic trust formed with the parents that later will be the basis of the faith in God.¹⁸¹

The second is the *do tu des religious style*, where the child comes to realize his own needs, and consider himself a part of reciprocal interactions.

The *mature religious style* occurs on the level of interpersonal relationships. It views God as a personal partner, and the relationship is characterized by “mutual respect.”

The individual-methodical religious style is able to integrate criticism into religious questions, understanding; one understands religious questions on a symbolic level.

In the *dialogical religious style* a new kind of openness appears where opposites do not lead to exclusion or hostility. In this style finding a religious identity is not an absolute purpose, with “the letting go of the self” a new basic trust comes to being (second naivity), where the individual let himself be drawn into the sphere of a symbol or narrative.

Though Streib do not write about the origin or coherence of styles, in Fowler’s opinion “types” can complete the theory of faith development. But they cannot substitute for his theory, because in his opinion the styles build in one another, and develop level-like structures of which order is not interchangeable.¹⁸² Considering the

¹⁸⁰ Streib, H.: *Faith Development Theory Revisited – The Religious Styles Respektive. The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion.* 153.

¹⁸¹ Cf. Stern, D.N.: *The interpersonal world of the infant.* New York, 1985, Basic Books, 2.

¹⁸² Even Fowler himself construed a typology according to the attachment of the value center, 1. totalizing type (authoritarian personality, fear of loss traumatizes him, rigid compliance to rules) 2. rationalizing, critical type (second naiveté, reflected attachment) 3. conflicting type (confidential crisis, intellectualizing, but unable to attach emotionally) 4. diffuse type (partially able to attach, incoherent) See Fowler,

content elements, the levels (not styles!) follow a constant sequence, and in the composing our life story, they shape the story according to our faith level. Both the horizontal and the vertical system theories take the most important criterion into consideration: namely the “crystallized” schemata systems that can be concluded on the basis of people narratives – and these systems can be categorized and compared with others. It is difficult to decide whether we read the existence of structural levels into the changes of life, or we rewrite our life story again and again according to these levels. Both assertion can be right, the essence lies in the accents.

3.2.2.3. *The Influential Questioning-effect*

The existence of the different levels or styles is not as obvious as the theories of developmental psychology show, since during the creation of the theories a so-called “hunter effect” emerges; the questions influence the answers. The interviewer leads the interviewed along his prepared questions which partially determine the answers by giving him specific criteria or the subject feels he is being examined by specific criteria, and may suppose expectations towards him.

At the evaluation process of these interviews we met a similar problem, since the interviewer hears what more or less fits into his categories, and conform the elements into the system of his schemata. The stress of the situation, the particular content of the question, and the personal life story play at least as important part in the answer as the subject’s intellectual abilities or the “maturity” of his moral judgment and religiosity.¹⁸³

In the examination of the “mere facts” and in the establishing of categories we need –as Habermas said– a “hermeneutical turn.”¹⁸⁴

J.W.: *Faith Development Theory and the Postmodern Challenges. The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*. 2001/3: 159-72. 165.

¹⁸³ Cf. Day, J. M.: *From Structuralism to Eternity? Re-Imagining the Psychology of Religious Development After the Cognitive-Developmental Paradigm*. 173-83. 178.

¹⁸⁴ Habermas, J.: *Theory and Practice – Sozial-Philosophische Studien*, London, 1972, Heinemann Educational Books, 1-41.

It states that the examiner cannot interpret the things of his subject if does not try to understand him: the examination, beyond the bare facts, has to include the understanding of the subject. What is that he felt right, how he experienced it. The subject's viewpoint must be enforced, mostly in case of religion and religious subject.

3.2.2.4. *The Simultaneous Presence of Schemata and Themata in the Life Story Narratives*

Life story narratives, consequently, have two readings, one is about the past, and the other is about the present.¹⁸⁵ These two, naturally, are not independent from each other. In the first, we can trace the thought of development, because with its help one can see and interpret the different periods of his life as developmental levels. Fowler's theory fits into this thought pattern. But there is another reading of life stories which concentrates on the present, for in every life story, the problems and crises of the present are the main guiding forces in the creating of the narrative.¹⁸⁶

We must understand that the developmental psychology model with its hierarchic levels is a specific, modern approach. Its use cannot be avoided, because we belong to this culture, our schemata reflect them.¹⁸⁷ But to understand man in his present situation, this level-based thinking will not bring us any closer to understanding reality, since by its social effects become relative, development seems pre-programmed, and the levels, as a result of their being standards of value, cannot show us the real picture. Just because we can demonstrate different schematas being present in our life stories, we

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Drechsel, W.: *Lebensgeschichte und Lebens-Geschichten: Zugänge zur Seelsorge aus biographischer Perspektive*. 28.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Klingenberger, H.: *Lebensmutig – Vergangenes erinnern, Gegenwärtiges entdecken, Künftiges entwerfen*. München, 2003, Don Bosco, 55.

¹⁸⁷ Narrative is more than a "good story," it reflects a defined worldview, and it transmits a value system. In the life story, the world history is reflected too. Cf. Fraas, H.-J.: *Anthropologie als Basis des Diskurses zwischen Theologie und Psychologie*. In Ch. Henning – Nestler, E. (ed.): *Religionspsychologie heute*. Frankfurt am Main, 2000, Peter Lang, 105-22. 219.

still do not understand what they are all about. Any person's present can be interpreted only in a narrative way, since beyond the structure and the schemata, the narrative has a story as well. It contains the worries or hopes of the speaker about the future. By considering the pattern of Piaget's cognitive levels, of Kohlberg's moral development, or of Fowler's faith development levels as the hermeneutical key, we dismisses the intent and the meaning of the narrator's story. The approach that cannot hear the narrator's problem, his wish of being acknowledged, misses its point. While Fowler thinks in structures and forms, Christian practice cannot be independent from the content, from the story of the Kingdom of God. We do place another model against Fowler's model of structures, but an approach. It is a hermeneutical perspective that does not concentrate on the structure of the life story, but on its content.

3.2.2.5. *What is Left Out of Faith Development Theories*

One of the main characteristics of theology in contrast to any other branch of science is that theology considers God as virtually existent, and it interprets human life and human world in their relationship to God. What does God mean as a virtual entity, and what is his effect on life? The one-sided socially oriented theories miss this particular point. This is why Browning says about Fowler's theory that strictly speaking it is not theology because it concentrates only on the human side, and it describes faith as a general human phenomenon.¹⁸⁸ Fowler's definition of faith is on the one side is too wide, on the other side it is too strict; it is so general that it is almost inconceivable, then again there is no faith without content. Streib criticizes that point as well: "Because of its essential and constitutive relation to specific con-texts and contents, faith cannot and does not have to be defined in rigorous demarcation from belief or religion."¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ See Browning, D. S.: *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care*. Philadelphia, 1983, Fortress Press.

¹⁸⁹ Examining Streib's thoughts one can ask whether there is sense to treat the faith, say, in the arrival of the postman alike the faith in the transcendent. The first

Fowler's effort to create a psychological concept of faith, loses its theological essence, because faith is a "heartfelt trust" in God. This is why Streib opposes to separate faith as function and as content. In the language of faith there are many symbols that moves even the subconscious parts of life, but that is not only a religious function, because the user of the religious language believes to have Somebody on the other end, and with this Somebody, with God he can enter into conversation. The thing the church talks about and people believe in is the "mystical aspect of life,"¹⁹⁰ thus it cannot be translated to a scientific –or perhaps any– language at all. In this field, we have to take off our sandals, and admit that scientific approach can help us to get closer to the mystery, but can never solve it. Although Fowler endeavors to interpret faith in such a way that many things can be included into it, but he only manages to attain right the opposite: he restricts reality. In the examination of faith we cannot leave the content elements out, we have to count the transcendental factor, the aspect of being in relationship with God into the developmental dimensions of faith.¹⁹¹ Even Christian thinking maintains the notion

one (generally) does not need the second naiveté. From this point of view, the differentiation between substantial and functional religion is meaningless. Streib, H.: *Hermeneutics of Metaphor – Symbol and Narrativ in Faith Development Theory*. 171.

¹⁹⁰ Even though religiosity has a language and "grammar" of its own, we have to see the limits of human speech. Language is unfit to express many things in life, and the same goes to religion too. Though we try to process our experiences in our thinking, or to perform them (rites, arts), but it means putting them into a frame at the same time. We need interpretation, but interpretation is always only one kind of approach to reality, and its expression in a language is connected to the phase of understanding that serves to describe the undescribable, since "the religious imagination is necessary for entering into the mystery of God's self-giving love." Moseley, R.M.: *Becoming a Self Before God – Critical Transformations*. Nashville, 1992, Abingdon Press, 131.

¹⁹¹ In order to understand religion, we need a kind of hermeneutical key, a second, "wanted" naiveté. Cf. Ricœur, P: *The Symbolism of Evil*. New York, 1967, Harper and Row, 351. Second naiveté is the attitude where religious language and symbols receive a new content. This imaginative attitude is a particular trait of religiosity– though there can be huge differences between individuals from the superstition to universalizing faith–and naiveté is a basic characteristic of all of it. Even Fowler and Oser use this concept, but both theories place its appearance into a later stage of religious development, where it helps to see the world and God in it as a

of growth in faith, and it does matter what contents this religious view holds, and how deep it is. It is not satisfied with the idea of people thinking of God because of contingency-experiences, or of their using elements of faith –or fate, or luck– to bridge the gaps of their knowledge, but it advocates reflected life and responsible following of Christ.¹⁹²

3.3. PARADIGM SHIFT IN POSTMODERNISM

With the change of sociality the frames of identity and thus the models undergo transformation in order to grasp and describe reality better for the man who lives in it. In the following pages, I review the approaches of identity formed to apprehend postmodern way of life, because these theories are of crucial importance to understand the changes occurring also in human religiosity.

unified whole. But this kind of symbolical imagination, this “second naiveté” is present in every level (or style). Even the third level is not necessarily atheistic. The third stage does not show the difference between theists and atheists, because “In every transformation, individual goes through a certain kind of atheism.” Hutsebaut distinguishes four religious styles along two axes (faith-scepticism, and literal/symbolical), two religious (orthodox, and second naiveté) and two non-religious (outsider-critical and relativizing) styles. Each style corresponds to a worldview, because they correlate the political, psychological and social attitudes. The characteristics of orthodox belief are, literal thinking, strong influence of religion on conduct, hierarchy, feeling of shame accompanying faith, dualistic thinking, God is prominently constant, religion offers answers. Whereas the characteristics of second naiveté are, symbolical thinking, attachment to a group, God passionately loves man, spiritual interest, long “collecting” period before decisions, religious content can change according to their interpretation, religion as a personal quest for meaning, they see complexity, but they have preferred answers. Hutsebaut, D.: *Some Perspectives on Religious Maturity*. In Lombaerts, H, Pollefeyt, D. (ed.): *Hermeneutics and Religious Education*. Leuven, 2000, Uitgeverij Peeters, 337-55. 340.

¹⁹² Cf. Luhmann, N.: *Funktion der Religion*. Frankfurt am Main, 1977, Suhrkamp Verlag, 80.

3.3.1. The Propagation of Narrative Thinking

Alongside the modern theories of identity new approaches appeared that not only complement the previous models, but offer contextual view. Hereinafter I try to outline how and why narratives came to the front in modeling human identity.

3.3.1.1. From Project-identity to Life Story

Identity's role as a driving force is problematical in our time. As we could see in Erikson's approach, in a given situation people generally endeavor to find the best available solution with minimal losses. Though people are able to make judgments of high ethical standards – for example if they are confronted to Kohlberg's dilemma story – but in a concrete situation vital instincts kick in according to the “I break out (of danger) therefore I am” principle.¹⁹³ From this point of view identity is not maintained by development, but by the interconnections of the present, although we can interpret its course as growth or development. Most of the people think in a relativistic way, they make their decisions depending on their given contexts.¹⁹⁴ In everyday life situations we can mostly speak about “project identity.”¹⁹⁵ People thinking in projects do not reflect to life as a whole, do not think about the final questions of life, they elaborate short or medium-term plans or projects they can identify themselves with. These “enterprises” can be marriage, having children, building a home, and many other things. These are the projects we concentrate our energies in a specific time of our life, and we define ourselves by them. The time to realize them is more or less foreseeable, we can imagine the point we should arrive after completing them. Project

¹⁹³ See Cohen, S, Taylor, L.: *Ausbruchversuche: Identität und Widerstand in der modernen Lebenswelt*. Frankfurt am Main, 1977. 23.

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Hutsebaut, D.: *Some Perspectives on Religious Maturity*. In Lombaerts, H, Pollefeyt, D. (ed.): *Hermeneutics and Religious Education*. Leuven, 2000, Uitgeverij Peeters, 337-55. 350.

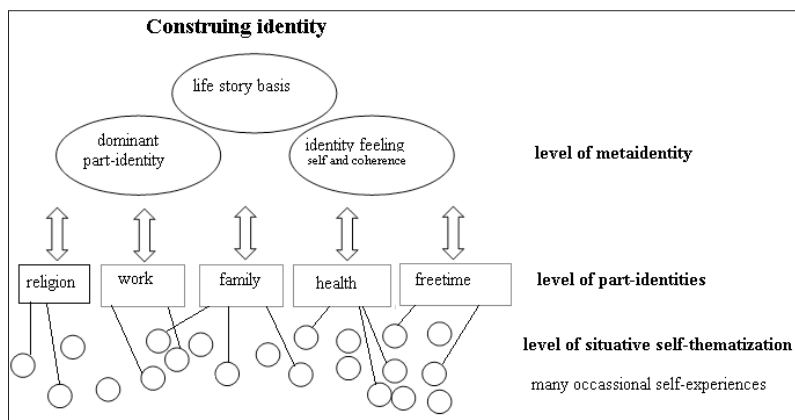
¹⁹⁵ Cf. Castells, M.: *The Power of Identity – The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol. 3*. Oxford, 1997, Blackwell, 9.

identity also means to use life energies and previous experiences to fill temporary needs, to see future from one project to the other.

The linear model of identity interpretation pictures human identity as being on a developmental course, where his abilities, skills, self image become more and more mature and developed, and he makes his decisions in every situation according to his developmental level. In the cyclic model, however, we see a continuous re-definition of self when facing different problems and tasks. We always have to find answers to the most basic questions in a concrete situation. Who am I? Where is my place? And the answers given to each situation –in Kreupp’s opinion – we integrate narratively into a unified system. In the events of everyday life, we make decisions that affect our self image too. But our decisions are not independent from our self image of that given moment. Even though self-thematizations can be manifold, we still can find points of reference to help forming coherence. Keupp calls them part-identities.¹⁹⁶ Part-identities are linked to different life situations, as work, family or religious identities. Part-identities are subjects of change, and depending on life situations or life stages they can come to the front or be pushed into the background. (If one does not face religious questions, his religious part-identity can remain in the background for years.) But these part-identities can come into conflict with each other, because one have different roles, he behaves differently at work, at home, or at a football match. Each stage of life can be dominated by a part-identity. For example working part-identity can be very important in the adult stage, people generally define themselves in life according to their workplace status. To keep life a coherent whole, people need structures. The primary way of creating such system is to give a historical frame to everyday life, and from the small stories and events, to form a big story having beginning, end and an inner structure. Part-identities form along the self-thematizations of different situations, we connect these part-identities by a generalized identity feeling, and “the conscious part of

¹⁹⁶ Keupp, H, Ahbe, T., Gmür, W., Höfer R., Mitzscherlich, B., Kraus, W., Straus, F.: *Identitätskonstruktionen – Das Patchwork der Identitäten in der Spätmoderne*. 217.

identity feeling leads to a narrative self-representation, a biographical core-narration (Kernnarration).”¹⁹⁷



*illustration**

The illustration shows that life events are linked to part-identities, and are interpreted by them. Thus in the narratives we rework self-thematizations and with the help of an ideology we shape them into a rational system: “Part-identities and identity in particular are complex systems that are only partially conscious thus we can narrate only parts of them. The central story is different, because it contains all the part-identities.”¹⁹⁸

Our thinking structure creates different stories from one event, and we use the most adequate. Narrative identity is not a prefabricated construction though it contains several scripts and a core story, but it is always formed in the concrete situation, and through interactions. “Narratives and stories are characteristically human indications of the way experiences are systematized, processed and interpreted. The

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. 217. Cf. Fowler szerint is mindig van egy úgynevezett „főnök” identitás, preferált történet. Fowler, J.W.: *Stages of Faith – The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. 19.

* Keupp, H, Ahbe, T., Gmür, W., Höfer R., Mitzscherlich, B., Kraus, W., Straus, F.: *Identitätskonstruktionen – Das Patchwork der Identitäten in der Spätmoderne*. 217.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. 229.

chaotic disorder of impressions and sensations disappears only by organization and interpretation, only in a narrative. People organize events daily in this manner, perhaps they can even find a meaning for them.”¹⁹⁹ According to this model the system thus used is abstract enough to consider life as a whole, but not so abstract to be unable to change continuously. Narrative identity appears as a process containing the changes, and even the fragmentality of life. In Giddens’ opinion it is not the interaction with other which is decisive in one’s identity (Mead) –though it is important– but the ability to continue his individualized narrative.²⁰⁰ Hardy goes as far as to claim we create our whole life and our relationship to the world narratively: “For we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, any love by narrative.”²⁰¹ Identity is not an abstraction we take possession later in life, but a structural framework construed by the story narrative, but it is the situation that fills it with content. “The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is represented.”²⁰²

Narrative thus appears as a thought framework or structure ensuring the cohesion of identity. “Narrative identity is the way one works on his identity in concrete interaction. The relevant aspects of identity are interpreted and represented in narrative depending on the actual situation.”²⁰³

¹⁹⁹ Heiko, E.: *Psychotrends – das Ich im 21. Jahrhundert*. München 1996, Piper, 202.

²⁰⁰ Giddens, A.: *Modernity and Self-identity – Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge, 1991, Polity Press, 54.

²⁰¹ Hardy, B.: Towards a poetics of fiction – An approach through narrative. *NOVEL*, 2. 1968, 5-14. 5.

²⁰² Goffman, E.: *Az én bemutatása a mindennapi életben*. 2000, Thalassa Alapítvány – Pólya Kiadó, 252-253

²⁰³ Lucius-Hoene, G.: Deppermann, A.: *Rekonstruktion narrativer Identität – Ein Arbeitsbuch zur Analyse narrativer Interviews*. Opladen, 2002, Opladen Leske, 55.

3.3.1.2. *The Concept of Narrative Identity*

The concept of narrative identity is a relatively new field of research, it has its roots in the beginning of the 1980s, and with the rapid changes of our time more and more articles have been published on this topic. There are publications about narrative identity among the writings of literary studies,²⁰⁴ as well as of psychology, theology, philosophy, sociology.²⁰⁵ One of the biggest questions of psychology is whether the self forms one unit along narratives.²⁰⁶ Sociology shows human identity formation using the narratives of its culture.²⁰⁷ In philosophy, narrative and life story appears as a meaning-finding tool for the self.²⁰⁸ Theologians investigate primarily the religious dimension of human life stories.²⁰⁹

We can define narrative identity in many ways. Some examples: "Narrative identity is the identity appearing in the autobiographic self-project."²¹⁰ "Narrative identity as an expression refers to the way of identity forming, to the method of the narration, independently of its content, the life story."²¹¹ „Narrative is the shape of personal identity. We know ourselves through our stories. (...) In short, our self-understanding naturally takes a narrative form."²¹² "Story is the outward shape of human identity."²¹³ Summarizing we can say

²⁰⁴ Cf. Barthes, R.: *The Pleasure of the Text*. 1975, Harper Collins Canada Ltd.

²⁰⁵ Cf. Bruner, J.: *Sinn, Kultur und Ich-Identität*. Heidelberg, 1997, Carl Auer.

²⁰⁶ Cf. Sarbin, T.R.: *The Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Psychology*. In Sarbin, T. R. (ed.): *Narrative Psychology – The Storied Nature of Human Conduct*. London, 1986, Praeger, 3-22.

²⁰⁷ Cf. Keupp, H, Ahbe, T., Gmür, W., Höfer R., Mitzscherlich, B., Kraus, W., Straus, F.: *Identitätskonstruktionen – Das Patchwork der Identitäten in der Spätmoderne*.

²⁰⁸ Cf. Carr, D.: *Time, narrative, and history*. Bloomington, 1986, Indiana University Press, Ricoeur, P: *Zeit und Erzählung III. – Die erzählte Zeit*. München, 1991, Fink.

²⁰⁹ Cf. Evers, R.: *Alter, Bildung, Religion – Eine subjekt- und bildungstheoretische Untersuchung*. Stuttgart, 1999, Kohlhammer.

²¹⁰ Drechsel, W.: *Lebensgeschichte und Lebens-Geschichten: Zugänge zur Seelsorge aus biographischer Perspektive*. 217.

²¹¹ Evers, R.: *Alter, Bildung, Religion – Eine subjekt- und bildungstheoretische Untersuchung*. 71.

²¹² Osmer, R.R.: *Teaching for Faith – A Guide for Teachers of Adult Classes*. Louisville, Kentucky, 1992, Westminster / John Knox Press, 113.

²¹³ Ritschl, D.: "Story" als Rohmaterial der Theologie. In Ritschl, D, Jones, H. O. (ed.): "Story" als Rohmaterial der Theologie. München, 1976, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 7-41. 32.

narrative identity is the form of which content is called life story. Identity always appears as having factual content, as a story strung on a given line. “The person processes his present experiences and situation in terms of modern way of life in his life story. (...) In it there appear results already achieved or hoped to achieve later. Man can be grasped in this narrative construction only.”²¹⁴

From the different conceptions of narrative identity it is clear that people construct, justify, modify their self-image during the interactions with their environment.

Narrative identity is the way one interprets himself in the world, and thus gives a frame to the content: the story and stories of his life. But it is true also the other way round: the “writing” of stories forms their identity. We can thread the events of our lives and our thoughts on different lines, and they all are parts of our identity.²¹⁵ It naturally does not mean that a narrative can only be a story encompassing our whole life. In reality it is a very rare phenomenon, shorter parts of it are told when one tells the story of his illness while lying in his sickbed, or the story of his marriage during a therapeutical session. In everyday life we generally relate short episodes or happenings, but we use the same thinking structure.²¹⁶

3.3.1.3. *The Role of Schemata in Identity Formation*

Like in any universal theory, the theory of narrative identity contains self-schemata, though not in Piaget’s meaning. These schemata are interlocked into a unified (narrative) system in an individual way in

²¹⁴ Evers, R.: *Alter, Bildung, Religion – Eine subjekt- und bildungstheoretische Untersuchung*. 65.

²¹⁵ “Life story can be considered as an expression of the present life situation, but it is more than that. It places present into a historical context and at the same symbolizes all that the individual in that given moment considers as meaningful in terms of his whole life. Life story becomes a symbol of human life.” Drechsel, W.: *Lebensgeschichte und Lebens-Geschichten: Zugänge zur Seelsorge aus biographischer Perspektive*. 186.

²¹⁶ Rizzuto, A.-M.: *Religious Development Beyond the Modern Paradigm Discussion – The Psychoanalytic Point of View. The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*. 2001/3: 201-14. 204.

everybody, and they are not universal. Schematic patterns, scripts can be similar, because these schemata are given everywhere.²¹⁷ In the narratives or narrative fragments we borrow schemata from our social milieu, environment. We use the narratives of our culture as well: “Narrative structures are not devised individually, it is the environment that provides them breeding ground, so their changes have their roots in the complex forming of reality.”²¹⁸

Narrative approach does not deny the importance of schemata, but claims that they appear in individual configurations. The basic roles of narrative identity construction are similar, but the combination of content and schemata is completely individual.²¹⁹ Life happens to us, in its course our self-thematizations change according to the rules of developmental psychology, but seeing from a personal perspective, it is not a prescribed change, but something understood afterwards. Every way of life is individual, even though they are similarly individual.

3.3.1.4. Comparison of Paradigmatic and Narrative Thinking

Jerome Bruner pictures the changes of parlance in a culture in two ways. The primary is the so-called narrative thinking of which characteristics are temporary organizations, decomposition of stories into episodes, and the central role of personal and social relationships.²²⁰ This is an almost tangible world description whereas

²¹⁷ It was Roger Schank who introduced the idea of scripts. Scripts are schemata systems that contain our knowledge connected with social activities about expected behaviour in a concrete situation. Schank, R.C.: *The structure of episodes in memory*. In Bobrow, D. G., Collins, A. N. (ed.): *Representation and understanding*. New York, 1975, Academic Press, 232-272.

²¹⁸ Keupp, H, Ahbe, T., Gmür, W., Höfer R., Mitzscherlich, B., Kraus, W., Straus, F.: *Identitätskonstruktionen – Das Patchwork der Identitäten in der Spätmoderne*. 208.

²¹⁹ “Human existence is participation in a process to find balance between participation (be part of the nature, or of a “whole”) and separation (be ourselves in our decision). The task, the need of freedom, and the need of concealment of the individual is to find the personal proportion of participation and separation between his actual psychological level of development and social and life story conditions.” Fraas, H.-J.: *Bildung und Menschenbild in theologischer Perspektive*. Göttingen, 108.

²²⁰ See Bruner, J.: *Valóságos elmék, lehetséges világok*. Budapest, 2005, Új Mandátum, 19-45.

the other, paradigmatic thinking endeavors to grasp reality in a categorical way, and its characteristics are the description of abstract phenomena, uprooted from their context and the hierarchic structure of concepts.

In the narrative approach we can experience world as a place where people act to achieve tangible goals. The events unfold in a definite, logical sequence. Bruner compares the two different cognitive and systematizing approach as follows:

	science	narrative
Focus	Reality, Universal Truth	Patterns, Experiences, Relationships, Intentions
Privileges	Precision, Exactitude	Interpretation, Metaphor, Allegory
Verification	Proofs, Experiments, Categorizations	Verisimilitude
Data collection	Quantitative	Qualitative
Framework	Objective, Real	Subjective, Experiential
Disciplines	Sciences, Mathematics	Arts, Humanities

*table*²²¹

These two systems exist parallelly, we use both in everyday life. Paradigmatic thinking is more abstract, rises above contextuality, thus it is suitable to systematize various phenomena and transport ideas.²²²

On the other hand narrative thinking is the system of related stories and unambiguous matches (e.g. I place myself into the story). In Ferenc Pataki's opinion it is the ancient form of thinking: "Individual processes self-related experiences and events of personal biography according to the logics of story editing. Namely, he

²²¹ Narrative and paradigmatic cognitive in Brunner's interpretation. See Pléh, Cs.: *A mai lélektan. Magyar Tudomány*. 2004/11: 1225.

²²² The use of writing and the revolution of printed books contributed to the extension of this thinking structure to a great extent. McLuhan, M.: *A Gutenberg-galaxis – A tipográfiai ember létrejötte*. Budapest, 2001, Trezor Kiadó,

organizes them into a continuous narrative structure that serves as a basic, direct experience (first-order-self concept) raw material to a higher level, cognitive structure (second-order-self concept) produced by deduction and generalization, providing the content of the self. As Sarbin says: people understand their primary selves (the “I”) as a –both metaphorical and literal– storyteller.”²²³

There are many explanations about the origins of the two systems. In Donald’s opinion during the evolution into man different so-called representative systems formed, the levels of communications evolved building on one another. It was followed by the forming of the mimetic culture, where the first men transmitted information by metacommunicative means; gestures, imitation, performing. Then came the language using man who handed down his knowledge in myths and narratives. With the invention of the alphabet established knowledge came to existence, scrolls and later books bequeathed culture from generation to generation. Every era had a way of thinking of its own.²²⁴

In Jan Assmann’s opinion human communities create cultures of memory.²²⁵ One type is the Egyptian culture that is characterized with repetition. The other is the Jewish or Greek that have an oral, narrative tradition. The sacred texts of Judaism played an important role in the transmission of culture, because the text serves as guidance and pattern to the next generations thus makes the ancient culture present. “The wisdom of Egyptians, Hebrews and Mesopotamians is that for lack of a better solution, they tell stories, because they do not have the speculative skill of Kant, Hegel, or Nietzsche.”²²⁶ But story is not only a mere medium level abstraction compared to paradigmatic thinking categories, but in the understanding of the world through

²²³ Pataki, F.: *Élettörténet és identitás*. Budapest, 2001, Osiris, 118.

²²⁴ Cf. Merlin Donald’s theory about the changes of representative systems and cultures through the evolution into man. See Donald, M.: *Origins of the modern Mind*. Cambridge, 1991, Harvard University Press, 162.

²²⁵ See Assmann, J.: *A kulturális emlékezet – Írás, emlékezés és politikai identitás a korai magaskultúrákban*, Budapest, Atlantisz 1999. 70.

²²⁶ Changeux, J-P, Ricoeur, P.: *A természet és a szabályok*. Budapest, 2000, Osiris, 323-324.

stories there is an ancient quality that provides explanation as well by orientating man in the universe not only in space, but in time.

In Lévi-Strauss' cultural anthropology we can find a similar explanation; though he appoints the two different ways of thinking as characteristics of "hot" and "cold" cultures.²²⁷ While in the "cold" culture categorical relations and hierarchies are the important factors, in the "hot" version social consciousness is arranged around narratives. The first has a cyclic view of time, its power lies in continuity and repetition, the second, on the other hand, is able to integrate even the most radical social changes. In our time, the effect of such changes are getting stronger. Telecommunication plays an always growing role in people's life, since on average, a European spends three hours a day in front of his TV or computer screen. That strengthens the use of and thinking in symbols. This kind of reading and getting information concentrates mostly on pictures and images. A new virtual world is forming now with new symbol system and language. These changes reinforce the story (or image) centered way of thinking beside the structural approach, for films, news, reports tell us newer and newer stories, complete our knowledge about the world with newer and newer information, and we try to systematize them all. That increases both the relativistic tendencies of our age, and the need to understand our identity through stories.

3.3.2. The Theological Relevance of Narrative Approach

The question arises as to what kind of thinking structure a religious man applies while uses a symbolical-mystical language? In the following pages, we examine the differences and similarities between religious thinking and the aforementioned paradigmatic, and narrative thinking.

²²⁷ See Lévi-Strauss, C.: *Structural anthropology*. New York, 1958, Basic Books, 311-317.

3.3.2.1. *The Language of Narrative Thinking and of Religion*

In the history of Christianity we can find examples to both paradigmatic and narrative thinking structure. Still, the language of our Christian thinking has basically a narrative structure. We bequeath value systems, worldview, and belief systems according to a narrative structure. We could see how the man of our time begins to rediscover the power of narration, and tends to think in symbols and images. But together with the man, the church has to rediscover this method of Christian thinking which is present both in the Old and New Testaments.

Gerhard von Rad also points to the Bible's original narrative characteristic: "Thus re-telling remains the most legitimate form of theological discourse on the Old Testament."²²⁸ In the world of the people of the Old Testament narrative thinking was strongly present, they experienced life as stories, and handed down their experiences by stories: "In the future, when your son asks you, "What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?" tell him: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the LORD sent signs and wonders—great and terrible—on Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household." (Deut 6,20-22.) For the first Christian the history of Israel was not only a succession of events, but "the story where the revelations about God are rooted and linked."²²⁹ Christians, for many generations, interpreted their life stories with God as a continuation of Israel's story. This is why Ritschl consider them as primary raw materials for theology. In his opinion, we use two different languages in theology: one is the informing, the other is the addressing. The first used generally for telling faith stories, the second for praising God.²³⁰ Hauerwas goes even further when he claims that dogmatic language usage is also be based on narratives,

²²⁸ Von Rad, G.: *Theologie des Alten Testaments – Die Theologie der geschichtlichen Überlieferungen Israels*. München, 1976, Kaiser Taschenbücher, 121.

²²⁹ Ritschl, D.: *Zur Logik der Theologie – Kurze Darstellung der Zusammenhänge theologischer Grundgedanken*. 180.

²³⁰ *Ibid.* 181.

that there are stories behind the dogmas. Narrative thinking is so determining in the thinking and theology of religious people that even our paradigmatic formulas are based on it.²³¹

Why is this close connection between narrative thinking and religiosity? We could see that paradigmatic thinking categorizes and forms hierarchies. Narrative thinking, on the other hand, creates a system in the world without embracing every phenomenon into an abstract, scientific arrangement. (We can add that less abstract a system, more flexible it becomes.) Narrative does not strive to categorize everything, so it can talk about phenomena like the fragmented state of life, it can accept paradoxes, or things inexplicable or impossible to deduct. Narrative composes its final truth in images and metaphors. This is why it is suited for religious people to understand their place in the world, or interpret their life in connection with God. As Streib says: "Faith has a unique relation to narrative. If it is true that narrative has 'the power to remake reality,' then interacting with, and 'reading' these narratives – including our life narrative– enables us to become 'authors' of our own lives as well."²³²

3.3.2.2. *The Relationship between Narrative and Orientation*

Narrative approach does not offer only an adequate model of our identity, but narratives have a reality creating/re-creating function as well.²³³

According to the narrative approach human identity is a collection of individual constellation of schemes: "one becomes what he was told to become and how he forms his own story." People are in some respects determined by the building blocks they were given in life, but they are free to decide how they want to use these blocks, what

²³¹ See Hauerwas, S.: *Seelig sind die Friedfertigen – Ein Entwurf Christlicher Ethik*, Neukirchen, 1995, Newkirchener Verlag, 71.

²³² Streib, H.: *Hermeneutics of Metaphor – Symbol and Narrativ in Faith Development Theory*. 11.

²³³ Cf. Ritschl, D.: *Zur Logik der Theologie – Kurze Darstellung der Zusammenhänge theologischer Grundgedanken*. 251.

construction system they want to apply in the building. It is not indifferent how we link together the events of our life, what relations do we suppose among them, in short, how we orientate in the world.²³⁴

If we accept the importance of narratives in the human identity forming, the question about the nature of these narratives is unavoidable. For narratives can be various according to the script they were based on. But there is one thing in common in them: they all have orientation. Every narrative is about something.²³⁵ The consciousness of our identity is filled with factual contents: relationships, happenings, places, events, and their interpretation. Erikson regards identity as a sense of self, the notion of narrative identity completes this theory of self with an orientation. When we compose our identity as a story, we give it an orientation. During storytelling we systematize events, put them into an order of importance, accentuate some facts more than the others, sometimes we change time aspects, another time we relate them linearly. Meanwhile very important decisions take place: when we chose a version, we exclude other lines of interpretation. In narration the world contracts, but at the same time it becomes more orderly. In Hauerwas' opinion meaning formation is always formation of a narrative systematized by different aspects.²³⁶ Narrative orders thoughts according to a perspective like magnet orders iron filings.

Characteristic feature of the narrative is that it does not only describe and organize events, but creates reality. "A developed narrative, then, is not simply an account of what happened, but implies much more about the psychological perspectives taken towards those happenings. Accordingly, one deep reason why we tell stories to ourselves (or to our confessor, or to our analyst or to our confidant) is precisely to 'make sense' of what we are encountering in

²³⁴ Armin Nassehi called the attention to the appearance of new identification techniques that can help people to reflect their lives, to interpret the events of their lives. See Nassehi, A.: *Die Zeit der Gesellschaft. Auf dem Weg zu einer soziologischen Theorie der Zeit*. Opladen, 1993, Westdeutscher Verlag 347.

²³⁵ Cf. Sarbin, T.R.: *The Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Psychology*. In Sarbin, T. R. (ed.): *Narrative Psychology – The Storied Nature of Human Conduct*. London, 1986, Praeger, 3-22. 9.

²³⁶ Cf. Hauerwas, S: *Truthfulness and Tragedy – Further Investigations into Christian Ethics*. Notre Dame, Indiana, 1977, University of Notre Dame, 23.

the course of living—through narrative elaborations of the natural arguments of action.”²³⁷ Life story and religion are both poetic. It does not only report facts, but gives an imaginative frame to the world: “Stories create an individual historical reality by being told and retold. The story is not identical with any reality based on historical facts, it seems completely independent from it.”²³⁸

Is there any principle we use consciously or non-consciously to assemble our self-image?²³⁹ This is what McAdams writes about: “In order to live well, with unity and purpose, we compose a heroic narrative of the self that illustrates essential truths about ourselves.”²⁴⁰ With the personal myth an individual worldview, a personal theory comes to life, which put into practice is called our life. Self-myths, leitmotifs are not to be belittled: they play a very important role in understanding ourselves. When we describe them as development, as way or maturing, they do not only serve as explanation, but as a plan facilitating our orientation.

²³⁷ Bruner, J.S., Luciarelli, J.: *Monologue as narrative recreation of the world*. Cambridge, MA, 1989, Harvard University Press, 73-97. 79.

²³⁸ Ritschl, D.: “Story” als Rohmaterial der Theologie. In Ritschl, D, Jones, H. O. (ed.): “Story” als Rohmaterial der Theologie. 20.

²³⁹ Cf. Buetow, H.A.: *Religion in Personal Development – An Analysis and a Prescription*. New York, San Francisco, Bern, Frankfurt am Main, Paris, London, 1991, Peter Lang, 261.

²⁴⁰ McAdams, D.: *The Stories We Live By – Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*. New York, 1993, Morrow, 9.



4. THE LIFE STORY AND THE CHRISTIAN META-NARRATIVE



“What do we and the people of the Bible have in common? The anxieties and joys of living; the sense of wonder and the resistance to it; the awareness of the hiding God and moments of longing to find him.” Abraham Heschel²⁴¹

4.1. INTRODUCTION

Certain rules of story-editing are valid for narratives about both humans and God. In this chapter, we shall deal with these rules, the patterns in forming a story, as we examine the elements of our narrative identity, the ways we forge our lives' events into a story, and the way this story becomes part of the common story of Christianity.²⁴²

To understand ourselves, to find our own place in the world, is an ancient aspiration. We encounter the same desire even in the pages of the Bible: “What is man that you are mindful of him?” (Psalms 8:4)²⁴³ the psalmist asks.²⁴⁴

In the previous chapters we have already dealt with the difficulties of interpreting life and its meaning, not only in times of crises, but

²⁴¹ Gerkin, C. V.: *The Living Human Document – Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode*, Nashville, 1984, Abingdon Press, 63.

²⁴² Both tradition and history are orally transmitted, and individuals relate to their context through narratives. Transforming our collective identity into the Kingdom of God is not a mere chance; it gives a metaphorical frame to all the experiences the community underwent in its relationship with God. The story strengthens the process of life, so that it can become more than a simple succession of days; there are special periods, expectations, and their positive or negative realizations. All people need to relate their own identity to a group, nation, or culture, to embed their own story into a bigger one in order to understand it. We need these meta-narrations to place our lives into a special frame of reference, to help our orientation in the world. Cf. Luckmann, T.: *Die unsichtbare Religion*. Frankfurt am Main, 1991, Suhrkamp, 80.

²⁴³ All the Bible quotations are from the New International Version.

²⁴⁴ Cf. Mk 9,36-37; 1 Cor 5,6b-8; 1 Peter 1,22-2,3.

in everyday business as well. As Karl Rahner says “Man is a question without an answer”.²⁴⁵ And still, Niebuhr is right, too, when he considers man an “answering” being.²⁴⁶ Every time we make decisions in different situations, such as in family or political matters, we give a factual answer to the question of “Who am I?”. Certainly, those answers are rarely conscious. Nevertheless, we want to retain our self-identity; we strive to be one with that whom we call “I”. But is there really a containable, comprehensible human essence, or should we interpret our identity as a process during which we answer the questions of life in concrete situations, and these answers depend mostly on the nature of the situation?

4.1.1. The Role of Stories in Human Life

It is interesting to observe in how many different forms stories are present in our everyday life. We are interested in stories: small children listen to tales, adults go to the cinema or read books, and people enjoy conversation.²⁴⁷ Each story helps us to understand our lives better. Stories generally cannot be condensed into one moral or theorem, they address people as a whole:

“Good stories are constructed to captivate their listeners who, though unnoticed, can find themselves in them. They make their listeners identify with the hero’s problems, fears, questions, and conflicts, and recognize the story as their own. Stories come from the real depths of the soul. In them, like in a mirror, everything reappears that its listeners have already experienced; feelings of attraction and tenderness, their male or female existence, questions of growing up, of illness, and death; encounters with happiness, and hopelessness,

²⁴⁵ Rahner, K.: Experiment Mensch, in *Die Frage nach dem Menschen*. Rombach, H. Freiburg, München, 1966, Verlag Karl AlDer, 55.

²⁴⁶ See Niebuhr, R.: *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, New Jersey, 1964, Prentice Hall, 167.

²⁴⁷ People are essentially interested in stories, “People are interested in people more than anything else”. Dörger, H. J.: *Heilige und andere Menschen – Gedanken zu vier Fernseh-Meditationen*. In Grözinger, A.: Luther, H. (ed.): *Religion und Biographie, Perspektiven zur gelebten Religion*. 268.

conflict and fear, rage and passion, peace and reconciliation. Stories carry and bring into life everything we only suspect, feel, or many times suppress and delay.”²⁴⁸

Stories may have their deep impact on our feelings, because our inner world works like a story.²⁴⁹ In the previous chapter we already established that we think in stories. These stories contain characters, events, and their mutual relations. They work like a map to help us orientate ourselves, and reach our goal.

We need such maps in our thinking because we construct our world as an “inner relief map”.²⁵⁰ In our inner map there are persons situated in different altitude-points, and in different distances from the point we watch them. Stories guide us in paths we construct as we tread them. But what happens when where we do not only listen to a story, but the story is about us?

4.1.2. Relationship between our Life Story and Identity

If we asked anybody the question about their “true self”, most often probably, we would get shocked silence in reply, or perhaps they would answer in embarrassment that they had not thought of the question before, or had done so only rarely, even though people ask themselves about it many times, and in many forms. We need to understand and define ourselves in this world and in our every decision. Even in the most prosaic ones, the way we picture ourselves and our environment is always present. We know that our deeds and feelings are in harmony with that certain essence we call “I”, even though this “I” remains a secret even from ourselves. “Who am I really?” To answer this question we generally enumerate dates; a name, essential relationships, life events. But if somebody asks us to recount the story

²⁴⁸ Baumgartner, I.: *Pastoralpsychologie – Einführung in die Praxis Heilender Seelsorge*. Düsseldorf, 1990, Patmos, 566.

²⁴⁹ Cf. Jüngel, E.: *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt – Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus*. 5 ed.: Tübingen, 1986, Mohr Siebeck, 415.

²⁵⁰ Cf. Bruner, J.: *Acts of Meaning*, Cambridge, 1990, Harvard University Press, 91.

of our lives, we can do it without hesitation. Our life story is a kind of answer to the same “Me-question”, but it has reference points –events, scenes, persons– in relation to which I can define myself. Later on, we will see that our life story is a continual reflection of our self-concept. Our opinion about ourselves, and our narration is not a mere factual report, but an interpretation of the events that happened to us. The events we encountered are more than the circumstances and the factual dates put together; they contain the way we experienced them – and later, how we interpret and fit them into our life stories. There are events and scenes in our lives which fall out from our recollection, and others, perhaps of lesser importance, become significant.

We can retell our life story again and again, but the course of the narration changes according to the listeners and our points of view. A life story is a representation of identity on the basis of a definite system of aspects. It contains many parts of the whole, but it is never the whole itself, just a segment of it. Narrating any of my life events can elicit many emphases. If I retell the story of my illness, I can interpret it in relation to myself, God, or my spouse. When I describe an incident of my life to an old friend, I will put the emphasis on different details than if I do the same to a stranger.²⁵¹ Thus, although our life story has many forms and even more aspects, or we can relay shorter or longer episodes of it, fundamentally, we just endeavor to answer the question “Who am I”. We try to define ourselves in our world, in our life situations, and in comparison to other people and events. This “historiography” helps us understand ourselves and to make ourselves understood. So as long as humans exist, they will comment and interpret everything happening to them. “The purpose of telling about our lives is not to save our memories, but to enter fully into the spirit of life.”²⁵² Our life story is an incomplete narrative that we revise again and again until our death. Through the processing

²⁵¹ Relating the story of life can have many other influential factors; such as whether the story is told of one’s free will, or under compulsion, anonymously or confidentially, to a real or an imaginative partner. Ibid. 155.

²⁵² Evers, R.: *Alter, Bildung, Religion – Eine subjekt- und bildungstheoretische Untersuchung*. 11.

and the revising of events we arrive at the life story itself.²⁵³ But what factors influence us, how do we choose among events, what are the aspects of our ordering them, and how do we find meaning for both the parts and the whole?

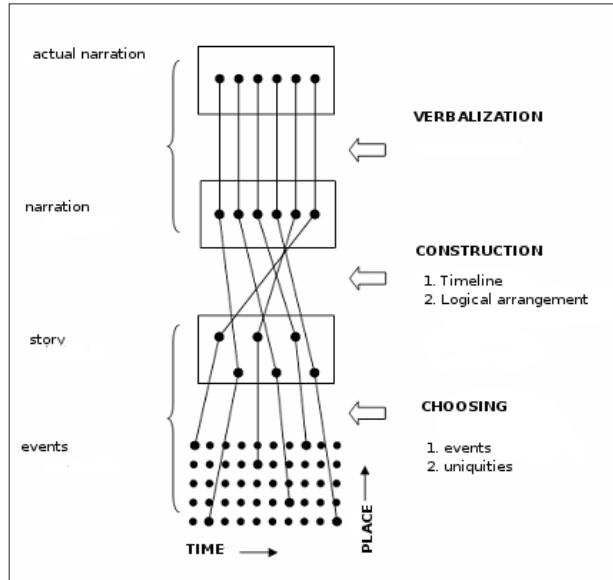
4.2. FROM EVENT TO LIFE STORY

According to Walter Schapp, human existence is an existence interwoven with stories.²⁵⁴ Still, although there are many things we understand only as parts of different stories, they will never become parts of our stories. Not all experiences become conscious, and they are not necessarily important in constructing the story. From day to day many unexpressed or inexpressible influences affect us. We cannot put everything into words, but even those unexpressed incidents influence the form of the story, constituting a pre-narrative structure for it.²⁵⁵ Behind our every recital, there extends the infinite horizon of our personal world in which every event of our life has its own place. Our identity stands behind our every recital as a pack of experiences, though we cannot relate all of them to anybody, and, perhaps we ourselves do not understand them. The conscious part of our life is attached to the language and its usage. Our thoughts and our remembrance need words to be realized.

²⁵³ Schütz says consciousness has two forms, experience and remembrance. Through our whole life an inner experiencing process persists in us, though we generally do not take notice of it, because it belongs to our thinking process; we do not think about our thinking, or interpreting. On the other hand, remembrance has a reflexive quality. Schütz, A.: *Gesammelte Aufsätze – Band 1, Das Problem der sozialen Wirklichkeit*. Den Haag, 1971, Nijhoff, 5.

²⁵⁴ See Schapp, W.: *In Geschichten verstrickt – Zum Sein von Mensch und Ding*. Frankfurt am Main, 2004, Klostermann.

²⁵⁵ Cf. Ricoeur, P.: Mimesis and Representation. *Annals of Scholarship*, 2, 1981. 15-32. 16.

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Schmid describes the process of events becoming a life story as four levels built upon each other.

1. The first level is the pre-narrative level, in which we experience different events, but they are present independently.

2. On the second level events become a story. The important, integrating elements remain, and form a perspective which serves as an interpretational base.

3. The third level is the full narrative when the chosen and interpreted events are ordered by relation of cause and effect.

4. The last abstraction level is the level of the narration when the complete narrative comes into being in a given situation with specific means. The means are generally different forms of verbalization, but can be film, dance, or music too.²⁵⁶

Therefore every life story is a construction which is ordered by the

* See Schmid, W.: *Elemente der Narratologie*. Berlin, New York, 2005, de Gruyter, 267.

²⁵⁶ Ibid. 267.

basic rules of story-engineering. A life story has to have a beginning, a focal point, and an ending. It has to comprise a central theme. It has to contain a preparation phase, conflict, solution, sometimes even catharsis. Events become important because of their role in the narration. Others are left out, because they do not fit into the chosen dramatization. Thus life stories, like any other good story, have to have a certain orientation and a combination of the different parts. So the main parts of identity –and in Drechsel’s opinion of life story engineering– are coherence, consistence, and continuity.²⁵⁷ Being a narrative form of our identity, our life story has to express and stress the continuity of our selves, in spite of the changes that transformed our thinking and ideologies. Life story is therefore a “meta-narrative” about ourselves.²⁵⁸ It gives an all-encompassing explanation for our course of life and the decisions we made in different landmarks of our lives.

4.2.1. The Role of Patterns in Narrations

The rules of story-engineering determine our narration alone, but are accompanied by the structures of meaning. Oeverman maintains that every narration happens always on two different levels: one of them is conscious (the events we chose to share, places, people etc.), the other is the latent reasoning we share through the conscious narrating. Those reasoning and interpreting structures are not evident at first sight. Still, they have an impact on the course and message of the story.²⁵⁹ Among our everyday narrations and stories we can find many similarly edited and engineered. Our small stories, like our life stories,

²⁵⁷ See Drechsel, W.: *Lebensgeschichte und Lebens-Geschichten, Zugänge zur Seelsorge aus biographischer Perspektive*. 213.

²⁵⁸ Cf. Lott, J.: *Erfahrung – Religion – Glaube. Probleme, Konzepte und Perspektiven religionspädagogischen Handelns in Schule und Gemeinde*. Weinheim, 1991, 187.

²⁵⁹ See Oevermann, U.: Allert, T.: Konau, E.: Krambeck, J.: *Die Methodologie einer „objektiven Hermeneutik“*. In Zedler, H. (ed.): *Aspekte qualitativer Sozialforschung – Studien zu Aktionsforschung, empirischer Hermeneutik und reflexiver Sozialtechnologie*. Opladen, 1983, Leske, 95-123. 98.

are similar to each other – and are similar to others’ stories, too.²⁶⁰ The course of events are never the same in two different people’s lives, but the interpretative schemes make them similar. Von Engelhardt shows the following sources in our engineering schemes:

(a) People relate the events of their lives to different political or social changes or social structures. A life story many times follows the track of schools and workplaces. The logic of such stories follows a chronological order, and their structure is linear.

(b) Personal identity can appear as a part of a bigger, common story. In that scheme life is interpreted in its relation to others’ lives. The inner structure of such story always evolves around the family’s, friendships’, and other communities’ lives.

(c) There are patterns in which past and present are closely related to each other, and the unity of the story is formed by the continual repetition of topics and motives rather than any chronological order.²⁶¹

4.2.2. Life Story Screenplays

In our lives, we realize different screenplays.²⁶² In Frye’s comparison narratives are composed like the ancient dramas’ scripts.²⁶³ One of them is the comedy, in which case not only the ending, but the course of the story is principally positive. Its opposite is the tragedy, the screenplay of failure and fall. Other screenplays can be the satire or the romantic story. A screenplay always gives an explicit order, traces the chain of events, and gives an orientation to their course.²⁶⁴

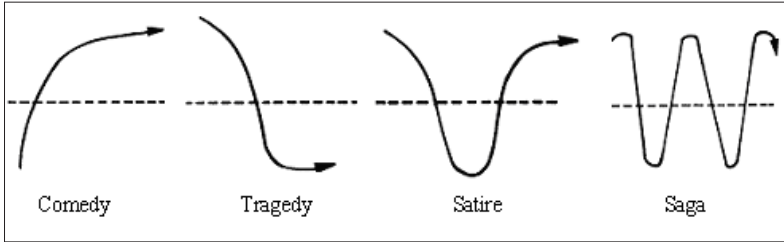
²⁶⁰ Cf. Evers, R.: *Alter, Bildung, Religion – Eine subjekt- und bildungstheoretische Untersuchung*.12.

²⁶¹ Cf. Engelhardt, Mv: *Biographie und Identität – Die Rekonstruktion und Präsentation von Identität im mündlichen autobiographischen Erzählen*. In Sparr, W. (ed.): *Wer schreibt meine Lebensgeschichte? Biographie, Autobiographie und Hagiographie und ihre Entstehungszusammenhänge*. Gütersloh, 1990, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 197-247. 227-240.

²⁶² Cf. Frye, N.: *Anatomy of Criticism – Four Essays* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957. 17.

²⁶³ Cf. Gerkin, C. V.: *The Living Human Document – Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode*. 126.

²⁶⁴ “The ordering of memories depends on the ordering of experiencing.” Rosenthal,

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The importance of Frye's theory lies not in the classification of the stories, but in the realization that stories basically are constructed in certain thought structures.²⁶⁵ These screenplays or thought structures not only influence the interpretation of events, but have an impact on our future experiences: we order them by certain schemes. The basic structures of our stories show how we relate to the world around us.²⁶⁶

4.2.3. The Role of Time Levels

Life stories do not follow the linear sequence of time; they narrate those events from the past or the future which are related to the present. A life story is not a finished narration, but a multitude of sketches. "Memories are structured and dispersed at different levels which –like islands– are separated by abysses."²⁶⁷ On the other hand,

G.: *Erlebte und erzählte Lebensgeschichte – Gestalt und Struktur biographischer Selbstbeschreibungen*, Frankfurt am Main, Campus, 1995. 76.

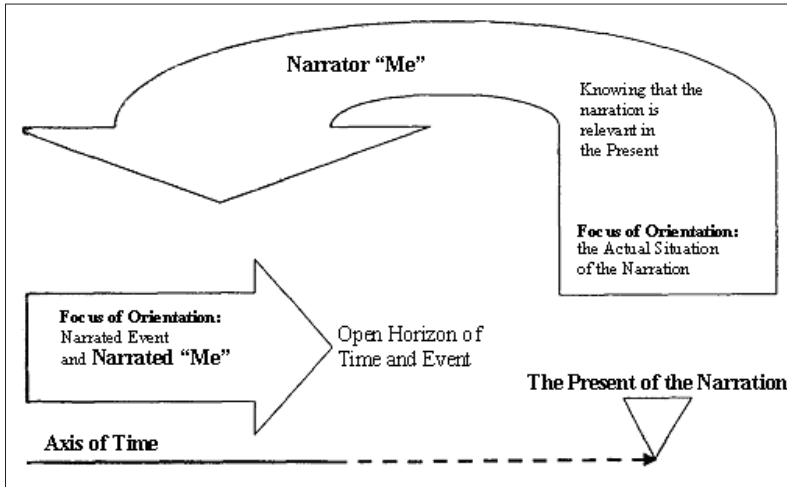
* The four main screenplays and their orientation. See Gergen, K. J.: Gergen, M. M.: *Narrative Form and the Construction of Psychological Science*. in Sarbin, T. R. (ed.), *Narrative Psychology – The Storied Nature of Human Conduct*. New York, London, 1986, Praeger 22-45. 29.

²⁶⁵ In our everyday life Frye's screenplays work as self-fulfilling prophecies, since they are interpretations of facts already happened. When people live their lives or make life stories of them, they want them to have a happy ending even if the events are tragic. They search the future prospects for the meaning of all that happened. See Frye, N.: *Anatomy of Criticism – Four Essays*. Princeton, 1957, Princeton University Press, 17.

²⁶⁶ "Organised memory depend upon organised experience" Koffka, K.: *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*. New York, 1963, Harcourt, Brace & World, 520.

²⁶⁷ Fulda, D.: *Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Geschichte – Zeitbewusstsein in*

our remembrance can annul time and go backward without ever noticing those abysses. Ricoeur places the time of a story between the socially and the personally experienced time.²⁶⁸ It is a time with its own characteristic rules, and it explains why two time levels are always present in a life story. One of them is the past's, the way the events happened and I understood them, and the other is the present's as I understand them now.



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I have a double role in the story: I am both an actor and the narrator. As a narrator, I see myself from the outside, objectively, and recite the events that happened to me as such. At the same time, my narration is composed in the most subjective way possible. “Because of this double time perspective, the narrator has two describing methods: one is the time level of the narrated time (the time the event actually happened)

Autobiographien des ausgehenden 20. Jahrhunderts. In Simonis, A.: Simoins, L. (ed.): *Zeitwahrnehmung und Zeitbewusstsein der Moderne.* Bielefeld, 2000, Aisthesis Verlag, 197- 226.

²⁶⁸ Ricoeur, P.: *Narrated Time.* *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 29, 1985, no.4, 263.

* See, Lucius-Hoene, G.: Deppermann, A.: *Rekonstruktion narrativer Identität – Ein Arbeitsbuch zur Analyse narrativer Interviews.* Opladen, 2002, Leske, 25.

with the point of view of the narrator from that time, and the other, the time level of the actual narration with present aspirations and points of view.”²⁶⁹ In the narration there are at least two time levels, two “I”s present: the narrated time and the present, per the narrated “I” and the narrator “I”.

4.2.4. The Self-forging in the Intermediate Area

Any connection between people always forms a special communication area.²⁷⁰ In this area we communicate through the language supposing that every word has the same –or at least a similar– meaning for our partner too. In the intermediate area of the self and its surroundings many events occur since we are in a dialectic interaction with each other. One such area is the cultural environment: “Culture is a ‘performance’ of one’s ultimate beliefs and values, a concrete way of ‘staging’ one’s religion. Individuals are actors, but they are culturally and historically costumed and thrown into plots that are culturally and historically conditioned. They may not be given particular lines, but they are given a particular language. Culture is the scenery, the environment, the world into which one is thrown when one appears onstage. The cultural scenery influences and conditions what the actors see, say, and do. If the world is a stage, culture provides the props to fill it.”²⁷¹ The boundaries of identity are not easily defined, because our environment has a deeper impact on us than we suspect.²⁷² We use culturally transmitted screenplays and schemes in our life narrations without even noticing it. Still, we are not determined ultimately by our environment, because self-identity is formed deep in one’s

²⁶⁹ Ibid. 25.

²⁷⁰ Habermas, J.: *Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns – Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft*. Frankfurt am Main, 1981, Suhrkamp, 206.

²⁷¹ Vanhoozer, K. J.: *The World Well Staged? Theology, Culture, and Hermeneutics*. In Carson, D. A., Woodbridge, J. D. (ed.): *God & Culture*. Wheaton, 1993, Crossway, 1-31. 2.

²⁷² Cf. Kohli, M.: *Institutionalisierung und Individualisierung der Erwerbsbiographie*. In Beck, U., Beck-Gernsheim, E. (ed.): *Riskante Freiheiten*. Frankfurt am Main, 1994, Suhrkamp, 219-244. 221.

personality and produces decisions and interpretations completely independent from outside influences. Even then, our identity needs a base of comparison to distinguish itself, along with a certain kind of identification with its environment. Thus, the model of the “space in-between” is a good expression of the interaction between our own schemes and those adopted from our environment.²⁷³

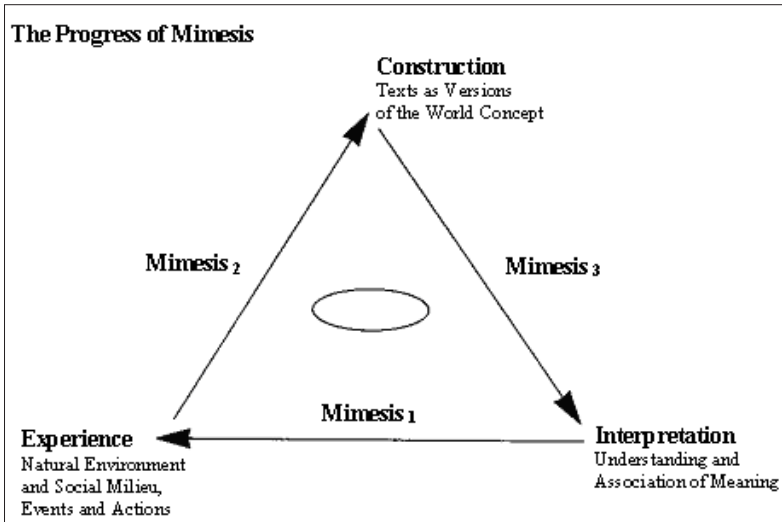
Space in-between is a peculiar phenomenon, because we live in it without noticing it. It cannot be described, because the world present in it is in a blurred, half-formed stage, where inside and outside, the personal and collective, cannot be distinguished from each other. Winnicott says: “My assumption is that if we need this dual division, we need a third as well: the third part of the life of a human being, a part we cannot ignore, is an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall be a resting-place for the individual engaged in the human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated. This is a transitional space of experience where inner reality and outer life are both formative powers. Language (like religion, arts, and culture in general) belongs to this intermediate area. As Gerkin says “Language constructs world. To have a world, to live in a world, means, for humans, to inhabit a time and place in which a certain language is connected with experience to give meaning to that experience. More than anything else, the capacity to make meaning marks the human as human.”²⁷⁴

4.2.5. The Hermeneutics of Self

The life story, as an expression of our identity forms in its complexity in an area where past, present, and future, the outer world and our

²⁷³ Green with reference to Winnicott treats religion as a collective transition object. Cf. Green, A.: *Der Mythos, Ein kollektives Übergangsobjekt – Kritischer Ansatz und psychoanalytische Perspektiven*. In Lévi-Strauss, C.: Vernant, J. (ed.): *Mythos onhe Illusion*. Frankfurt am Main, 1984, Suhrkamp, 84 -116. 105.

²⁷⁴ Gerkin, C. V.: *The Living Human Dokument – Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode*. 40.



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inner self, our life experiences and our future plans are all present. There can be found those schemes and patterns we inherited from our surroundings, and use them similarly, but the experiencing of events and their forming into a story is very special and unique.

Gebauer and Wulf use the idea of “mimesis” for the emergence of this area: “In the course of mimetic processes humans relates themselves to the world. Mimesis makes it possible for humans to integrate the outer world into their inner one by practically leaving themselves, in the expressing of their inner world.”²⁷⁵ Ricoeur describes three different aspects of this process, which follow each other.²⁷⁶

Mimesis 1 is the sketch of the story, which is ready even before the event. That is a certain kind of pre-knowledge, the system of our

* The Mimetic Circle. See Flick, U., Kardorff, E., Steinke, I.: *Qualitative Forschung – Ein Handbuch*. Reinbek, 2000, Rowohlt, 50.

²⁷⁵ Gebauer, G., Wulf, Ch.: *Mimesis – Kultur, Kunst, Gesellschaft*. Reinbek, 1992, Rowohlt, 11.

²⁷⁶ See Ricoeur, P.: *Zeit und Erzählung I. – Zeit und historische Erzählung*. München, 1983, Fink, 105-109.

schemes and expectations by which we order the effects reaching us. That is the way we see the world.

Mimesis 2 is the form in which both the reader's and the text's world is present at the same time.

Mimesis 3 is the reader's world already influenced by the text.²⁷⁷

Bruner writes about the connection of mimesis and life narration:

"[T]he mimesis between so-called life and narrative is a two-way affair: that is to say, just as art imitates life in Aristotle's sense, so, in Oscar Wilde's, life imitates art. Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative. "Life" in this sense is the same kind of construction of the human imagination as "a narrative" is. It is constructed by human beings through active ratiocination, by the same kind of ratiocination through which we construct narratives. When somebody tells you of his life—and that is principally what we shall be talking about—it is always a cognitive achievement rather than a through-the-clear-crystal recital of something univocally given. In the end, it is a narrative achievement. There is no such thing, psychologically, as 'life itself'. At the very least, it is a selective achievement of memory recall; beyond that, recounting one's life is an interpretive feat."²⁷⁸

Consequently our life and its interpretation are inseparable. As long as we live we categorize the events and add explanations to them. Our explanations determine our later experiences, and they affect in turn the system of our ratiocination. According to Koselleck's theory, the area of experience and the field of expectation form a dynamic unit in our lives —and thus in our life stories as well. The area of experience is the world we live in, the horizon of our point of view.²⁷⁹ It contains the living spaces we inhabited during our lives, people we met, and even the explanations we used to explain different parts or the whole of our lives. The area of experiences is the sphere we can sense of the world and the way we sense it. The field of expectation holds the hopes we have cherished about our future. It contains our expectations and worries, which are not independent of our past.

²⁷⁷ See Ricoeur, P.: *Mimesis and Representation*. *Annals of Scholarship* 2, 1981. 15-32. 20.

²⁷⁸ Bruner, J.: *Life as Narrative*. *Social research*, 54, 1987. 11-32. 12.

²⁷⁹ Cf. Koselleck, R.: *Vergangene Zukunft – Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*. Frankfurt am Main, 1979, Suhrkamp, 65-104.

The area of experience is in the dynamics of the past, while the field of expectation is in that of the future. These two poles are always present in life stories. Our lives, just as our life stories, tend towards an expected future since not only stories but our lives are meaningless without an orientation.

4.3. POETRY AND REALITY IN LIFE STORIES

The path of life, a biography, a curriculum vitae are all synonyms of the same, complicated narration by which we try to summarize our life or its parts. To give a frame to the everyday events, to see our life story as a whole is an integral part of “the drama of our existence”.²⁸⁰ In the following chapters we examine the characteristics of the intermediate area of a life story.

4.3.1. Hermeneutical Imperative

In our lives we always have to choose --either consciously or unconsciously-- among possible interpretations. Both our smaller decisions and the answers we give to the important questions reflect our particular worldview, our value system. There is only one version of the world for everybody that excludes many other possibilities.²⁸¹

Gräb maintains that humans are interpretative beings. We cannot live without explanations, and this so-called hermeneutical imperative is present in every event of our lives.²⁸² We must see a meaning both

²⁸⁰ Ricoeur, P.: *Zeit und Erzählung I. – Zeit und historische Erzählung*. München, 1983, Fink, 117.

²⁸¹ Our pluralistic world expects us not to vote for any worldview. But non-decision is also a decision, a vote in favor of an intangible, self-made, more sentiment-based worldview (Bastelexistenz). Meta-stories, on the other hand, are interpretation systems, which specify the number of existing worlds. Cf. Benjamin, W.: *Der Erzähler – Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows*. In *Gesammelte Schriften, Bd. II, 2* Frankfurt am Main, 1977, Suhrkamp, 438-465. 439.

²⁸² See Gräb, W.: *Der hermeneutische Imperativ – Lebensgeschichte als religiöse Selbstausslegung*. In Sparn, W.: *Wer schreibt meine Lebensgeschichte?* 79-89.

in ourselves and in our aims in order to live. This is why Evers thinks continual reflection on life is vital for living: “I do not build myself through experience and reflection, they are not prerequisites of my life, but they are me: experience and reflection.”²⁸³ Evers goes so far as to claim there is no need to postulate an inner core of personality as an independent entity. Our identity forms in the hermeneutical cycle of the influences reaching us and their interpretation.

The events of our lives and their narrations do not precisely cover each other. What is the character of their relation?²⁸⁴ Does the empirical run of our lives have any purpose, or is that only a characteristic of the composed life story? What is the correspondence between a life story and the parts that form it? To see our life as a coherent one we need a logical structure, and the events must have a part in our identity as elements of that structure.²⁸⁵ It is a general conviction that our past is a closed chain of events, something we cannot change, and our remembrance is determined by the happenings of the past. But that is true in reverse order too. Our remembrance determines the happenings of our past. Events which happened years before can receive a new meaning in a later part of our life. Even a significant experience can acquire a new meaning from a new point of view.

4.3.2. The Medial Parlance

According to Johannes Anderegge we can integrate the different events of our lives in two linguistic ways.²⁸⁶ One is the “instrumental” use by which we describe our everyday world, the tangible reality, the

²⁸³ Evers, R.: *Alter, Bildung, Religion – Eine subjekt- und bildungstheoretische Untersuchung*. 91.

²⁸⁴ “Narrations have beginnings and endings, but do our life stories have such a limitation? Not necessarily, even though there are the facts of birth and death, the events of early childhood are unintelligibly blurred, and death will be an ending in others’ stories about our lives.” Tengelyi L.: *Élettörténet és sorsesemény*. Budapest, 1998, Atlantisz, 19.

²⁸⁵ Cf. Lucius-Hoene, G.: Deppermann, A.: *Rekonstruktion narrativer Identität – Ein Arbeitsbuch zur Analyse narrativer Interviews*. Opladen, 2002, Leske, 111.

²⁸⁶ See Anderegge, J.: *Sprache und Verwandlung – Zur literarischen Ästhetik*, Göttingen, 1985, Vandenhoeck/ Ruprecht, 75-76.

things which mean the same for the larger community. The other, the “medial” usage helps to circumscribe things that are not self-evident. We interpret and integrate the unknown in the horizon of the known. To construct a safe and reliable world for ourselves we need to bridge over the gaps caused by unknown and unfamiliar things. This is the field of our parlance where only a subjective interpretation can construct a logical structure of events. In our life stories, we often use metaphors in the quest of logic. Luckmann is even more outright when he thinks only transcendentalization of everyday events can give meaning to our lives and contribute to a life story without contradictions in terms.²⁸⁷ Thus describing our everyday life by putting it into a larger context is in a way a religious phenomenon. “I cannot find the meaning of my life in myself. It seems to me as if it had been there before my existence – the meaning of my life appears as a reference to a certain concrete, transcendent essence.”²⁸⁸

Narration offers us new perspectives. Stories create an “as if” field where many things can happen. The world of stories draws from reality, but that creates a new reality – the world of subjective reality. Stories have fictitious, illusory, poetic, imaginative elements but it does not mean they are not “true”. Even if a thing cannot be described by the instrumental parlance rationally or its underlying facts cannot be analyzed, it still can be perfectly real.²⁸⁹

4.3.3. Inner Tradition-forming

Even though narrating life events gives a subjective framework to --or “falsifies”-- reality, we cannot live without narrative systems. Drechsel thinks people try on more different stories until they find their own story, and later on they adjust every event of their lives to

²⁸⁷ Cf. Luckmann, T.: *Die unsichtbare Religion*, Frankfurt am Main, 1991, Suhrkamp, 80.

²⁸⁸ Drechsel, W.: *Lebensgeschichte und Lebens-Geschichten, Zugänge zur Seelsorge aus biographischer Perspektive*. 238.

²⁸⁹ Cf. Polanyi, M.: *Personal Knowledge*, Chicago, 1958, University of Chicago Press, 279.

that.²⁹⁰ The events of our lives can have many different interpretations depending on the context in which they are placed. Because of the continual re-constructing and re-arranging of the plot on the basis of different points of view, we can talk about multiple re-births of a certain story. So we can admit Sparn is right in his assumption that a life story is a piece of art—“The tools of description, the keywords, the knowledge of the appropriate style and its usage, as well as the consistent and convincing combination of many disintegrated, independent, and different facts and events of a story become a self-displaying symbol characteristic of its narrator”.²⁹¹ Living in a given historical place and time, we inherit stories and by filtering them through our lives and experiences, transform them into parts of our own story. A life story is always more than the sum total of singular events. The details together, just as parts of a mosaic, have a common meaning. “The already narrated life stories together with life story episodes serve as a repertoire for our different recitals, which we integrate in any concrete narrations when they are needed. This process can be called an inner tradition-making.”²⁹²

4.3.4. The Illusion of the Life Story

But what is the whole story about? What is the purpose of the inner tradition making? People generally do not think in the frame of their entire lives, in everyday life their shorter or longer projects absorb them. But behind any action there exists an idealized self-portrait we endeavor to achieve in our lives. In the reflection the implicit axiom surfaces and lies there as a deep structure behind our every action.²⁹³

²⁹⁰ See Drechsel, W.: *Lebensgeschichte und Lebens-Geschichten, Zugänge zur Seelsorge aus biographischer Perspektive*. 144.

²⁹¹ Sparn, W.: *Dichtung und Wahrheit – Einführende Bemerkungen zum Thema, Religion und Biographie*. In Sparn, W. (ed.); *Wer schreibt meine Lebensgeschichte? – Biographie, Autobiographie und Hagiographie und ihre Entstehungszusammenhänge*, Gütersloh, 1990, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 9-29. 12.

²⁹² Drechsel, W.: *Lebensgeschichte und Lebens-Geschichten, Zugänge zur Seelsorge aus biographischer Perspektive*. 144.

²⁹³ This expression comes from Chomsky, and Ritschl reuses it. Church as community

The axiom is that life is important and it has a meaning. Thus life stories have a self-justification quality, by which we try to verify that “we do [life] well. (...) Life for any human is a quest for the good, for virtues which can help our understanding of what we need for a successful life.”²⁹⁴ We want to lead a successful life and we want our listeners to acknowledge that, because narration is not only about story- and self-creation, but persuasion too.²⁹⁵

Putting our lives in a historical frame has more purpose than mere self-satisfaction. It serves as a tool to see ourselves and be seen. As Bourdieu observed during the narration of the “life story illusion,” people create self-portraits which are mostly idealistic.²⁹⁶ They do not show reality, but the persons they would like to become, they would like others to see. “Every biography is both poetry and reality (...). The narrated life story is not only the transient present, but also the re-incarnated past. Remembering is a “reconstruction illusion” which talks about future and present, not only past; about the person the narrator would like to become, not only the person he or she actually is. Thus, the narrated life story becomes a representation of self-portrait, an

forms basic methods and points of view of relation, thus defining its members’ reactions to different impacts, and the message they transmit to society. They are fundamental principles that define the life of the community and its members at metacommunicative levels, in their deep structures. Ritschl, D.: *Die Erfahrung der Wahrheit – Die Steuerung des Denkens und Handelns durch implizite Axiome*. In Ritschl, D. (ed.), *Konzepte – Ökumene, Medizin, Ethik – Gesammelte Aufsätze*, München, 1986, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 147-166.

²⁹⁴ “The story which we like the most exists only in our imagination.” MacIntyre, A.: *Der Verlust der Tugend – Zur moralischen Krise der Gegenwart*. Frankfurt am Main, 1995, Suhrkamp, 293.

²⁹⁵ The psycho-social functions of everyday narrations according to Boothe are the following, 1. Actualization, past events are recalled in an intermediate area where old emotions reawaken. 2. Social integration, narrating happens in front of an audience (even if that is the narrator only) of whose attention and acceptance we seek to win. 3. Overcoming fear, instead of passively suffering we actively convert the events into a narration, then by the narrating and the understanding of interconnections we try to gain control over them. 4. Wish fulfillment, our fantasies about our future or model figures appear in the story. See Boothe, B., von Wyl, A., Wepfer, R.: *Erzähldynamik und Psychodynamik*. In Neumann, M. (ed.), *Erzählte Identitäten*. München, 2000, Fink, 59-76. 64.

²⁹⁶ Cf. Bourdieu: Die biographische Illusion, *BIOS* 3, 1990. 75-81. 76.

ontology –or mythology – of the self.”²⁹⁷ Personal myth is constructed of pieces of reality, but its inner logic follows other intentions.

4.3.5. The Autobiographical Pact

Narrating one’s life is always a conscious process. In order to convince our listeners or readers, we have to know their points of views, we have to devise how to share our story with them to be accepted. Narration, on the one hand, has to mirror reality. Our story cannot be exaggerated, it has to be believable. On the other hand, we, too, have to be satisfied with the outcome.²⁹⁸ Our life story has to be not only authentic, but also interesting for the listeners or readers. During the narration, we imagine what is interesting, important, or intelligible to our audience. This is what Evers means when he talks about narrations as a “stage play” rather than a documentation of life.²⁹⁹ The term “autobiographical pact” comes from the field of science of literature, and it means “a form of contract between author and reader in which the autobiographer explicitly commits himself of herself not to some impossible historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and to understand his or her own life.”³⁰⁰

4.3.6. Reciprocity of the Narrator and the Listener

According to Habermas every person creates a cognitive relational system in order to process the events happening around them.³⁰¹

²⁹⁷ Osterland, M.: *Die Mythologisierung des Lebenslaufs – Zur Problematik des Erinnerns*. In Baethe, M.: Eßbach, W. (ed.): *Soziologie – Entdeckungen im Alltäglichen*. Frankfurt Am Main, New York, 1983, Campus, 279-290. 279.

²⁹⁸ Cf. MacIntyre, A.: *Der Verlust der Tugend – Zur moralischen Krise der Gegenwart*. Frankfurt am Main, 1995, Suhrkamp, 285.

²⁹⁹ Cf. Evers, R.: *Alter, Bildung, Religion – Eine subjekt- und bildungstheoretische Untersuchung*. 34.

³⁰⁰ Cf. Lejeune: *Der autobiographische Pakt*. Frankfurt am Main, 1994, Suhrkamp, 230.

³⁰¹ Cf. Habermas, J.: *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns – Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft*. Frankfurt am Main, 1981, Suhrkamp, 206.

Our stories, just like our lives, are formed in interactions and mutual influences. All people have their own life stories which serve as relational systems in the interpretation of the stories of others. When people meet, they try to find the connecting points, to place each other in their own frames of reference. Searching for connecting points between two stories is a natural phenomenon in our life. Communication between two individuals creates a force field like the one between two poles. Both individuals have their own integrity and history, yet still they influence each other, and by meeting they write a common story. For our personal identity, we need a “symbolic world of meaning”,³⁰² but it does not turn into a part of the group’s identity unless it becomes conscious and relevant for the other members as well. Our stories hold their meaning embedded in the stories of the others around us, and we understand others through stories. “I” turns into “we” in a dual position where isolation (my acting) and participation both are present: by withdrawing from myself I identify myself with the group.³⁰³

4.3.7. The Problem of the Addressee in the Case of Life Stories

The addressee is the general and concrete audience which serves as a relational point for the narrator in self-interpreting and narrating. As Drechsel says, “During narration I try to watch myself from the other’s point of view. Biographical hermeneutics can be interpreted only as a kind of relationship hermeneutic, and it comes into being in the interpretational space we think we share with our listeners.”³⁰⁴ Relationship with the addressee is vital for narration, because it determines the important elements of the message and my main purpose with the communication. Other than its purpose and

³⁰² Assmann, J.: *A kulturális emlékezet – Írás, emlékezés és politikai identitás a korai magaskultúrákban*. Budapest, 1999, Atlantisz, 134.

³⁰³ Cf. Waldenfels, B.: *Der Spielraum des Verhaltens*. Frankfurt am Main, 1980, Suhrkamp, 189.

³⁰⁴ Drechsel, W.: *Lebensgeschichte und Lebens-Geschichten, Zugänge zur Seelsorge aus biographischer Perspektive*. 177.

content, the addressee determines the role of the narrator (“I”). Every narration happens in front of an “audience”, though in some cases it is not visible.³⁰⁵ But whether or not we have that audience, in a life story we examine ourselves and we would like to understand and justify our lives, and in this self-reflection we lead an “inner dialogue” with a significant other.³⁰⁶

Sometimes we happen to try to convince ourselves, or we confess things about our lives to God, or through our communication partners we send messages to those not present. “We can suppose that during narration, just as in everyday life, the speaker’s main attention is directed to the same significant other. Perhaps this significant other has the role of the imagined audience to whom the narration is directed. In the process of narrating that significant other can be as important as the real audience, though he or she is only present as a shapeless, unfathomable reality.”³⁰⁷

4.3.8. God as Co-author

In order to be able to form a conception about ourselves and to define our place in the world, we need to rise above everyday events, so that we can reflect on our lives from an “aerial perspective”.³⁰⁸ “The basis

³⁰⁵ Cf. Fuchs-Heinritz, W.: *Biographische Forschung – Eine Einführung in Praxis und Methoden*, Wiesbaden, 2005, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 257.

³⁰⁶ Cf. Drechsel, W.: *Lebensgeschichte und Lebens-Geschichten, Zugänge zur Seelsorge aus biographischer Perspektive*. 245.

³⁰⁷ Hermanns, H.: *Das narrative Interview in berufsbiographisch orientierten Untersuchungen*. Kassel, 1981. Wissenschaftliches Zentrum für Berufs- und Hochschulforschung, Gesamthochschule Kassel, 45.

³⁰⁸ In the forming of human identity one of the most important elements is communication, or more precisely, the role one plays in it. “The real direction of the development of thinking leads not from individual to social, but from social to individual. A child gets his or her first self-picture from others, through social channels. His (or her) mother considers him ‘nice’, his father ‘rough’, his grandmother ‘spoiled’. After a while the child’s examination of himself generalizes and becomes independent of actual interactions. Individuals form their personality knowing the existence of ‘others’, and those others’ opinion of them. Role taking is a mechanism to help individuals to imagine being in the other’s place, and thus to see themselves from the outside. So the “I” is a meta-consciousness, a knowledge

of my life cannot be found in me. It always precedes me, it is in front of me. In reference to the basis of life the Other appears as a concrete, transcendent reality.”³⁰⁹ According to Henning Luther, the uniqueness of life is the main question of every life story, but the main connecting point of theology and human life is still those in which human seeks after the Whole and relates to this Whole in placing himself in the world. “The language of the Christian prayer offer words of (...) the conversation held with the Other. It teaches us that we can talk to the One no human could talk to, because He is invisible. (...) We can call him ‘You’, and he is closer to the ‘I’ than the ‘I’ itself.”³¹⁰

Luther compares that phenomenon to keeping a diary. In writing a diary, its owner imagines the one he or she is writing to.³¹¹ That Other sees our life in its interrelatedness. So we do not have to be introduced to Him, nor do we have to justify ourselves. “In Christian tradition this Other has a name: he is God.”³¹² This “Other” is always sympathetic and full of love, can be trusted with the secrets of our most inner lives, and, at the same time does not shrink back from reprimanding us. God is a specific named “Other”.³¹³ A Christian autobiography is

about knowledge, which requires the ability to detach ourselves from our firsthand experiences, and inspects them as outsiders.” Ranschburg, J.: *Szeretet, erkölcs, autonómia*. Budapest, 1994, Integra-project Kft, 196-197.

³⁰⁹ Drechsel, W.: *Lebensgeschichte und Lebens-Geschichten, Zugänge zur Seelsorge aus biographischer Perspektive*. 238.

³¹⁰ See Luther, H.: *Der fiktive Andere – Mutmaßungen über das Religiöse an Biographie*. 77.

³¹¹ According to Vygotsky, thinking and usage of speech are interconnected. In a little child’s life, language usage and thinking develop in parallel but language usage later divides into oral speech and inner or written speech. “Written speech is a separate linguistic function, differing from oral speech in both structure and mode of functioning. Even its minimal development requires a high level of abstraction. It is speech in thought and image only (...). In learning to write, the child must disengage himself from the sensory aspect of speech and replace words by images of words.” Vygotsky, L.S.: *Thought and Language*. London, 1986, MIT Press, 180-181.

³¹² Luther, H.: *Religion und Alltag – Bausteine zu einer Praktischen Theologie des Subjekts*. 120.

³¹³ “The ‘metastatic god’ construed by the narrator and addressed in the listener is not to be identified hastily with the God of faith. This self-made god wears the enlarged features of the parents.” Baumgartner, I.: *Pastoralpsychologie – Einführung in die Praxis Heilender Seelsorge*. Düsseldorf, 1990, Patmos, 557.

not a monologue but more like an inner dialogue with God. It is God who “co-writes” with humans. While the individual as the explicit narrator tells the story, God is present as an implicit co-author, and listens to what he has to tell.³¹⁴

For religious people, God really exists, so he is a real, non-fictitious individual. “From this point of view, the “fictitious Other” whom people look for, does not wear only the enlarged features of the mother and the father, but the narrator addresses Him —though substituted, temporary, hidden, and blended with many other persons— as God himself.”³¹⁵ God as a dialogue partner differs completely from every other character in our lives, because he knows things about us that even we do not discern. He sees who we are, where we came from and what we are to become. The Scripture helps us to learn how God relates to us. He knew us even before our birth: “Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” (Psalms 139,16.) He knows the smallest details of our lives, “And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.” (Matthew 10,30.) Christian tradition helps us to know how it is that God calls us to a real dialogue in our lives: “In this dialogue the explicit narrator weaves his memories, experiences, feelings, and thoughts into a story, but still leaves space for the implicit author to even overwrite them. The result is not a homogeneous, logical unity covering every part of life, or a temporarily actualized continuity, but rather an ‘Art Collage’.”³¹⁶

Humans always search themselves, but their identity always remains “in part” (1Cor 13,9ff), so they have to embrace fragmentation – which leads to the doctrine of justification. Identity will never be a whole, it will always be burdened with tensions. In biographies, the narrator cannot win the complete approval of himself or his listeners.

³¹⁴ Cf. Sparn, W.: *Dichtung und Wahrheit – Einführende Bemerkungen zum Thema, Religion und Biographie*. In Sparn, W. (ed.): *Wer schreibt meine Lebensgeschichte? – Biographie, Autobiographie und Hagiographie und ihre Entstehungszusammenhänge*. Gütersloh, 1990, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 9-29. 24.

³¹⁵ Baumgartner, I.: *Pastoralpsychologie – Einführung in die Praxis Heilender Seelsorge*. Düsseldorf, 1990, Patmos, 556.

³¹⁶ Sparn, W.: *Autobiographische Kompetenz, Welchen christlichen Sinn hat lebensgeschichtliches Erzählen heute? MJTh III.*, 1990, 62-63.

A tension between them remains, which is why Evers regards God the main critic of our stories.³¹⁷

In our life stories, God can appear either as the co-author, or as the opponent, the critic of our lives to whom we have to account for our deeds. In Henning Luther's opinion, however, God is present in our life stories as a listener who sees our lives and our struggles in an indirect manner, like an audience.³¹⁸ Grözinger, on the other hand, describes God as both director and audience of our life stories.³¹⁹ Both approaches try to interpret metaphorically the inner dialogue we lead with this strange, unfathomable, and still real and significant Other.

4.4. THE COMMON STORY OF GOD AND HUMAN

Considering the history of the church, we see the big story of the Kingdom of God built by personal observations, faith experiences, narratives and testimonies of the members of the Chosen Community. The collective history is composed of selected and combined small stories, a history that can never be narrated. It is like a vision which is more than the sum total of its parts. In the following pages we examine the similarities between our stories and the story of the Kingdom of God, and their relatedness.

4.4.1. Christian Religion as an Interpretational System

Everybody has his/her own theory of life, and our pictures of God differ according to our different worldviews. Still, on the basis of God's Word and from the perspectives handed down to us through Christianity we can believe that the God we converse with is the

³¹⁷ See Evers, R.: *Alter, Bildung, Religion – Eine subjekt- und bildungstheoretische Untersuchung*. 62.

³¹⁸ See Luther, H.: *Religion und Alltag – Bausteine zu einer Praktischen Theologie des Subjekts*. 149.

³¹⁹ See Grözinger, A.: *Praktische Theologie und Ästhetik – Ein Beitrag zur Grundlegung der Praktischen Theologie*. München, 1991, 201.

same one to whom Augustine wrote his *Confessions*. When Augustine turns to God, we can identify with him, because we “know” who the addressee is.

“To Thee, then, O Lord, I am laid bare, whatever I am, and I have already said with what profit I may confess to Thee. I do not do it with words and sounds of the flesh but with the words of the soul, and with the sound of my thoughts, which Thy ear knows. For when I am wicked, to confess to Thee means nothing less than to be dissatisfied with myself; but when I am truly devout, it means nothing less than not to attribute my virtue to myself; because *Thou, O Lord, blesses the righteous* (Psalms 5,13), but first *Thou justifiest him while he is yet ungodly* (Rome 4,5). My confession therefore, O my God, is made unto Thee silently in thy sight—and yet not silently. As far as sound is concerned, it is silent. But in strong affection it cries aloud. For neither do I give voice to something that sounds right to men, which Thou hast not heard from me before, nor dost Thou hear anything of the kind from me which Thou didst not first say to me.”³²⁰

In the previous pages, we could see how “religion opens a unique, enriching interpretational horizon to form a unique playing field.”³²¹ If life stories contain implicit, religious elements, we should ask how a story is connected to a concrete religious system, how it becomes a faith story. How do single persons meet the interpretational system, the meta-narrative offered by the church?

According to Wittgenstein our worldview is the entirety of our perspectives.³²² Every sight appears “as I see it” and knowledge “as I know it”, because we interpret the world in conformity with our perspective. In Ritschl’s opinion that is the key to understanding our worldview. With every new story we gain a new point of view. The more stories we know, the more perspectives we have for considering the

³²⁰ Augustine, *Confessiones*, CCEL electronic edition, translated by Albert C. Outler, Book Ten, Chapter Two. (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/confessions.xiii.html> Cached 2010-08-20)

³²¹ Bobert, S.: *Selbsttransformation als Tor zum Heiligen – Zur Praktischen Theologie des multiplen Selbst und seiner Transformation in religiös und medial konstituierten Spielräumen*. In Hauschild, E., Schwab U. (ed.): *Praktische Theologie für das 21. Jahrhundert*. Stuttgart, 2002, Kohlhammer, 25.

³²² See Wittgenstein, L.: *Filozófiai vizsgálódások*, Budapest, 1992, Atlantisz, 66.

events of our lives. When we share stories in a religious community, we also communicate points of view. Christianity bequeaths a system of perspectives from generation to generation. That “bunch of perspectives” is bequeathed as God-stories in the church. Being Christian means embracing a system of perspectives and living in that stream of stories. “Jews and Christians, from a historical point of view, form a uniquely continual and intensive interpretative community.”³²³ Thus they are parts of a story which helps to interpret life, to give name to our longings and vocabulary to our feelings. Things we experience and understand can be communicated to those who speak the religious language of Christianity. “Every group which considers itself constant or important develops shared stories that not only define the identity of the group, but offer guiding tools for individuals to discover the meaning of their own lives.”³²⁴ From a Christian point of view meaning of life does not imply only a cognitive interpretation, but an attachment to the community, too. Thus anchoring identity does not necessarily means narrow-mindedness, quite the contrary, the decision to accept one version relieves us from the constraint of competing with the other alternatives. Even if we see ourselves as parts of the Christian meta-narration, we know we could interpret our life events differently. Still, perhaps a bit naively, we hold on to the Christian interpretational system.

4.4.2. God’s Presence in Human Life Story

Ritschl distinguishes between two kinds of stories: there are closed stories, connected completely to the past, and there are on-going stories that cannot be fully related because the story is still on the move.³²⁵ In Jewish-Christian thinking, these on-going stories play a

³²³ Ritschl, D.: *Zur Logik der Theologie – Kurze Darstellung der Zusammenhänge theologischer Grundgedanken*. 55.

³²⁴ Pataki, F.: *Élettörténet és identitás*. 298.

³²⁵ In every common (meta) story there are “always important” topics (dogmas) as well as “now vital” questions (ethics), and individual part-stories. See Ritschl, D: *“Story” als Rohmaterial der Theologie*. In Ritschl, D., Jones, H. O. (ed.): *“Story” als Rohmaterial der Theologie*. München, 1976, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 7-41. 30.

very important role³²⁶ in handing down the tradition of Israel, The stories come to life with every retelling. Man becomes part of the stream of history; he joins the covenant with the fathers and stands in the ranks of the people coming out of Egypt.³²⁷ “‘Story’ for the people of that age was a much wider and much more open concept. It formulated an experience of belonging together with the fathers and mothers in all time—not only with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but with all the fathers and mothers following them. The thing that binds all of us together is the faith in God who so marvelously delivered our people in the beginning.³²⁸ The knowledge of God was not handed down as a concept or theoretical idea, but rather a narrated experience — the experience of healing, delivery, reconciliation, of the healer, deliverer and reconciler God.³²⁹ God appears as moving together with his people. The relationship with him is dynamic and continuously changing. “God’s activity includes the personal life of the individual. His promises reach into the houses, the places of work, and into the

³²⁶ As we can see in the book of Joshua, “And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. He said to the Israelites, ‘In the future when your descendants ask their parents, »What do these stones mean?« tell them, »Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.« For the LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over.” (Josh 4, 20-22).

³²⁷ Stefanie Klein compares the process of constructing our life story to the creation and formation of Christian interpreting system, “Many faith experience fall out of our memory [...] The question is, which of the memories of human communities will be handed down, and which will perish [...] Bible is a good example for this process. We can see a wide variety of experiences, expressions, motives, interpretation or action patten side by side. The Bible preserves stories of basic human situations –danger, hostility, war, shame, revenge, threat, social vulnerability, love, power, helplessness– they all preserve the interpretation and action patterns of faith. (...) There are many contradicting stories, there are repetitions, but there are also complementing stories. Later generations reinterpreted all of them, but the original stories always influenced the faith interpretation of the descendants. There are texts that the decendants reworked, corrected, or completely omitted...” Klein, S.: *Theologie und empirische Biographieforschung – Methodische Zugänge zur Lebens- und Glaubensgeschichte und ihre Bedeutung für eine erfahrungsbezogene Theologie.* Stuttgart Berlin Köln, 1994, Kohlhammer, 25.

³²⁸ Westermann, C.: *Der Mensch im Alten Testament – Mit einer Einführung von Hans-Peter Müller.* Münster, 2000, LIT, 30.

³²⁹ The Bible about knowing (and getting to know) God, Jer 33,33b; Ezech 36,25-28.; Hos 6,6.; Jes 58,2.; Jer 24, 7.

days and nights of every individual.”³³⁰ Here we can see the image of the God moving together with us, who does not emancipate himself from the happenings of human life, but he is present really even in the sufferings of his people.³³¹ God does not want to reveal

³³⁰ Westermann, C: *Theologie des Alten Testaments in Grundzügen*. Göttingen, 1978. 67.

³³¹ In biblical tradition, from the very beginning, knowledge about God was linked to a concrete historical situation, told stories about concrete people, or told stories about the formation of the community. The individual and communal stories become elements of a unified historical stream, like carriers of God’s action and direction. In the Old Testament, relationship with God, promise and its fulfillment, benediction or malediction, and reconciling with God compose the main frame of historical interpretation. In this sense, God’s story appears in the human story, and at the same time, the human story receives its meaning as embedded in the divine history. The basic experience of biblical historical interpretation is the deliverance from Egypt. God is the one who stays together with his people among the suffering, who listens to their woes and delivers them. Thus he becomes their God, and the Hebrews become his people. The manifold individual and communal stories, experiences, and observations are woven together by the presence of God through time. It is God’s power to shape history that distinguishes him from the man-made idols (Psalm 135,4-18). In biblical tradition, knowledge about God is not a theoretical notion, but reaches the whole human existence, “Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his own people work for nothing, not paying them for their labor. He says, ‘I will build myself a great palace with spacious upper rooms.’ So he makes large windows in it, panels it with cedar and decorates it in red. Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar? Did not your father have food and drink? He did what was right and just, so all went well with him.” Jer 22,13-16. (Cf. Exod 22,20-22.; Deut 24,17.; Deut 10,17-19.) God does not promise to be present in cultic places or rites. His presence depends on the compliance with his will, and the observance of his premises. Thus, only those who act righteously can get to know God (Hos 1,4.; 4,6). Thus, neither remembrance, nor narration, nor worship are enough to cultivate a relationship with God; it only becomes apparent in a concrete life situation—a factual ethical action. In the New Testament, we can observe God’s personality and action through the life story of Jesus Christ. Through Jesus’ life story, God reveals himself; thus, the knowledge of God cannot be separated from Jesus’ life story. The Gospels recount the story of Jesus in narrative form, because his uniqueness makes him of special importance for the faith. Jesus lived and told who God is and how he acts, so the Jesus stories throw a new light upon human life, and show us particular ethics (Mark 12,1-9. Matthew 18,12. Luke 15,8-32). “Here comes the decisive criterion for the Christians, what God’s action means through the happening. Identification with Jesus’ acts can signal the leaving our magic circles towards God and the others (what do you mean by “magic circles” in this sentence? I would change it). All over the world where people –against their natures’ urges– do not act egoistically, but surpassing themselves, they become new people. God works through the people. This is the central message of what God’s work can

himself in another way, only in the central happenings of our lives. In Grözinger's opinion, God reveals himself through history: "We have to think about God's person as something happening."³³² Or as Jüngel says more directly: "God has no story, he is the story."³³³ God is an active participant in our collective and individual lives, and the realization of this fact can open new dimensions of both our individual and communal lives. In God, there is a place for everything we as limited beings cannot comprehend. The image of God moving with us speaks about much more than the image of the God directing our wretched lives.

4.4.3. Christian Worldview as the Hermeneutics of Life

Scripture and Christianity offer us lenses to read God's work in our lives. Collective memory and remembrance ensure the frames to assemble the events of our lives into a complete story.³³⁴ The inherited way of reading helps us order our experiences, what and how they are important in our lives. God is not present in our lives only in single events, but in the way we interpret these events and the way we understand the world. In the reality thus interpreted, faith becomes the basis of the experiences. I interpret the events of my life from the point of view of my faith. Henning Luther says: "If in a biography the self and the world get into contact, the religious dimension may not be noticeable, because we expect God to be a third actor in the story. But he appears in the special constellation of *how* the self and

mean in human lives." Kessler, H.: *Sucht den Lebenden nicht bei den Toten – Die Auferstehung Jesu in biblischer, fundamentaltheologischer und systematischer Sicht*. Düsseldorf, 1985, Patmos, 290.

³³² Grözinger, A.: *Erzählen und Handeln – Studien zu einer trinitarischen Grundlegung der Praktischen Theologie*. 17.

³³³ Jüngel, E.: *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt – Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus*. 5 ed. Tübingen, 1986, Mohr Siebeck, 428.

³³⁴ Cf. Komoróczy, G.: *A babilóni fogság – Egyéni és közösségi stratégiák az identitás megőrzésére kisebbségi helyzetben. Bezárkózás a nemzeti hagyományba – Az értelmiség felelősége az ókori keleten*. Budapest, 1995, Osiris, 210-78. 216.

the world relate to each other.”³³⁵ The worldview of Christian people is not different in its containing different elements than an atheist’s, but in the way they interpret the existing elements, in its approach to its events and actors. The hermeneutical role of religion lies in the particular processing of experiences, and it helps us to interpret our lives from a special point of view which considers God as an existing reality with whom one can converse and who influences not individual life only, but the wider community or the whole world. “A life story interpreted as a story with God will be the basis of our reconstruction of single events and experiences in a specific intellectual coherence.”³³⁶ If we regard the life story as a meta-narrative, Christianity appears as a “meta-meta-narrative’ of our lives.³³⁷ From a hermeneutical point of view, two things happen simultaneously. Partly, I rewrite my life from a new perspective, in relation with God, and partly my life becomes involved in the common story of God and man. I interpret or reinterpret the events of my life as a sinful but redeemed child of God. Religion thus transcends life by interpreting it from its end, and by integrating it into a community.³³⁸

4.4.4. Becoming Part of the Christian Story

Christianity grasps the essence of faith basically in a narrative way, but what is this narrative about? For getting to know God is not a cognitive knowledge, rather it is a search (Hos 6,3; 10, 12; Jes 58,2) and conversion (Hos 6,1; Jer 24,7). One of the main thought structures of scripture is the description of the salvation history. In Israel’s lifespan,

³³⁵ Luther, H.: *Religion und Alltag – Bausteine zu einer Praktischen Theologie des Subjekts*. 121.

³³⁶ Wagner-Rau, U.: *Segensraum Kasualpraxis in der modernen Gesellschaft*. 127.

³³⁷ Ritschl, D.: “Story” als Rohmaterial der Theologie. 33.

³³⁸ “Collective identity or selfsameness is the image of a group formed by itself, and the image with which its members identify themselves. Collective identity depends on the identification of its participants; it ‘does not exist in itself,’ only if there are people believing in it. Its power depends on its being vivid in the minds of the members and how it can motivate their thoughts and actions.” Assmann, J.: *A kulturális emlékezet – Írás, emlékezés és politikai identitás a korai magaskultúrákban*. Budapest, 1999, Atlantisz. 131.

one of the basic experiences was liberation or deliverance that in Christianity was fulfilled in the event of the redemption.³³⁹ From the Christian point of view the center of history is the earthly life of Jesus Christ, of which the main characteristic is that it is completed by our own stories, for Jesus remained with his disciples even after the ascension, as he promised: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28,20).

Practically everything that happens before that in the Christian meta-story prepares for this event, and everything that happens after “does not add anything to the history of salvation,” but it is the time of the work of the Holy Spirit and of waiting for Christ’s return. What it means to be a Christian is most evident in Jesus’ stories. We have to follow Him with the help of his Spirit.³⁴⁰ Remembrance and collective memory do not only reconstruct an old story, but they organize the experiences of the present and the future: “Our task is to go on writing the story of Jesus by adding our own stories, by seeing and living our small stories, stumbling imitation Christi in the light of the story of Jesus and God.”³⁴¹ Thus, any life story involved in the system of Christian faith becomes part of the story of Israel, Jesus Christ and the church, and through it receives a wider sense than it could have if standing alone. The expression “meta-story” is in reality inexplicable, because we cannot see all the stories about Jesus and Christianity in one piece. But out of the many part-stories, we can construct a comprehensive whole, which is ours only, because we filtrate the stories of Christianity through our lives. But on the other hand it belongs to the community, which for the greater part exists outside us.

³³⁹ Cf. Westermann, C.: *Theologie des Alten Testaments in Grundzügen*. 57.

³⁴⁰ Cf. Klein, S.: *Theologie und empirische Biographieforschung – Methodische Zugänge zur Lebens- und Glaubensgeschichte und ihre Bedeutung für eine erfahrungsbezogene Theologie*. 20.

³⁴¹ Arens, E.: *Wer kann die großen Taten des Herrn erzählen? – Erzählstruktur christlichen Glauben in systematischer Perspektive*. In Zerfaß, R. (ed.): *Erzähler Glaube – Erzählende Kirche*. Freiburg, Basel, Wien, 1988, Herder, 13-27. 22.

4.4.5. Believer as a “Carrier of Meaning”

The meta-narrative about the God-human relationship is a continuously changing system with permanent perspectives, a tradition that offers a system of rules to Christian communities and, on the other hand, interprets the individual’s life and integrates it into the history of salvation.

Jüngel interprets God’s presence in our life stories from the perspective of the common stories.³⁴² According to this model there is a “fusion of horizons”³⁴³ between the human and the divine. “An autobiography is never a series of time periods rolled into an individual’s life, but the internalization of these times, and the formation of the experienced times into a story with which the narrator identifies himself.”³⁴⁴ That means that the story of the individual is a continuous part of the common story of God and man. On the other hand, every individual life is embedded into the collective human story. “Faith is continuously retold and thus the people of God hand down the great story of the economy of salvation.”³⁴⁵ Life events interpreted together with God complement and sustain the Christian meta-story. Every Christian life story amplifies the collective narrative of Christianity. Every single believer is a “carrier of meaning” (Bedeutungsträger). “In every interpretation of life, tradition leaves its imprints; thus, with every single life story even the elements of the traditions are written further, and tradition lives on.”³⁴⁶ The center of this collective narrative is God, who is present in every moment of life, who is with us but can see our lives from above. The main characteristic of this Christian world is to see the world as the stage of God’s judgment and work.

³⁴² Jüngel, E.: *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt – Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus*. 5 ed. Tübingen, 1986, Mohr Siebeck, 100.

³⁴³ Gadamer, H.: *Truth and Method*. London, 1979, Sheed & Ward, 367.

³⁴⁴ Jüngel, E.: *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt – Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus*. 101.

³⁴⁵ Klein, S.: *Theologie und empirische Biographieforschung – Methodische Zugänge zur Lebens- und Glaubensgeschichte und ihre Bedeutung für eine erfahrungsbezogene Theologie*. 36.

³⁴⁶ Drechsel, W.: *Lebensgeschichte und Lebens-Geschichten: Zugänge zur Seelsorge aus biographischer Perspektive*. 41.

4.4.6. Life Story Reinterpreted

“When we change the frame, we change the meaning” is one of Capps’ theses.³⁴⁷ He is right: in a new context, things have to be reassessed. Not only do we read the Scripture through the glasses of the present, but the reverse is also true: scripture offers us viewpoints to understand our place and task in the world.³⁴⁸ “The recollection of the church is not a static, rigid memory, because the inexhaustible richness of the Scriptures and the tradition gives new and healing perspectives in every life story.”³⁴⁹ One who exposes himself to measure his life to the God besides him does not necessarily receive an image of himself such as he would like to see. In other respects through this image new perspectives can open before him, because he tries to interpret his life from an elevated point of view. In Hauerwas’ opinion, we can only grasp our real identity if we are able to see ourselves in the light of God’s story, because then we can see our life and its interconnections from the highest possible perspective.³⁵⁰ We expose our life story experiences to a new way of interpretation, and through it, we may have new kinds of experiences. Belonging to the Christian meta-story therefore puts the reflection of our own lives into a newer hermeneutical sphere adding new viewpoints to its interpretation. “A special function of theological metaphor in the language of the Christian faith is to make the fact evident: nonexistence cannot be overcome by God alone, but in the life of Jesus Christ it was overcome once and for all. And one can see the experiences of his life in light of this fact. Thus we arrive to the reflection on experience through which a newer experience appears as a life gain.”³⁵¹ By the grace of

³⁴⁷ See Capps, D.: *Reframing – A New Method in Pastoral Care*. Minneapolis, 1990, Augsburg Fortress, 10.

³⁴⁸ Cf. Ricoeur, P.: *Zeit und Erzählung III. – Die erzählte Zeit*. München, 1991, Fink, 398.

³⁴⁹ Schoberth, I.: *Erinnerung als Praxis des Glaubens*. München, 1992, Kaisers, 255.

³⁵⁰ See Hauerwas, S.: *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*. Notre Dame, Indiana, 1983, University of Notre Dame, 27.

³⁵¹ Ricoeur, P.: *Stellung und Funktion der Metapher in der biblischen Sprache*. In Ricoeur, P., Jüngel, E.: *Metapher – Zur Hermeneutik religiöser Sprache*. 45-70.

God, we can consider our place in the world.³⁵² Religion, despite the fragmentation of life, carries the chance to change into another in itself. “Faith from this point of view does not mean the abilities or conduct of the individual, but the entering into the story of God as the church proclaims and celebrates it.”³⁵³ The message of the Christian meta-story is to see the Messiah through our own life in Jesus: “theologically, this change of direction in the life story can be called conversion or imitation, because the story of the believer is entered into the story of Jesus, and into the Jesus stories of the Christian tradition.”³⁵⁴ We interpret our life in connection with Christ and his story, and the great narrative of Christianity appears as a frame in which the past receives a meaning, the present receives a direction, and the future receives a perspective. The Christian meta-story interprets life in its perspectives. It is a story that has beginning (Creation), middle (the crucifixion of Christ) and end (eschaton), and they together determine the direction of the present.

4.4.7. Remembering the Way and Becoming Subject for God

The Christian meta-story is not a platonic idea independent of its carriers, because it contains facts and metaphorical expressions of universal validity with which every generation and every individual can interact over and over again. It does mean every generation has to rediscover Christian faith, but it does mean that in their given situation, they have to reinterpret their Christianity in the dialectics of past and future.³⁵⁵

Another characteristic of common Christian story is that primarily it does not contain concrete answers to the different life questions, but rather it gives direction and orientation.

³⁵² Gerkin, CV: *Prophetic Pastoral Practice – A Christian Vision of Life Together*. Nashville, 1991, Abingdon Press, 19.

³⁵³ Schoberth, I.: *Erinnerung als Praxis des Glaubens*. München, 1992, Kaisers, 247.

³⁵⁴ Kuld, L.: *Glaube in Lebensgeschichten – ein Beitrag zur theologischen Autobiographieforschung*. 264.

³⁵⁵ Cf. Ritschl, D: *Memory and Hope*. New York, 1967, Macmillan.

In Siller's opinion, the "life texts," our everyday events, are the basic happenings of Christian existence.³⁵⁶ Our Christianity becomes a determining force through our life experiences, and not through acceptance of dogmas or teachings. Naturally, if one grows up in or gets involved in a tradition, he accepts the truths transmitted by the community and is formed by them, but human relationships and experiences are more determinative than we generally think. Christian life appears in front of us as a study process, a search, but it is hope as well. We should not forget about the eschatological dimension of Christian faith: the hope in the future.³⁵⁷ The second observation of Siller is that the earthly way of Jesus serves as a model for his followers. From this point of view, the gospel shows us the life story of a suffering man, and we know that the Father approved of it, verifying Jesus' life. Thirdly, Siller throws light on one of the basic truths of our human identity. The purpose of narrating human life is for the individual to gain recognition that his listeners accept him and his views, and his deeds be confirmed by the others. But this recognition comes to us under certain conditions. Thus, Siller proposes that the religiosity of life stories appears mostly in their desire to appeal to the highest level.³⁵⁸

We can become somebody only in the eyes of another. "We become subjects when we observe ourselves in the other's eyes. Becoming somebody happens through the other, although it is not completely dependent on the other. A life story is not identification but comparison that is realized in proportion to the other. The principle of life story narration is not identity and identification, but subjectivity and subjectification."³⁵⁹ Becoming somebody is always realized in the interaction with the Other in a given context and as a result of our possible answers. Here meet the stories of man and God, because man's humanity is realized in this conversation: "the fact that

³⁵⁶ See Siller, H.: *Handbuch der Religionsdidaktik*, Freiburg, 1991, Herder, 190.

³⁵⁷ Cf. Poláková, J.: *Perspektive der Hoffnung – Transzendenzsuche in der Postmoderne*. Paderborn, 2005, Schöningh, 102.

³⁵⁸ See Siller, H.: *Handbuch der Religionsdidaktik*, Freiburg, 1991, Herder, 202.

³⁵⁹ Evers, R.: *Alter, Bildung, Religion – Eine subjekt- und bildungstheoretische Untersuchung*. 127.

God acknowledges me and the fact that man is a self-responsible, free being are the two sides of the same process where man realizes he is acknowledged.”³⁶⁰ Thus, man interprets his life from the perspective of the lost but found child of God.³⁶¹

The meaning of being Christian is independent of our age, sex or “faith level.” The command to love and to follow Christ calls us in every life situation. In any place we may be, we must experience it in those given circumstances. We can grow in faith only if we become subjects during our conversations with God.

By trusting in God one becomes able to see his wish to be acknowledged and hidden fulfilled independently of the circumstances. As Kuld says, “a biography becomes truly religious if this trust remains against every contrasting human experience.”³⁶²

Consequently, Christian faith is retrospective; it examines the way it experienced its relationship with Christ, and looks ahead at the same time. It examines the way we should live hereafter. In Christian faith, remembrance and hope are the two sides of the same story we experience in our relationship with God. Theology has the duty to continually remind people to the invitation to “hope backwards” in our remembrances, and to “remember” while looking into the future.³⁶³ We not only remember the acts of God, we believe that he is who he was and he will remain the same. Perhaps the context and the actual characters of the Christian meta-story can change, but the God we converse with is everlasting and unchangeable.

“In my personal story, remembrance and hope for the future are balanced. My story has its roots in the past and at the same time in the future, so they are in stories which people share with the others: we love only those with whom we are prepared to share our story and in whose story we want

³⁶⁰ Wagner, H.: *Der Geist neuzeitlicher Subjektivität – Realisator oder Konkurrent der christlichen Freiheit?* ZThK. 1985; 82.

³⁶¹ Cf. Schoberth, I.: *Erinnerung als Praxis des Glaubens*. München, 1992, Kaisers, 100-102.

³⁶² Kuld, L.: *Glaube in Lebensgeschichten – ein Beitrag zur theologischen Autobiographieforschung*. 54.

³⁶³ Cf. Ritschl, D: *Memory and Hope*.13.

to have a share. Only those who share memories and hopes really belong together.”³⁶⁴

4.5. SUMMARY

Faith becomes truly tangible in the life stories. Bringing our life before God, reflection on our lives is “part of the program of Christian faith.”³⁶⁵ Here meet the two aforementioned approaches that in our dealings with life stories we will inevitably arrive at religious questions, and if we examine man from the viewpoint of Christian faith, through his search of God we will inevitably arrive at the questions of his experiences and stories. We may say man searching for God and God searching for man meet in the concrete stories. Thus, the connection of human identity to the Christian meta-narrative is not an abstract notion, but is related to situations, persons, experiences: traditional identity is not construed by abstract principles, but concrete correlations where the stable elements get their meanings in local contexts. To every question – Who am I? Where is God in the world? – the answer is the concrete life story.

Christian meta-story assumes its shape behind many tiny life stories.³⁶⁶ It builds itself from them, so it is not independent of them, but is still more than and different from the total of the part stories. Christian meta-story becomes a determining, formative power: “Our character is constituted by the rules, metaphors and stories that are combined to give a design or unity to the variety of things we must or must not do in our lives. If our lives are to be reflective and coherent, our vision must be ordered around dominant metaphors and stories. Therefore, it is crucial to our moral life to allow the metaphors that make up our vision to check and balance each other. (...) The metaphors and stories we use to organize our life plan are inherited from our

³⁶⁴ Ritschl, D.: *The Logic of Theology* (trans. by John Bowden), London, SCM Press, 1986. 21.

³⁶⁵ Mandl-Schmidt, I.: *Biographie – Identität – Glaubenskultur – Zur Entwicklung religiös-spiritueller Identität am Beispiel Thomas Mertons*. 33.

³⁶⁶ Cf. Ritschl, D.: “Story” als Rohmaterial der Theologie. 23.

culture and our particular biographical situation. Christianity can be understood as but one set of coherent metaphors and stories that constitute an understanding of the nature of the world and a possible life plan.³⁶⁷ The only question is whether the man of our time is ready to consider a life plan or meta-story his own that comprises leading principles, and to walk a way so many millions have walked before him following Christ – a way that is always individual, and consisted by personal steps.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁷ Hauerwas, S.: *Vision and Virtue – Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection*. Notre Dame, Indiana, 1981, University of Notre Dame Press, 74-75.

³⁶⁸ Cf. Mandl-Schmidt, I.: *Biographie – Identität – Glaubenskultur – Zur Entwicklung religiös-spirituelle Identität am Beispiel Thomas Mertons*. 71.



5. MYTHOBIOGRAPHY AND LIFE STORY



“According to autobiographic texts religious development does not have a specific pattern. [...] On the other hand, we must point out the fact that they are the autobiographic representations that uncover a richness of experiences and interpretations no scientific description of religious development can offer.”

(Friedrich Schweitzer)³⁶⁹

5.1. CONCEPTION AND METHOD

In this chapter I will try to present the points of human life stories which comprise mythobiography using concrete examples.³⁷⁰ In stories described from a religious point of view, the part of our identity which is interpreted in its relation to God can be examined more simply in those cases where the participant considers him or herself religious according to the teaching of the church. But how do spiritual and religious themes appear in the life of those people who have a “non-traditional” spirituality or those who are not religious at all? In order to find an answer to this question we have to find subjects who lived in a non-religious environment during part of or all of their lives, lacked religious elements in their upbringing or entered or left the church in a later period as adults.³⁷¹ The viewpoints of the “border-crossers” and outsiders of the church can be very valuable to those who are leaders in the church, because the experiences of these individuals may serve as a mirror, helping to understand their motives and religious actions. In the selection of subjects, I tried to find people between 30 and 40 years of age. I had three reasons for this. First,

³⁶⁹ Schweitzer, F.: *Lebensgeschichte und Religion – Religiöse Entwicklung und Erziehung im Kindes- und Jugendalter*. 29.

³⁷⁰ Cf. Klingenberg, H.: *Lebensmutig – Vergangenes erinnern, Gegenwärtiges entdecken, Künftiges entwerfen*. 119-122.

³⁷¹ This kind of questioning generally comes from the personal biography and social environment of the interviewer. Cf. Flick, U, Kardorff, E., Steinke, I.: *Qualitative Forschung – Ein Handbuch*. Reinbek, 2000, Rowohlt, 65.

because the research of developmental psychology – and therefore the majority of Christian religious pedagogical works – concentrates on childhood and adolescence, the focus is on this age group. The reason may be that in later periods of life, after the choice of career is made and establishing a family is over, human lifestyles become extremely diverse. It is difficult to place them in a unified theory or framework. This age group is excluded from scientific research and also the church's focus. This middle-aged generation is missing from churches. People are the most susceptible to religious questions in their adolescent discovery and in their golden years.³⁷² But what happens to human religiosity between these two periods? Third, this age group may be important for life story research, because in their experiences there is both a sense of past and future.

I chose a particular segment of human life cycle supposing the subject will face similar questions and problems and I hoped it will be seen how their religiosity (or Christian faith) influenced their life story, self-interpretation in the world.

5.1.1. Methods of Interviewing

During interviewing I applied two methods. I made two interviews with each subject. The first was the so-called narrative interview that was comprised of three stages. The first stage was the free relating of the life story.³⁷³ The interviewer asked one question: she or he requested the subject to relate his/her life story from its beginning to the present day. When the subject finished relating everything s/ he considered important with no time restrictions, the second stage began. This was when the interviewer asked a couple of questions

³⁷² We could already meet this topic in the beginning of the 1900s, in Starbuck's works. Cf. Starbuck, E.D.: *The Psychology of Religion*. New York, 1911, The Walter Scott Publishing Co., 29.

³⁷³ Cf. Schütze, A.: *Die Technik des Narrativen Interviews in Interaktionsfeldstudien – dargestellt an einem Projekt zur Erforschung von kommunalen Machtstrukturen*. Bielefeld, 1977, Universität Bielefeld 1. Cf. Bohnsack, R.: *Rekonstruktive Sozialforschung. Einführung in Methodologie und Praxis qualitativer Forschung*. Opladen, 1993, Leske + Budrich, 101.

concerning what was heard. Here s/he clarified moments s/he did not understand precisely and tried to gain the information needed for his research. Following these questions the final stage of the narrative interview began.. What was the story as a whole about?

I chose this method because it provided the widest possible freedom for the subject. She or he could talk about everything they considered important in a random sequence. Thus we could see the topics central to the subject, the key events, actors and problems of his identity and life. In mapping the mythobiography, all these are of great importance, because not all subjects have the language and thought skills to interpret their identity from a religious point of view. A narrative interview does not show us the linking points between the individual and the Christian community but their lack thereof. If the subject is not a part of any religious community and their relationship with God is not a central part of their personality, the interview reveals themes contained in their life.

The method used in the second interview is a partially controlled form of interviewing.³⁷⁴ I assembled a set of questions that drove the subject from the implicit religious topics to explicit religiosity.³⁷⁵

a. The first set of questions was aimed to map the world and describe the everyday routine of the subject. “How does your average day look like?” “How is an average week?” “What would you miss the most of a day should something be left out?” were the types of questions asked.

b. The next questions referred to the rites of life and the forms of belonging to a community: “Are there any rites characteristic to your family?” “How do you celebrate Christmas?” “Is there any activity you generally do together with the others?”

c. After the communal dimension, the next questions were about the boundary experiences of their personal life: “Have you ever experienced an exuberance of joy?” “Have you ever felt lucky?” “Have you ever felt miserable?”

d. The next questions aimed at personal discovery and value system

³⁷⁴ Cf. Flick, U, Kardorff, E., Steinke, I.: *Qualitative Forschung – Ein Handbuch*. Reinbek, 2000, Rowohlt, 99-105.

³⁷⁵ Cf. Schnell, T.: *Implizite Religiosität – Zur Psychologie des Lebenssinns*. 2004, Universität Trier, 46-55.

development: “How do you cope with your problems?” “How do you make decisions?” “What helps do you have in orientation?” “What is your basic conviction?” “What would you hand down to the next generation?” These were the types of questions asked.

e. The following set of questions faced the interviewer with questions of finality and the latter stages of life. “Do you have a vocation in your life?” “Do you think that there is a plan for humanity?” “What do you think when you hear the following words: growing old, death?” “If somebody could see your life from the outside what would they see?”

f. The last questions were directly about personal religiosity: “What is your reaction when you hear the following words: God, religion, church?”³⁷⁶

The method of the partially controlled interview gives the subject a chance to associate quite freely in the given topic. At the same time the interviewer could guide the subject through the questions concerning the topics of the research.

5.1.2. Choosing the Subjects

In terms of religiosity, Hungary is in a particular situation as compared to Western societies. Prior to the change in regime in 1989, almost two entire generations grew up without any attachment to churches. In my work, I wanted an environment where people do not follow the traditional forms of ecclesiastical religiosity. According to social surveys, a connection to church is higher than the Hungarian average in villages and among intellectual circles in capital. In other towns and among people working in industry, it is the lowest.

I chose subjects from an industrial town created by the socialist regime half a century ago. The workers migrated to the town from all over Hungary and became separated from their previous

³⁷⁶ In the method of the thematically oriented narrative interview I used the formula of the Evangelical Church of Germany. EKD: *Quellen Religiöser Selbst & Weltdeutung – Die themenorientierten Erzählinterviews der dritten EKD- Erhebung der Kirchenmitgliedschaft* Hannover, 1998, Studien- und Planungsgruppe der EKD, 9.

family connections, traditions and roots. My method for choosing subjects was the so-called “snowball method.”³⁷⁷ It is a method used in qualitative research where the interviewer reaches the subjects through his social connections (acquaintances of acquaintances). This method naturally does not provide us an overall image of the people living in a given social environment because the data of qualitative analysis is too numerous and impossible to compare. The six subjects (4 men, 2 women) in their 12 interviews do not show us every possible attitude towards church, religion and God but we can find patterns characteristic not only of them but also of the wider social environment.³⁷⁸ The purpose of the following analysis is not to discover something “new” but it is of a descriptive character to support what I said in the previous chapters and to show how manifold human mythobiography can be and how many different points of reference there can be between the personal life story and Christian meta-narration.

I present the stories of the subjects one by one because we have to understand them in their own system.³⁷⁹ Direct comparison is therefore impossible. However, comparing the patterns of the stories can be useful and we can draw conclusions with regards to the object of our survey.

5.1.3. The Analytical Method

The purpose of the interviews is to shed light on how religious and church topics appear in a secularized environment. In this survey, it is important for the subjects to associate freely, so we can have a true picture of their thoughts and the structures present in their lives. Subjects do not only disclose data for the survey, their opinion and world view plays an important role in the interpretation of their data.

³⁷⁷ Cf. Fuchs-Heinritz, W: *Biographische Forschung – Eine Einführung in Praxis und Methoden*. 216.

³⁷⁸ In order to protect personal datas, I changed the names of the subjects and their relatives.

³⁷⁹ Like the Dasein analytics I endeavor to respect the subjective reality of my subjects. Cf. Sárkány, P.: Az egzisztenciális pszichoanalízis emberképe. *Pro Philosophia*, 46.2006, 47-54.

For example, when Ildikó, who has never had formal relationship with any religion or church says she prays every evening (Ildikó, II.46,14), we do not try to analyze what this “praying” means but we accept that the subject experiences it as a prayer.

From the end of the 70s, many different methods appeared which analyze life stories. One of the most well-known is Oevermann’s objective hermeneutics,³⁸⁰ and the sequence analysis based on it.³⁸¹ I use mainly these theories but I completed the analytical method with Schütze’s and Bohnsack’s narrative analysis.³⁸² The primary purpose of objective hermeneutics is not to outline the causal interconnections the subjects disclosed but to map the latent intellectual structures. What is the explanation, historical event, myth hidden behind the actions? What are the trends hidden between the lines, being perhaps independent from the spoken intentions of the subject? Our analysis is closer to Schütze’s where we look for themes related to mythobiography.³⁸³ Life stories always have central themes that practically rally the experimental content around them and show earlier actions and events in new relation.³⁸⁴ The first step of the analysis is to show the structure of their life stories: the main events critical for their identity formation, the way they articulate the story, the way social environment appears in their story. The next level of analysis is to map the themes closely related to religion. This is not a classical analysis, it is more an editing.³⁸⁵ The form of

³⁸⁰ See Oevermann, U, Allert, T., Konau, E., Krambeck, J. : *Die Methodologie einer „objektiven Hermeneutik“*. In Zedler, H. (ed.): *Aspekte qualitativer Sozialforschung – Studein zu Aktionsforschung, empirischer Hermeneutik und reflexiver Sozialtechnologie*. Opladen, 1983, Opladen, 95-123. 95-123.

³⁸¹ Cf. Schöll, A., Fischer, D.: *Deutungsmuster und Sinnbildung – Ein sequenzanalytischer Zugang nach der „objektiven Hermeneutik“*. In Adam, G, Gossman, K. (ed.): *Religion in der Lebensgeschichte – Interpretative Zugänge am Beispiel der Margaret E. Gütersloh*, 1993, Güterloher Verlagshaus, 19-49.

³⁸² See Bohnsack, R: *Rekonstruktive Sozialforschung. Einführung in Methodologie und Praxis qualitativer Forschung*. Opladen, 1993 Leske + Budrich, 91-107.

³⁸³ Cf. EKD: *Quellen Religiöser Selbst & Weltdeutung – Die themenorientierten Erzählinterviews der dritten EKD- Erhebung der Kirchenmitgliedschaft Hannover*, 1998, Studien- und Planungsgruppe der EKD, 19-24.

³⁸⁴ Cf. Schütze, F.: *Biographieforschung und narratives Interview*. *Neue Praxis*, 3,1983; 283-93. 287.

³⁸⁵ See Rosenthal, G.: *Erlebte und erzählte Lebensgeschichte – Gestalt und Struktur*

the interviews provided relative freedom for the subjects and a lot of irrelevant information is disclosed. In life story research, there is no unequivocal method applicable to every field of research. This is the same with mythobiography as well, since it can be constructed by assembling tiny parts.³⁸⁶ The purpose of the analysis is to assemble all the information about religion into a mosaic so that the main characteristics of the subject's mythobiography, the most important stages, turning points, changes, events and encounters can be seen, those that influenced the subjects the most in the forming of the religious aspects of their world and view.

The last level of analysis is the application of Glaser and Strauss' "Grounded Theory" which draws conclusions from the texts of the interviews.³⁸⁷ It means the analysis does not evaluate the data according to the clichés of existing theories but by taking the subjects' theories and philosophies and forming a common and abstract pattern to work with. The purpose is to reconstruct the world of the subject because for the personal myth cannot be analyzed. The story itself as a whole reflects our self-image.³⁸⁸

5.1.4. Assessment Criteria

Manuel Castells describes current society as a system of networks.³⁸⁹ According to him both the environment and the narrative identity of the individual appear as a network of topics where newer elements can always be added. People are members of communication networks

biographischer Selbstbeschreibungen. Frankfurt am Main, 1995, Campus, 39.

³⁸⁶ Cf. Fuchs-Heinritz, W.: *Biographische Forschung – Eine Einführung in Praxis und Methoden*. 298.

³⁸⁷ See Glaser, B.: Strauss, A.: *Grounded Theory*. Bern, 1998, Huber, 29-46. Cf. Strauss, A, Corbin, J.: *Grounded Theory Methodology – An Overview*. In Denzin, N, Lincoln, Y. (ed.): *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, 1994, SAGE Publications, 273-85. 282-283.

³⁸⁸ Cf. Biehl, P.: *Der biographische Ansatz in der Religionspädagogik*. In Grözinger, A, Luther, H. (ed.): *Religion und Biographie – Perspektiven zur gelebten Religion*. München, 1987, Chr. Kaiser, 272-96. 285., Cf. Schnell, T.: *Implizite Religiosität – Zur Psychologie des Lebenssinns*. 2004, Universität Trier, 27.

³⁸⁹ See Castells, M.: *The Power of Identity – The Information Age*. 9.

that are in continuous interaction with each other. “Identity does not feed on a common world view or ideological moral system of norms any more but on the dialogic world-experience of the individual that can only be concrete.”³⁹⁰ In the previous chapters we have already mentioned that society is built as a network but during the examination of individual life stories we have to see that it is not only the person who is connected with many threads to its surroundings but his/her identity is a part of a network too. The life events are interconnected with many other events but there are central topics and part-identities that as an ordering principle help to understand and organize the various experiences. When one relates a story according to a given viewpoint or a part-identity, the story cannot purely contain the events belonging to that part-identity omitting the events of another part-identity. With the growing numbers of events, the network of our narrative identity is steadily growing but interpretations, schematic systems, scripts and central themes help us to order them and to put them “into their place” in our lives. In the analysis of the interviews I used Heiner Keupp’s identity model, because it helps to examine how situational events are organized by central themes and the part-identities of our life and how they are elevated into a higher, more abstract level where the nuclear story and the feeling of identity are formed and the axis of our life story appears.³⁹¹

5.2. ANALYSES

5.2.1. Szabolcs’s Story

Szabolcs (40) works as a tax inspector 50 km from his home, in a county town. He lost his parents in quick succession. He has been married for three years and has no children.

He spent his childhood in the town. “I was a latchkey child” he says. He loved company. His childhood is full of memories of hanging out

³⁹⁰ Keupp, H, Ahbe, T., Gmür, W., Höfer R., Mitzscherlich, B., Kraus, W., Straus, F.: *Identitätskonstruktionen – Das Patchwork der Identitäten in der Spätmoderne*. 99.

³⁹¹ Cf. Ibid. 217.

and doing pranks. He had a close relationship with his parents and felt a strong attachment to his home. His primary and secondary schools were both less than 200 meters from home. The central experience of his childhood was his membership in the KISZ (Communist Young Alliance), This period is memorable for its camps and excursions.

Being inclined to obesity, he tried sports many times. After three knee injuries, he stopped doing sports regularly. After secondary school he decided not to continue his studies and he began to work in the clock factory where his mother and his sister worked. After the working in the factory, he completed his obligatory military service and worked as a customs officer in town. At 28 he lost his mother and shortly after that he lost his father as well. In 2003, due to restructuring, he lost his job. He met his wife through a personal ad. He married at 37 and got a job in town but for a better salary he decided to commute 3 hours a day to the county town. In his life story, connection with communities, home, friends and founding a family play central roles.

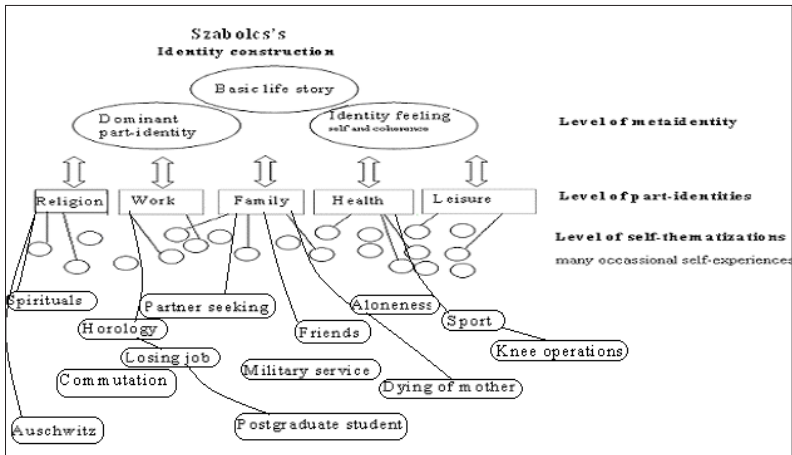
5.2.1.1. The Final Questions of Life without a Religious Explanation

When talking about world view, Szabolcs mentioned his KISZ (Communist Youth Organization) membership. In secondary school, he was a KISZ secretary, a member of the KISZ committee. His job was mainly organizing summer camps. During a KISZ summer camp in Poland, he visited the concentration camp of Auschwitz. "It had a very deep impact on my soul" he confessed (I.57,00). "Nowadays people think it shameful if somebody was a KISZ member. For me, it was a positive experience. I loved going to camps." (I.14,55) Interestingly, he mentioned his hobby of collecting stamps as a part of his world view. As a student, he attended philatelist competitions. "It broadened both my world view and knowledge." (I.15,36) Belonging to a community and sharing common experiences are of central importance in Szabolcs's life story. Childhood groups, excursions, years of military service, playing handball and later friends and social relationships

all appear as cohesive forces of identity. His life story has very few connections with religion. In his youth, he met religiosity in the military only when he participated in a talent contest where he sang spirituals with his comrades. It was their “cultural mission.” (I.36,09) Though he had three knee injuries during his life, the hardships and the operations related to them were not traumatic enough to confront him with the final questions of life. When talking about his time in the hospital, he mentioned the interesting people he met there but he did not look for the deeper reason for his suffering. Among the interesting people he mentioned there were “fanatics.” “I always respected those people, who did something different than I did.” (I.2.06,02) One of the most staggering experiences of his life was when he lost his mother. “I retreated by myself for a week and that week was very terrible for me.” (I.2.14,41) He lost 4-5 kg during this time and later he buried himself into his work to try to take away his pain. Some years later he lost his father and felt terribly alone. “Losing my parents was the worst part of my life.” (III.15,16) Three and a half years later he lost his job too. “I was bloody alone. It was like the ground was slipping from under me.” (I.2.34,16) “I was terribly upset that nobody needed my work. They didn’t really tell my why. But why me? It was an inexplicable, bad feeling.” (II.17,13) But he did not try to find religious answers to the questions of his life. In his case, the only reason was not only the missing vocabulary to ask the final questions in a religious way but in his world religious themes are scarce. When asked about his plan of life, Szabolcs said “I do not really believe in it. I think there were situations when I thought of it. When one hears about a freak accident, then he thinks about things like that but otherwise they don’t.” (II.34,48) “When (in a nearby village) some people were digging a trench, the soil buried one of the people. One thinks I could have been there. I could have been that man.” (II.35,38) “The biggest hope one can have is to bring up his kids and live as long as he can.” (II.39,11) “It is so bad to think about how man wears out.” (II,42,10) “Consciousness determines existence. Part of the consciousness is to be afraid of it (death). Whoever denies that just deludes himself. Even those who believe (in resurrection) are afraid of it.” (II.39,29) “I’d like to die as they did (his parents). If we do not know about ourselves

it is meaningless.” (II.44,01) “I don’t really believe in God but there are some things that make me think. I cannot explain why not but it is just left out of my life. Someone who sees his parents believing will believe, if someone doesn’t they won’t.” (II.46,54) “If somebody believes in things but not in others, that’s stupid. I don’t believe in this.” (II.48,39) “I don’t have many experiences (about the church). I don’t want to speak ill of it... but I heard in my history studies about Catholics and I take that as the basis. I have a very bad opinion of it. But I think it’s not about that.” (II.49,19) “For many people religion is like a therapist. It answers problems. I’m sure it sounds stupid and it’s may be about something completely different but I’d compare it to that. People need something to hold on to.” (II.51,28)

5.2.1.2. Evaluation



As the illustration shows, religion is not a decisive factor in Szabolcs's identity. In his life story, we only meet a couple of isolated religious topics (Auschwitz, spiritual songs) and not even they carry religious meanings. Spiritual songs are more cultural experiences in his memories and he does seek a way out of the questions concerning death the finiteness of life, descendants, solitude and loneliness. His

answers are not connected to religion, they are placed into the category of belonging to human communities. In his case, mythobiography does not hold expressively religious content. These themes are only present on the level of situative self-thematization.

5.2.2. Ildikó's Story

Ildikó (37) is a teacher. She teaches German and Physical Education in a public grammar school. She is married and has two children.

She is the second child. Her brother who is two years older than her, has always played an important role in her life. She looked up to him as a child and he was also her rival. She attended a local elementary school. She remembered the first years of school as a good period that later went wrong when a couple of troublesome students and children from a reformatory home came to her class. She loved sports so she went to a Physical Education specialized grammar school. The most decisive experience of grammar school was the school leaving exam itself. Owing to the "shrew of a history teacher" the exam did not go as well as she intended but she was admitted to the Teacher Training College of Szeged Physical Education-Russian program upon her first try.

During her college years she had the opportunity to live in the Soviet Union for half a year. Although her state examination went well, due to the change of the political system, Russian teachers were not needed anymore. With the help of her family connections she went to Germany to study the language. When she returned to Hungary, she taught Physical Education in different schools and worked as a trainer. At 28 she married a professional handball player. After one year she gave birth to her first child. Two years later their second son was born. During these years, she attended Eötvös Loránt University to be retrained as a German teacher and obtained her degree. Since 2001 she has been working in the local grammar school as a German-Physical Education teacher. According to her account, her life themes are connected mostly with family, school and in particular with children's education.

5.2.2.1. The Relationship of Sport and Religion

In Ildikó's life her love of sports is the central ordering motive. Her relationship with sports and communities gained through sport are recurring motives. She gained experiences of community and traveling through sport and even her childhood dream is connected with sport. She learnt to swim at seven years of age when she attended first grade of elementary school. She participated in competitions and was fourth in breaststroke swimming and was among the first eight in butterfly stroke in a municipal competition.

Later in elementary school, she began to play handball thanks to one of her teachers. Her adolescent dream was to become a player in the first division of the Hungarian Championships. She therefore attended a Physical Education specialized grammar school. In college she earned a place in the second division. She played matches every weekend. Even when she worked in Germany she found a team to play with. The local team meant a lot to her: "If they weren't there for me, I couldn't have lasted that one year." They celebrated birthdays together with her friends from the handball team, and when Ildikó quit her first job, the others helped her to find a new one. During that year, she organized a training match between her team and the locals when her team went to Netherlands and stopped for a break in Germany in the town she lived and played. When she returned to Hungary, in addition to working as a Physical Education teacher, she worked as a handball trainer as well and she met her husband in the handball environment. She has much less time to do sports with all her work. She began to visit a fitness center although it is not the best place to build deeper relationships like the other places were earlier in her life. She tries to hand down the love for sport to her children. "Football is everything" for her older son and "last time, he won the running competition. We are very proud of him." She is still in contact with her first trainer, she sends him a card on special occasions and her friends are from the same circle. As a teacher and mother, in addition to sport she finds school and work important in her life. When asked what the past 37 years were about, she answered: "they were about studying and sport." Ildikó comes from a non-religious

background but sport played a role in her life similar in function to religion. One of these is the community building. The other is the integrating function because the sport Ildikó played was a team-sport. Besides her school and family life, all her human relationships, friendships and loves are connected to sport. She found role models here. One of her trainers became a role model throughout her life. She found group identity and community experience. Sport helped her to travel even before the change of the political system and she could travel to Sweden and Slovakia. Through sport she had her first experience of flying an airplane. All the training and championships were experiences attached to sport. Sport offered rites because the games and meetings happened at a definite time of the week.³⁹² The common sport helped to leave everyday routine behind. It was where according to specified rules particular purposes were formed and where a playground formed and offered a place outside the rational world. The environment of the sport determined the circle of human relationship. It gave new purposes and programs to life as well. It ensured a framework for routine-like meetings, different competitions and personal or common ambitions. Of course despite the sport's quasi-religious function, it is different from religion. It is only a part-identity. While it is true that we experience religion in a given environment, it still provides a whole universe with its transcendence and interpretation of life through the final questions.

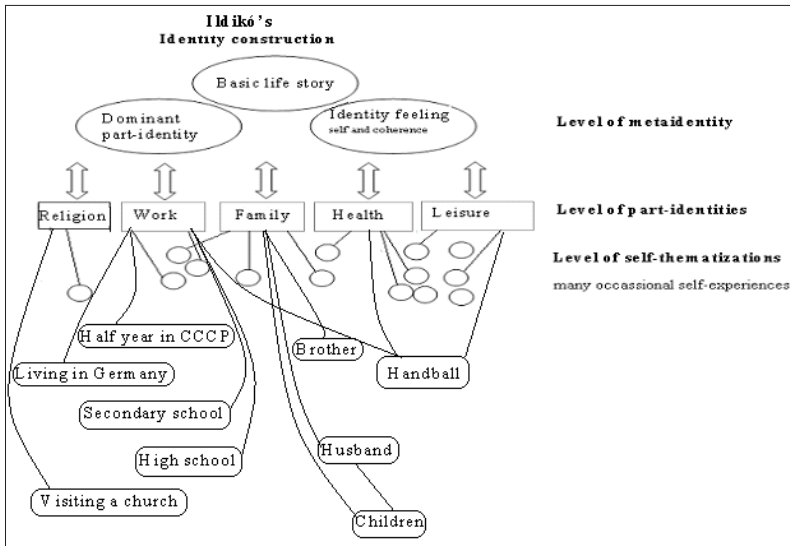
5.2.2.2. *A Religious Plateau-Experience*

Although Ildikó explicitly expressed her being religious when she said she prayed every evening, her religiosity is felt only implicitly, since organized religion is not present in her life. She rarely met with the religious environment in her life. For example in class outings, they visited churches. She imagines religious people to be “cleaner” than others, although she is not sure of it. Religious formulation of

³⁹² See Daiber, K-F: *Religion in Kirche und Gesellschaft – Theologische und soziologische Studien zur Präsenz von Religion in der gegenwärtigen Kultur*. Stuttgart, 1997, Kohlhammer, 189-202.

questions is not present in her life, due to both the environment she had grown up in and the life situation she lives in. From the point of view of human religiosity, the third decade of life is like a “quiet journey.”³⁹³ According to developmental psychology, this is the period when people are occupied mostly by their identity projects: founding a family, building a house, traveling, etc.³⁹⁴ Until some grave loss does not move people out of their routine and off the course of realizing their plans, it is entirely possible they do not ask questions about the finiteness, limitedness or the meaning of life.

5.2.2.3. Evaluation



In Ildikó's case explicit religious themes are only on the level of situative self-thematization but among the part-identities her

³⁹³ Cf. Nipkow, K.E.: *Erwachsenwerden ohne Gott? – Gotteserfahrung im Lebenslauf*. 5 ed. Gütersloh, 1997, Chr. Kaiser, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 98.

³⁹⁴ Cf. Nittel, D.: *Das Erwachsenenleben aus der Sicht der Biographieforschung*. In Heinz-Hermann, K, Marotzki, W. (ed.): *Handbuch erziehungswissenschaftliche Biographieforschung*. Opladen, 1999, Leske + Budrich, 302-23. 308-310.

attachment to sport carries religious elements. There are no religious, spiritual elements in her wording but in her thinking they are present when she talks about evening prayers. On the other hand, it is not an integral part of her life story; she does not explain it and she does not evaluate what it means to her.

5.2.3. Zoltán's Story

Zoltán (30) works in three shifts in a town 35 miles from her home. He is married. He is rearing three children, two (ages 12 and 15) from his wife's previous marriage and their common child.

Zoltán remembers his grandparents as playing an important role in his childhood. Even if his grandfather was not "related by blood," he shared many experiences with him. They traveled together. He does not have good feelings about his parents. "They went nowhere in life and if I achieved something, that's really no thanks to them." (I.4,07) In Zoltán's biography, school has an important role. He tries to construct the life of his children accordingly. Zoltán was a good student, he liked reading, was talented in history but he was introverted and often ridiculed because of his obesity. He has good memories of secondary school: he did sports a lot. He was not obese any longer and even his results were good. After the maturity exam, he wanted to study history at the university but he was not admitted. He missed the acceptance limit by one point. He then enlisted in the army. It was at this time that he met his wife. He married her at 18 and because of this, his relationship with his parents deteriorated. "At 18, I was cast out and got into my new family." (I.36,52) He became the breadwinner of the family relatively young and began to work three shifts at the county town. This meant commuting three hours a day. Soon his son was born. Later, he started business school but he did not finish it. He studied metallurgical engineering but after two years abandoned it. Now, he is studying economics in a town 200 km from his home through a correspondence course.

Zoltán's life story is centered mostly on a limited number of social relationships, studying and his children's education. He says he hasn't

time for anything else. He finds it hard to maintain friendships and other kinds of human relationships due to his duty shifts. He lives by a different schedule every week. He has been working three shifts for more than three years. Commuting by bus or train takes away at least three hours from his day. If he works in the afternoon shift he can get home only by changing lines and he arrives home at one in the morning, eats dinner, watches TV and browses the Internet. He goes to bed at about 2.30 in the morning. Soon after that the family wakes up and everybody goes to school or to work. Since his lifestyle permits only a restricted number of human relationships, the quality of his relationships is very important for him. He describes his stories from the point of view of his relationships and his belonging to people and places. He begins his life with his close relationship with his grandparents and he contrasts that with his parents less loyal family model. “The family did not work as it must have as a family is expected to work.” (I.30,58) After his marriage, his relationship with his parents was broken. After more than a decade, he admits: “What is a special day to me? When my parents, or –God forbid– my sister calls me. (...) But they don’t call me and it hurts me. But I buried it in myself, I don’t care.” (I.32,30)

5.2.3.1. *Connection to Church and the “DIY-faith”*³⁹⁵

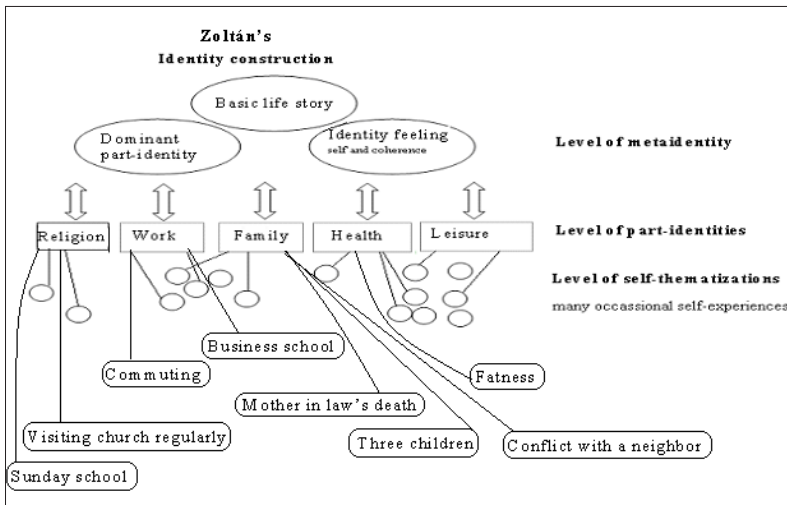
If we examine Zoltán’s view of life and wording, we find a special phenomenon. He fits into the category of “believes according to the church’s teaching” used in religious sociology, because whenever they give thanks with his family before eating, he reads the Bible. Even those who go to church have widely different beliefs. Due to the influence of one of his teachers, Zoltán together with the teacher’s children began to attend Religion classes in the second half of elementary school. Later he connected to the youth club of the congregation. Following elementary school, he wanted to go to the Reformed Grammar School

³⁹⁵ Cf. Gabriel, K.: *Christentum zwischen Tradition und Postmoderne*. Freiburg, 2000, 152-156.

in Sárosatak but on his way back home he had a negative experience: “In Miskolc railway station, gypsies took my money.” (I.25,49) He was not admitted to this grammar school and later he dropped out of the youth club. “I don’t remember why I didn’t go but I didn’t.” (I.27.31) His “new enlightenment” (I.27.45) came later in life. In his wording: “You could say that I owe my second encounter with God to my wife,” whose mother one day suddenly felt ill. His mother in law was taken to the hospital and the doctors encouraged his wife to return home and that there was nothing to worry about. But when she went back in the morning, her mother had died. Being unable to say goodbye to her mother, left a deep scar in Zoltán’s wife. “Perhaps she will never forgive herself.” (I.1.02,16) “From then on, she went to church every Sunday.” (I.1.04,10) Zoltán and the children began to go to church as well. They had their oldest son enrolled into a Reformed grammar school where, in Zoltán’s opinion, “selected children,” attended and not “‘come here, you bitch’ kind of kids” (I.1.06.09) Their second oldest son goes to Sunday school class too, because “it is better for him to go to a place like that. Perhaps he will calm down there.” (I.1.05,25) Zoltán thinks the church has a function of moral teaching. In his life story, religion comes to the surface in his conflict and years of litigation with his neighbor: “I do not mention the book of Job, because I don’t feel guilty.” (I.55.18) According to his faith schemata, he interprets his own faith as critical reflexive in contrast to his wife’s: “I can accept if somebody believes in God, because God exists but I don’t believe that everything is under his control. That’s what Klára believes. I don’t think so.” (I.43.36) But he thinks his faith is different from that of the community. “I don’t believe two people created for each other...” (I.1.34,18) “Many told me I am wasting my talent and retrospectively I agree with them but perhaps that was predestined for me, no, I am sure of that. If I had to start over, I’d do the same. It’s easy to be clever in hindsight. But to think ahead, that’s difficult.” (I.1.57,10) Zoltán met the religious environment twice in his life but he spent his youth with practically no religious influence. He equals living in the church and in the world as follows: “Fate and predestination are the same. Some call it this way, others the other way. I don’t believe in faith.” (II.1.01,00) Church idioms and non-Christian

wording is present in Zoltán's speech in a particular way. Refusing the existence of faith and accepting it get on together in his mind. "No one can know where life will bring them." (I.1.24,09) Idioms do not reflect a coherent world view, rather a view where main principles are settled but smaller details can be in contradiction with each other. "I managed to remain in, knock on wood." (I.44.05) God is present in his world view but he does not interfere but it is "God who helps to overcome things." (I.1.34,18) "I believe that God exists and so on but are you sure he is directing people? You see? 'because sometimes strange things happen.'" (I.55.33) He describes finding his job: "I'm sure God's hand was in it but at the time I didn't think so." (I.42.10) About a college exam: "I felt I'll be lucky and oops..." (II.32.02) "Good Lord, I have to take that exam tomorrow! And Somebody generally helps me." (II.33,17) He sees God's role in his decisions: "I'm a rational man. If I have two equally good options, that's when I pray." (II.35.07)

5.2.3.2. Evaluation



Zoltán's life story has more than one connection to religion and not only on the level of situative self-thematizing but between his

interpretations of life. In his case, religion is a part-identity. These themes are connected with other part-identities; they appear in his family relationships, in his childhood stories and even in the topic of learning or his children's education. There are part-identities however, that are not really connected to religion.

5.2.4. Tamás's Story

Tamás (33) is the director of a carpentry workshop founded by his father. He is married but does not have children yet. Tamás is the youngest child in his family. His brother was nine and a half years older than him. He was schizophrenic and he died at 40 – a year before the interview took place. Tamás regards his childhood as average but as for later, he mentions he was “backward in writing” (I.5.20) In his childhood, he had a serious accident. He was run over by a car. Half of his cheek was grazed and he broke his left arm. He was a good student in elementary school and his parents sent him to a technical high school to learn a trade. Through his sister he met a monastic community and later he joined the youth club of a Reformed congregation. After completing his matriculation exam, he wrote the entrance examination for theology and a wood technology program. He failed two parts of the theology exam –he thinks they were unfair to him– but now he says “I'm grateful I didn't go there.” (I.14.08) He was admitted to the University of Sopron. He gradually became estranged from the congregation.

At that time another serious accident happened to him. He had knee surgery and due to medical malpractice, he spent four months in hospital and for another six months he had to undergo physical therapy.

Tamás began to work in his father's workshop during university and he has been working there ever since. In the meantime he completed a supplementary course in economics and now he is the director of the workshop. He has been training skilled workers for three years.

He met his wife in a German language course. Because Tamás wanted to marry in a church, she had to be baptized. This was when

Tamás got into contact with the church again. They have no children as yet but they have a Hungarian pointer requiring much care and attention. Tragedies and disappointments play central role in his recollection.

*5.2.4.1. Religious World View without Christian Community?
Disappointment in Church*

Tamás met Cistercians through his sister when he went to elementary school. He met Father Vendel who led a life of prayer, spoke seven languages, liked to work with children and taught them languages. When talking about their meeting he says: “I guess that’s where this whole career, if I may call it that way, my believer career started.” (I.10.12).

Through his friends in the beginning of the 90s, he began to visit the youth club of the Reformed congregation which was attended by Catholics as well in the beginning. Tamás was there from the establishment of the youth club thus the group became of high importance for him. Most of his friends were members of this group and he himself was a central figure in it. “During secondary school, I always participated in everything.” (I.12,36) “But there was that theology entrance exam and I became disappointed in the whole system. When I was young, I had a completely different image of the church in my mind than what I have now.” (I.12,38) “I imagined things differently. I don’t know whether I was to be blamed or the things happened to me. And I don’t even want to know that.” (I.13.11) Tamás failed two parts of the three-day long exam but he was admitted to the University of Sopron Faculty of Wood Engineering. When describing the next years he says: “I became alienated from the congregation, I didn’t really go to church... I went sometimes but during the college years, it was difficult.” (I.14.40) His next disappointment in church happened when he went through a series of operations with his knee. During his recovery, two girls from the youth club visited him but since the flat was untidy, he did not let them in. After that, nobody from the congregation visited him. “Everybody I considered

a friend just disappeared from my life. Though all my friends were from there, from the congregation. It was a very good lesson about people.” (I,16,59) During his college years it was his circle of friends that stopped him going to church. Later it was the disappointment that hindered him and did not let him find a community. “There were 3-4 or more 5-6 years, those were quite secluded. It still was in me but I did not care.” (I.22.53) Five and a half years later he met his wife during a language course and that eventually meant his reconnection with the church. “My wife wanted to marry, not me. But she wanted a family for our kids to be born in... Finally I proposed and I insisted on a church wedding. I wanted to marry in a church. She didn’t but she wasn’t against it either.” (I.24.00) “If I marry someone, I marry her before God.” (I.39.46) Since Tamás’s fiancée was not baptized, she had to study catechism. They also went together to marriage preparation classes. Both the marriage and the preparation was a positive experience for them: “since then every Sunday evening we read the Bible together.” (I.24.39) Sometimes they go to church together and once or twice a year they talk to their pastor and visit their monk friend regularly in Budapest. Even if he feels alienated from the church, he still considers himself Christian. “I live as I believe up to now.” (I.47.07)

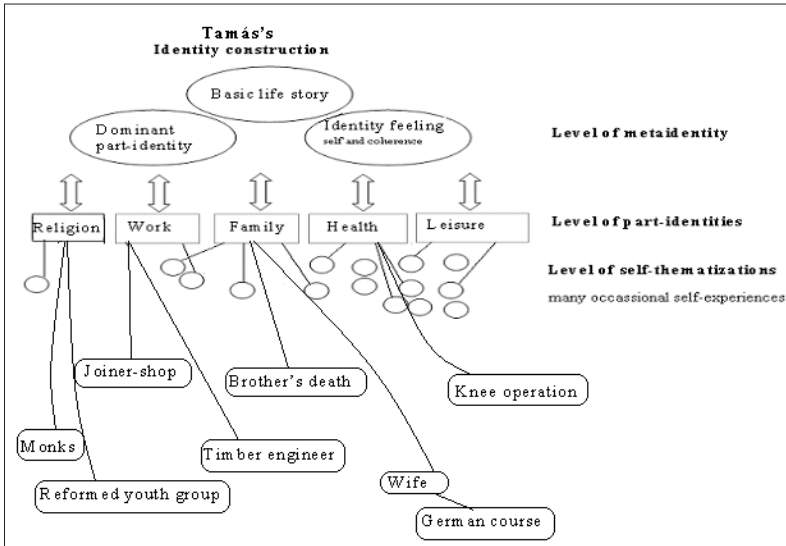
He reads the Bible at least three times a week and he says religious norms are important in his decisions. “The moral side of my life is connected with it.” (I.44.30) “It is the faith that directs man... atheists decide according to different norms.” (I.49.25) He sees his faith as individual reflexive: “People have no choices, one have to reconcile themselves with what it is determined. I don’t believe in predestination.” (I.50.58) “One is humiliated by life itself. It is like being humiliated by God.” (I.52.26) “I think, there must be some spiritual handhold, to help people out of the abyss. This is the biggest role of faith.” (I.52.50) Faith for him is a possible explanation, a hermeneutical key to life’s events. There are disappointments and crises in life from where “you can’t climb out. You can only process it. These are the most determining things for man. How you process it.” (II.26.21) He says about misfortune: “I saw it wrong at that time. God taught me by everything. There is always luck in ill luck as well.”

(II.24.38) “You can’t be successful in everything but that is part of the life. Life isn’t just about joy.” (II.25.12)

5.2.4.2. Faith as Hermeneutics

Despite his disappointments, Tamás did not close connections with Christianity, though he did not have formal connection with the church for year, the Christian values remained determining in his world view. “What’s the biggest joy? I’d be deceitful if I said: it’s finding my faith. I’d lie, if I said so, because I think man is much more selfish than just to say it.” (II.21.01) “Faith is very good, it is a very big help, because when somebody feels alone, he can talk to Somebody and that’s a very big help. It can give strength and handhold even when somebody doesn’t really believe.” (II.27.17) “Go on with life, do what we have to and die in the end. That’s all. I’d like to believe we will go to heaven. But I can picture myself in the heavenly life devouring a bowl of fruit till the end of time. It’d be very boring. I wouldn’t call that heaven. I’ll get into another dimension and I’ll have purposes worth living for. That’s heaven for me.” (II.37.48) “Faith is relating.” (II.47.10) “I can’t do many things. I’m in the beginning of my things. But I don’t expect myself to become big. It’s not in my nature. But I wanted to, I confess... Well, God’ll tell...” (II.50.45)

5.2.4.3. Evaluation



In Tamás's construction of identity, religion plays an important role but as the illustration shows there are part-identities connected with religion but there are part-identities where it is not of determining importance. Tamás has a life story interpreted from the religious point of view but parallel to that he can interpret himself according to his other part-identities (i.e. family and work). Though religion is important to him, it remained just a "part" of his identity. Presently it is not the unique, all-determining aspect of his life. From his life story it is clear that on the level of meta-identity there was a period in his life when religion played a central role. Currently the dominance of religion is not explicit. It is just one interpretation of life among the others.

5.2.5. Vilmos's Story

Vilmos (30) lives in a city where he works as a lawyer. He was baptized in the Catholic Church as an adult. He is successful both in his personal and social life. At the time of the interview he was preparing for his

wedding with an orphaned, devout Catholic girl. Vilmos's parents are "first-generation intellectuals" who had two children: Vilmos and his younger sister. Vilmos's life is closely connected to his parents and grandparents. He was a good student in both the elementary and secondary school. He lived at home with his parents, who helped him in choosing his career. They paid for extra lessons when he was studying for his entrance examinations. Even before the exam, they bought him a flat in the town where he would attend university. One of Vilmos's uncles was a minister in the 1990s. He helped his nephew find a job after university. A couple of years later, during part of his second degree curriculum, he won a scholarship to Denmark for six months and he quit his job in order to accept the scholarship. After graduation, he successfully received another job. After a short while, he was offered another position at his first workplace for a better salary than previously. As an adult he joined a Christian youth club through his friends and he has been an active member ever since. He met his fiancée in this community. He describes his life story as an unbroken success story, where fragility of life is connected to illness and loss. He recently lost his grandfather, his father is seriously ill and his fiancée lost both of her parents early.

*5.2.5.1. "It takes all kinds to take the world!"
Religion as the Place of Meaning Formation*

Three years ago Vilmos's father was diagnosed with cancer. It such a rare form, that there is no treatment for it in Europe. At first, the doctors could weren't able to diagnose his illness and one of them said to him: "You shouldn't even be alive in your situation!" (I.2.00,00) "Who knows what will happen tomorrow or the day after that. Since then, he went to a Cursillo. He has been there three times. I can accept that. I can accept it because I believe. I can't explain everything but I feel everything will click into its place in time." (I.2.06,46) "Birth, life, suffering, death. The picture is now complete in me. I can't put everything to words... It's good as it is all things considered. When one feels things to be unfair, everything has a reason. After all, you

have to pay for everything and you will be paid. Everything will have their consequences. At least, in my opinion.” (I.2.07,44)³⁹⁶

About religious education he says: “In the family we didn’t talk about it. Grandma went to school to the nuns but later she became very leftist. My other granny went to confession regularly. My uncle was very religious in his childhood but he left it. Later, he began to show interest in it again.” (I.1.21,55) Vilmos got closer to the church, through his relationships. In university he went to mass with his friends. “I went to mass quite regularly but I don’t remember who brought whom and how.” (I.1.20.30) “In the family, there wasn’t only sensitivity towards religion but some antipathy as well. My cousins began to go in earnest, one of them even took things too far and became ill from fasting.” (I.1.21.02) Vilmos’s mother and sister joined the so-called “Cursillo” movement. They went to Kőszeg for a spiritual week and “they came home tached by God.” (I.1.26.20) Following their example, Vilmos too went to a similar occasion and during the procession “bang! I just got the cross to carry. You don’t need a big vocation to see a sign (in it). Especially a man like me. It was bloody interesting. People, completely different from me, grown-ups and old men were crying. They were talking but I couldn’t see with whom... Is there a level such like that?” (I.1.28.06) “It had a big effect on me but I can’t say I converted. After all, one’s whole life is a conversion. But I got a very interesting push.” (I.1.29.01)

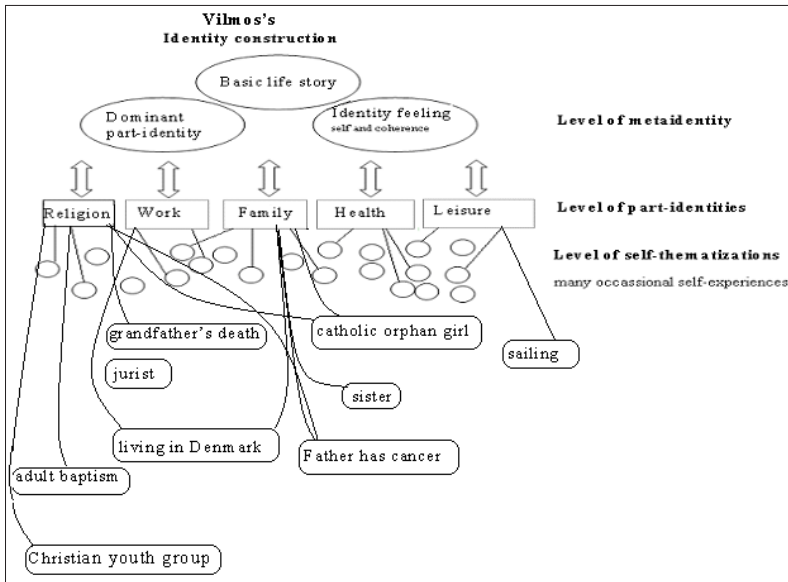
After that experience, Vilmos began to go to mass at least once a month and read the Bible more intensively. “God called me not through my heart but my mind – first to understand and then to believe. Actually, that’s the way it is.” (I.1.29.50) “I picture it as a tap which is opened. First, there’s only one drop and slowly it is deeper. I’d compare my relationship with God, religion and church like that.” (I.1.23.22)

Apart from the spiritual experiences Vilmos finds the community of his university friends also important. They meet every week. They pray together, read the Bible together and talk about the things of life.

³⁹⁶ Vilmos’s religious wording supports Streib’s view about the simultaneous presence and usage of faith levels. See Streib, H.: *Faith Development Theory Revisited – The Religious Styles Respektive*. 149.

After Denmark he reconnected to this group and there he met his future wife. He says about her: “despite her losing both of her parents, she is a deeply devout, happy person.” (I.2.37.37). “He was baptized in the Reformed church but he picked things up later.” (I.2.38.05) Vilmos was not baptized but through the years: “I began to feel I was ready for something very important. Vilmos’s godmother was a girl 10 years his junior from the same community. He sums it up: “I had a good life up to now. Formerly I said I was lucky, now I say God is good to me and I give thanks to him for all this he’s given to me.” (I.2.51.30) “I believe because it’s good to believe. It’s good to have a solid point of my life and things are in their places, it fills me with a good feeling.” (I.2.55.11)

5.2.5.2. Evaluation



In Vilmos’s construction of identity it is obvious that religion plays a very important role: it does not connect only to the religious part-identity but it appears in many other places and is connected to other

part-identities (family, work, health, etc.). Though he was already an adult, when religion became an important part of his life, on every level of his interpretation of life, we can find religious themes. In his case, religion is not a part-identity among part-identities but an element of meta-identity which helps to interpret the other part-identities and his whole life.

5.2.5. Katalin's Story

Katalin (41), surgical nurse, divorced, mother of two girls. One of her daughters lives with her ex-husband, the other lives with him.

Katalin spent the first 14 years of her life in a village close to a town, where her father worked as a railway man. She remembers her childhood as containing good family circumstances but at the age of 13 her parents got divorced. She finished elementary school in the town where she moved with her mother. Her marks deteriorated and she went to study at a public health secondary school. After her studies she went to Budapest where she worked as a children's nurse. Soon she married an army officer and they moved to Cegléd. They had two daughters but after a while, their relationship deteriorated and Katalin cheated on her husband with a man 18 years older than her. They later tried to save their marriage but after the birth of their second daughter, they decided to divorce. After the separation, Katalin and her husband separated the girls: the older 9 year old daughter went to live with the father, the young 2 year old remained with the mother. Katalin moved first to the capital to live with her mother but when she inherited a flat in Budapest, she moved there. She got a job as a surgical nurse and she buried herself in her job. She felt guilty and began to search for where she had spoiled her life and through reading books on psychology; he began to ask religious questions. She says it was her guilt that drove her to sports. Once she overexerted herself so much, that she ended up with a protruded intervertebral disc and her left hand was temporarily paralyzed. Since her father married for the third time, he needed the flat, so Katalin and her daughter went from one flat to another. Later they got an official residence. She tried

many times to form a new relationship but all the attempts failed because her partners abandoned her. In her search for a way out of her problems, she encountered a Reformed congregation. Religiosity and Christianity became of central importance in her life. The main thought pattern of her life story is centered on the double concept of crime and punishment.

*5.2.5.1. Limit-situations of Life and
the Stabilizing Function of Religion*

Katalin had many losses in her life that made her ask the final questions of life. "I got to a point where, when (...) I felt I didn't know why I got there because I felt I did everything well. Like after conversion when one feels he's doing everything well. I began to search for reasons for how I got into that physical and mental abyss." (I.10.51) Katalin's mother was a believer and she wanted her daughter to be the same. Katalin did confirmation at her request as an adult. It took place in 1994 after her divorce, when she was still living at her mother's with her daughter.

They went to church together many times and Katalin often began to cry during the service, though she could not explain why. Three years later when she went to the hospital due to a serious illness, she took her Bible with her and a couple of months later, she began to go to church regularly. By that time, her life was becoming settled. She had a secure job in the city, lived in a council flat and after her recuperation from physical trauma "my soul began to heal as well." (I.22.10) "The center of gravity in my life shifted and my life became settled. I am satisfied." (I.25.38) She is an active member of a Reformed congregation. Later in the local hospital, she undertook the task to invite patients to the hospital service. One year before the interview she began to take a missionary training correspondence course in the Baptist Theological School.

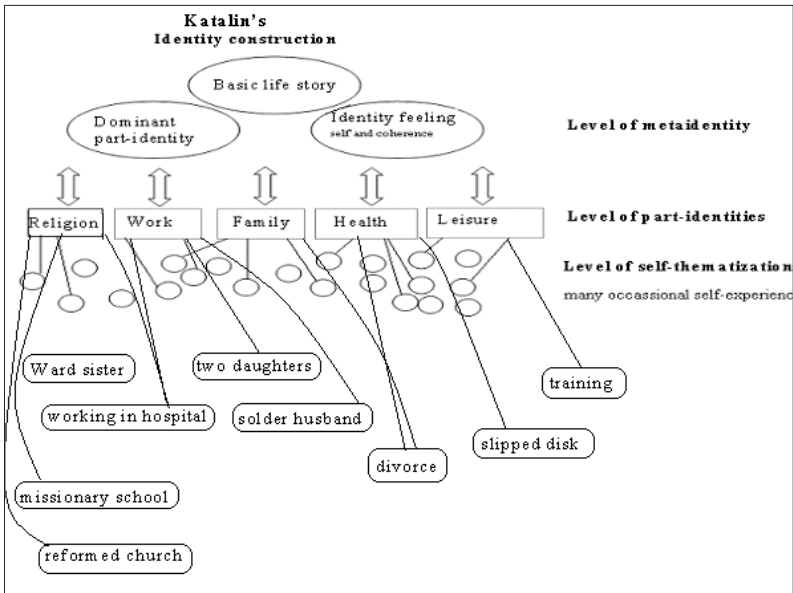
The question of divorce and fidelity are of key importance in Katalin's self-image. Thirteen years after her divorce, her Christian faith helped her to process these problems. During these years, she

tried to marry more than once but with no success. “I was always the one who was abandoned but I deserved it.” (I.39.01) “When I converted I hoped God would fix my marriage. But it seemed it was not my way. I accept it and it is not a problem anymore. I don’t look for explanations; I accept it from God’s hand.” (I.26.17) “It had to be that way. I accept there is no “what if” but only the now. That was then and this is what I have now.” (I.32.56) “It’s good to live my life as a companion of Jesus Christ... Márton is my husband, I have no other... My life is a misery but my place is at Jesus’ side.” (I.40.09) Katalin sees the roots of her misery not in her divorce only but in her parents’ divorce. “What is that 30 years in the face of eternity?” (I.44.52) During recent years, Katalin met Seventh-day Adventists and she felt better in their congregation than in the Reformed one but it was fidelity that dictated her to remain in her congregation. “No one should leave their own congregation. I left my husband but my Lord placed me here. I have already broken the Law, I didn’t want to repeat the same sin twice. My Lord gave me a mission.” (I.47.34) “I don’t have plans nowadays. I have hopes.” (I.49.37) “I put tomorrow into his hands and I have relative peace in my life.” (I.50.50) “He placed me in different situations to show me how they are.” (I.51.40) “I’m in the blood circulation of creation. I’m part of God’s plan as he ordered me to be. I married against his will. All right, it must have had to happen that way. I exist because God wanted me to exist. He needed my service, my giving birth to two children. He wanted me to enjoy the mere joy of existence.” (I.52.54)

To Katalin, faith plays a vital part in the struggles of everyday life: “A day is special, if there is a spiritual conversation, where I feel Christ’s presence. If I’m a good tool in God’s hand in the operating room.” (II.3.09) “I enjoy this treadmill.” (II.5.17) Ever since I began to live in Christ, I don’t have big joys or sorrows. I went through miseries, when I cried to my sisters and brothers but I didn’t find it hopeless. I experience them with Christ. I know the Lord will lead me out.” (II.15.47) My purpose is to preach the gospel. I cannot be satisfied by less. The Lord knows my greatest wish is to be Christian and to be a part in the building of his kingdom.” (II.19.28) She says about her job: “I wanted to break free from here but the Lord entrusted me

with unbelievers. I wished it but the burden just got bigger. I wanted to abandon my theological studies but I understood God wants to use me here and now.” (II.23.47)

5.2.5.2. Evaluation



Among the subjects connection with religiosity is the strongest in Katalin's case. In her case, religion is not only a part-identity but an explanation for her life, a connecting basis for her whole identity. Religion is present in every part-identity as a definite, integrating force. Religious interpretations are present in every part of her life (sport, family, health, work, etc.) Religiosity is such an integral part of the basis of her life story, that every interpretation in terms of any part-identity unavoidably contains religious elements.

5.3. CONCLUSION

5.3.1. Variety of Mythobiography

The accounts of the subjects showed that they are about past and present simultaneously and these two fields of time are not independent but they define each other.³⁹⁷

In the scheme of the life story there are lines and events which not even the interviewer can see how they fit into the narrative, why a certain event is important. If we see the life story as a whole, there are threads resurfacing again and again, interpreting and completing everything the storyteller considers important with regard to his identity. In Vilmos's story mourning and loss are recurring motives. He mentions two deaths from his childhood: one is from elementary school when one of his friends played in a ditch and the soil collapsed on him. (Vilmos, I.17.37) There is another from kindergarten when the father of one of his companions killed his wife during a quarrel. (Vilmos, I.19.37) These topics in the initial phase already project the importance of mourning in later stages. "Thanks to God, I haven't had to face these for long." (Vilmos, I.21.10) This example shows how past and present are connected. Forgotten stories do not become important and resurface accidentally. There are several topics in life story which can run parallel to the life story. When we construct our life story, we have more causal threads making possible different

³⁹⁷ In Drechsel's opinion, every narrative of our life story has a meaning in our present. It depends from our present which story we choose to tell, which one we describe in detail. Our present is an ordering principle of the story. Drechsel wrote a story about an old man, who was in the hospital when he talked to him. He was waiting for his stomach to be operated. It would be natural, if he spoke about the operation or his fears but instead he – in a relatively neutral tone – he talked about the second world war, the frontline, about the battle of Stalingrad, "And then, that Russian officer clasped his pistol to my breast and said, 'It I pull the trigger, you'll die!' And I answered, 'If you pull the trigger, you'll be my murderer!'" When the old man said the word "pistol," he pointed to his stomach and so he signalled, he told that particular episode of his life, because he felt just like in that situation. See Drechsel, W.: *Lebensgeschichte und Lebens-Geschichten: Zugänge zur Seelsorge aus biographischer Perspektive*. 20.

interpretations of different points of view. One such relation can be mythobiography – the religious or ideological version of the life story.

Mythobiography analysis is not an easy task, because – as we already mentioned – not everybody reflects their life from this point of view (but everybody has already faced religious questions, so we can say everybody has “history” with God³⁹⁸). On the other hand we have to consider that every person has their own philosophy and theology, even those who visit church on a regular basis.³⁹⁹ It is due to the fact that religion is a complex dimension of human life, which is partly connected to a social environment, a tradition, partly to a person’s fears, wishes and search for meaning.⁴⁰⁰

Life stories demonstrate how we can get from implicit religious phenomena –which are more or less present in every human life story– to explicit religiosity.

Religion is present in many different parts of human life but several phenomena have lost their explicit religious character in the course of time. These are some family rites and the different forms of celebration. “At Christmas Eve we call the children when baby Jesus has left.” (Zoltán, II.12.04)

In this social environment we can find wording referring to traditional religiosity or superstition. “Knock on wood, thank God, we have quite good teachers.” (Zoltán, I.7.36) “Time was not merciful to us.” (Zoltán, I.57.36) Szabolcs says about meeting his wife: “We are a match. Thank God, we experienced much positive happiness.” (Szabolcs, I.2.53.39)

Other than these implicit appearances religion appears as the place of meaning formation. Even in the more religious biographies, religious wording occurs only occasionally- mostly in connection with abstract, non-everyday themes which try to form a unity in the upper levels. “It’s the way the world is. I can accept that. I can accept it,

³⁹⁸ The German EKD survey arrived at the same conclusion. Cf. Engelhardt, K., Loewenich, Steinacker, H.: *Fremde Heimat Kirche – Die dritte EKD-Erhebung über Kirchenmitgliedschaft*. Gütersloh, 1997, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 58.

³⁹⁹ Ibid. 58-64.

⁴⁰⁰ Cf. Oertel, H.: *“Gesucht wird: Gott?” Jugend, Identität und Religion in der Spätmoderne*. Gütersloh, 2004, Chr. Kaiser, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 94.

because I believe. I can't explain everything but I feel everything will click into its place in time." (Vilmos, I.2.06.46) But it is interesting to note than even these have secular counterparts. "I don't really believe in God but there are some things that make me think. Fate, if we could bind God to the things, we could believe in that." (II.46,54) "Fate and predestination are the same. Some call it this way, others the other way. I don't believe in faith." (II.1.01,00) In these levels, religion appears as a form of struggle. "Klára calms his soul with it. That is good, something is needed." (Zoltán, I.1.08.20)

We can see the variety of ways religious topics and relations appear in the life stories. From the meaning formation through family rites, to personal experiences and encounters religion is present in many different ways even in this secularized social environment.

5.3.2. Personal Myth

Examining human biographies, we can notice the personal myth (meta-story) behind all of them.⁴⁰¹ It is an idealized self-image that both real enough to reflect the previous life events and positively biased on the assumption that we are doing our life well considering our circumstances.⁴⁰² "He can see such a career that he said he would trade it." (Vilmos, IV.14.42) In our crises and in fact in our everyday struggles we need to see basically in a positive way our place and role in the world. All of the subjects were more or less satisfied with their lives and when they were asked when they felt the worst, they implied they had not felt that way before, or they referred to a past crisis they had already processed. "When did I feel miserable? I have to think about it. I can't say any occurrences right now." (Ildikó II.15.35) "The hardest part of my life was losing my parents." (Szabolcs II.15,26)

⁴⁰¹ Cf. Fraas, H.-J.: *Die Religiosität des Menschen – Ein Grundriss der Religionspsychologie*. 1990, 135.

⁴⁰² Oevermann, U.: *Ein Modell der Struktur von Religiosität – Zugleich ein Strukturmodell von Lebenspraxis und sozialer Zeit*. In Wohlrab-Sahr, M. (ed.): *Biographie und Religion – Zwischen Ritual und Selbstsuche*. Frankfurt am Main, 1995, Campus, 27-102. 65.

“Since my conversion, I haven’t experienced excessive joy or sorrow.” (Katalin II.15.40) The personal myth thus forms a thinking scheme that helps the storyteller appear in a relatively positive light convincing his listeners about the meaningfulness of his life and the acceptability of his arguments and deeds. It does not mean denying one’s flaws but rather watching oneself with the same love and judgment as that transpersonal Significant Other would do.⁴⁰³ It is noteworthy that the sense of reality and self-criticism does not disappear from the life story. “What can someone watching my life from above see? Just an ordinary man...” (Katalin II.32.10) In the life stories, personal myth contains something other than the simultaneous appearance of poetry and reality. It also contains motives that make it possible for the storyteller to describe his or her identity through metaphors. “I’m like a ship turning in an arch...” (Vilmos II.22.54) Such metaphors occur more often in religious life stories. For religious thinking, as we could see before, is closer to metaphorical thinking. “I live my life as a good companion of Christ.” (Katalin I.40.09) While in non-religious identity establishing a family, raising children and building a house are in the center of life tasks and meaning, in religious biographies the idea of a mission for the larger environment and the Kingdom of God. “The Lord placed me into a mission.” (Katalin I.47.40) “I have to learn how to love people.” (Katalin II.27.15) By so doing religious biographies are interpreted in a larger context as parts of the story of God. At the same time it means a metaphorical-symbolical meaning formation as well.⁴⁰⁴ “The Lord knows that my greatest wish is to be Christian and to be a part in the building of his kingdom.” (Katalin II.19.28) “I believe I have a mission in life but I don’t want to know what that is. It’d be nice if God led me without me noticing what I did. I’d like to believe that God leads me and can use me for the purpose He needs.” (Tamás II.35.27) “What was the last 30 years about? It was about meeting the requirements of my family. (And the next 30?) I’d

⁴⁰³ The name “God’s eye” of the viewpoint comes from Putman. Cf. Schnell, T.: *Implizite Religiosität – Zur Psychologie des Lebenssinns*. 2004, Universität Trier 3.

⁴⁰⁴ Cf. Nestler, E.: *PNEUMA – Außeralltägliche religiöse Erlebnisse und ihre biographischen Kontexte*. Konstanz, 1998, Univetitätsverlag Konstanz, 23.

like to say it will be about meeting God's requirements, that's a bigger category..." (Vilmos I.3.08.20)

We can see how the narratives help us to behold our world as a coherent whole and us in it as coherent personalities.

5.3.3. Connection Points between our Life and Christianity

From the viewpoint of our personal myths the role models we meet during our lives, the mentors who help us growing up, the tales we inherited, the parables serving as an explanation to our lives and the group identity of which part we consider ourselves are of decisive importance.⁴⁰⁵

The points that connect personal life story to the great meta-story of Christianity, where the individual considers the Christian common identity as his own can be manifold and they can be interconnected in various ways. According to the evidence of the interviews, there are two basic integrating powers that help the individual to find Christian answers to his life's questions. Those who did not "grow into" Christianity (Szabolcs II.52.49), generally began to search Christian answers in connection to some limit experiences. "I began to search for the reason, where did I mess up?" (Katalin I.13.30) "Éva began to tell me to go to church, because then he will surely help us." (Zoltán I.56.00) Naturally, limit experiences and crises do not mean one will automatically find Christian community but it offers a kind of openness, a time of searching answers. All those who became Christian had some "prehistory" prior their integration into it. For example, Katalin had a previous knowledge about Christianity: in her childhood she went to church, she did confirmation as an adult. There is another important factor to all this: the level of human relationships. In this respect, occasional personal meetings or role models were of decisive importance in the majority of the cases. So was Father Vendel in Tamás' childhood and his encounter with the Reformed youth club

⁴⁰⁵ Cf. Klein, S: *Theologie und empirische Biographieforschung – Methodische Zugänge zur Lebens- und Glaubensgeschichte und ihre Bedeutung für eine erfahrungsbezogene Theologie*. Stuttgart, Berlin, Köln, 1994, Kohlhammer, 30-34.

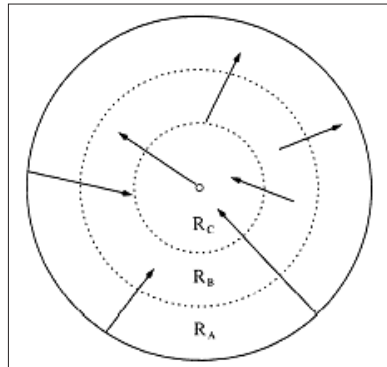
or the weekend Cursillo meeting and the university Bible class for Vilmos. Zoltán's reconnection with Christianity after more than one decade was due to his wife.

5.3.4. Forms of Mythobiography

From the Christian point of view, in the interviews, we could distinguish three kinds of mythobiography according to religious identity. One, where religious themes and interpretations appear isolated on the level of situative self-thematization only. Another, where the religious topics of the mythobiography are interconnected, form a specific story and appear as a part-identity (People have common story with God but this story is not necessarily connected to other part-identities). The third, where in the case of mythobiography, religion becomes important even on the level of meta-identity and self-interpretation. Religion here is more than a coherent story. It is an integrating, interpretative explanation for the other part-identities and for the other possible life story episodes. Here in the life story narrated from the viewpoint of work and family, mythobiography is an organizing principle for the other part-identities as well.

There is thoroughfare among the different types of mythobiographies, for narrative identity is a changing system. Life situations and actual themes can influence which part-identity can come to the fore.

The life stories of the interviewed subject support Oertel's theory according to which religious attachment –though we could distinguish several



illustration*

* Cf. Oertel, H.: *„Gesucht wird, Gott?“ Jugend, Identität und Religion in der Spätmoderne*, Gütersloh, Chr. Kaiser, 2004, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 98.

religiosity depending on their depth (R_A, R_B, R_C religion)– varies flexibly during life.⁴⁰⁷

In its entirety however, as we go from the level of situative self-thematization to part-identities and meta-identity, we can watch as mythobiography becomes a story of faith. Since it is not only the fact that religion appears in a more and more abstract level in the formation of identity but that it is connected with concrete faith contents as well. The question aimed at the church is not only what we can do to induce people to self-reflect and this those situative religious interpretations become a coherent story, a whole explanation of life but what we can do to induce people to change their religious self-interpretation into confession of their faith and an experience of the reality of the Kingdom of God applied to themselves as well.

⁴⁰⁷ Oertel distinguishes three kinds of religious dimensions in life stories. RA type is self-reflection, the religion of asking questions. RB kind of religion appears in the encounter of concrete problems connected with limit situations, like death and illness. RC type is connected to the experience of encountering the transcendent. Ibid. 95-98.

6.THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LIFE STORY – SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION



“I’d like a Practical Theology that speaks a double language when making theories. One that prepares scientific models through which it endeavours to name general phenomena and to connect the inner conflicts of today’s people to the symbols of the inherited wisdom. On the other hand I would like to have a Practical Theology that makes the completely personal aspect of understanding possible, and helps me in understanding myself deeper by introducing me into a new and different approach, where the ancient texts can be built into the hermeneutical context of understanding.”

(Joachim Scharfenberg)⁴⁰⁸

6.1. TODAY’S APPRAISAL OF LIFE STORIES

In this last, summarizing chapter we try to answer the question of how one can consider one’s own story as part of the story of the Kingdom of God.

In our time, people do not relate to the “great story” referred to by Lyotard, the one that gives an explanation to the place of man in the world. Instead, everyone has to interpret the world themselves. A new function of the life story has therefore emerged: it has developed a tendency to become a “world explanation.” It is getting harder to understand our world, to see it as a whole. As Poláková says: “Postmodern man realized that the balance between human life and the world can be renewed from an inner source that is above materialistic world and egoistic human interests.”⁴⁰⁹ In Postmodernism, the world

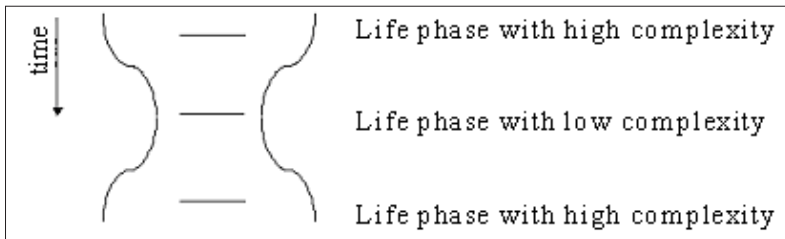
⁴⁰⁸ Scharfenberg, J.: *Das „Allgemeine“ und das „Persönliche“ in der Praktischen Theologie – Gedanken über eine psychohistorische Betrachtungsweise „nach Auschwitz“*. In Grözinger, A., Luther, H. (ed.); *Religion und Biographie, Perspektiven zur gelebten Religion*, München, Kaiser, 1987. 186-198. 187.

⁴⁰⁹ Poláková, J.: *Perspektive der Hoffnung – Transzendenzsuche in der Postmoderne*. Paderborn 2005, Schöningh, 102.

cannot be grasped by rationality only, or at least there are limits to that kind of approach.⁴¹⁰ The human mind is not able to form it into a whole in the traditional way. Instead, understanding the world appears to rely on a new, post-critical approach.

People feel the variety of their lives and the ambiguity of the phenomena they encounter: they not only need orientation at the important turning points and transitions of life, but they experience situations which require a decision almost every day, and this freedom to choose among alternatives forms a heavy burden on their shoulders. This is what Grözinger says: we have to invent ourselves.⁴¹¹

There are times when we encounter a great variety of choice and have to decide which way to take. In these periods, the difficulty is to decide not only what to choose, but what to forgo. In our pluralistic world this is an everyday phenomenon with which we wrestle. Our life is pulsating with a succession of greater and smaller complexities.



*illustration**

People continuously compare their life plans with one another, but today it is very hard to say which way is normal and what life model is consistent with our social surroundings. There are more possible models than ever before, and we select the variations of possible models and purposes from an ever-growing circle. This increase in the number of possibilities lends added weight to the perception

⁴¹⁰ Cf. Gerkin, C.V.: *The Living Human Dokument – Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode*. 62.

⁴¹¹ Cf. Grözinger, A.: *Die Kirche – ist sie noch zu retten?* 32.

* Cf. Klingenberg, H.: *Lebensmutig – Vergangenes erinnern, Gegenwärtiges entdecken, Künftiges entwerfen*. 25.

that self-definition is necessary in the world. “It seems in today’s world that creating and carrying out a personal life plan is getting more and more difficult.”⁴¹² One always locate oneself between the horizon of the interpretation of experienced path and one’s orientation towards an imagined future. But in the world where “everything is relative”, both past and future are erratic. People willy-nilly, consciously or unconsciously have to struggle with the problem of self-definition in everyday life. Orientation is indirectly connected to the question of the final meaning of life. It is more and more problematic to find such meaning lacking in the all-comprehensive meta-narratives and ideologies, so it is no mere chance that we turn to our biographies and life plans as a secure point. “Without constructing our personal myth, without reflecting on the final questions of our life, we cannot grasp who we are in the present situation. The self being realized in the present can be understood through the process of past events and their causal connections.”⁴¹³

6.2 THE CONCEPT OF BIOGRAPHICAL WORK AND ITS GENERAL PURPOSES

Most people think of biographical work as a general concern about our past, although that is only one aspect. By our exploration of the past we try to solve the crises and questions of the present in such a way that in the meantime our imagined future is present as well.⁴¹⁴ Our past is not as closed as we generally think because through exploring new connections and recalling long forgotten events we can reach a new self-interpretation. On the other hand, our future is not as incalculable and obscure as we like to think.⁴¹⁵ There are patterns,

⁴¹² Lüking, M.: Brüche und Diskontinuitätserfahrungen als Thema von Biografien. *MThZ*, 55., 2004, 56-66. 57.

⁴¹³ Lucius-Hoene, G, Deppermann, A.: *Rekonstruktion narrativer Identität – Ein Arbeitsbuch zur Analyse narrativer Interviews*. 48.

⁴¹⁴ Cf. Drechsel, W.: *Lebensgeschichte und Lebens-Geschichten: Zugänge zur Seelsorge aus biographischer Perspektive*. 18.

⁴¹⁵ Cf. Klingenberger, H.: *Biographiearbeit mit älteren Menschen – Über die Bedeutung von Erinnern und erzählen*. 32.

scripts or expectations in our lives that have an effect on us and define the way we take, as well as the idealised self-image we want to reach.

Biographical work is about the conscious management of the times and occasions of our life, in order to acquire what is termed biographical competence.⁴¹⁶ This competence refers to our self-knowledge, our work on our identity, our involvement within a community, our emotional expression and development and the way we communicate our opinion. Biographical work is manifold and inexhaustible, because it is our management of our identity, the different aspects of our identity. In relation to this, Schultz distinguishes studying according to a syllabus and biographical studying. The first kind is in order to acquire quantifiable knowledge written in books. Biographical studying, on the other hand, occurs on different occasions and does not follow any written account: it is dependent on the context of one's life and each given situation. Knowledge thus attainable is connected to the emotions and can be acquired by reflection only. The purpose of such work is "to find the balance of identity, where new, personally tailored life perspectives are opened."⁴¹⁷

In biographical work, there are many different possibilities, and the fact that connects the different methods is the common approach that our life is unique and cannot be repeated, it has a beginning and an end. This work can be narrating a part of the story, processing single chapters of it, or thinking over our relationship to a person or a notion. As regards its methods, biographical work can comprise many things from personal counseling and pastoral care to multi-general group activities.⁴¹⁸ It comprises the writing down of the life story, theme-

⁴¹⁶ Cf. Nassehi, A.: *Religion und Biographie – Zum Bezugsproblem religiöser Kommunikation in der Moderne*. 114.

⁴¹⁷ "The purpose of biographical study is not to acquire a degree and participate in a course, but to create an identity having meaningful, personal life perspectives." Bornhauser, T.: *Gott für Erwachsene – ein Konzept kirchlicher Erwachsenenbildung im Zeichen postmodernen Vielfalt*. Stuttgart, 2000, Kohlhammer, 98.

⁴¹⁸ We can distinguish social biography where we examine our family and social relationships. But human identity has an aspect connected to some milieu or culture. Our life can be described through our relation to sport, nature, or through our attitude towards illnesses, alcohol, or sexuality. Or we can approach our identity or some slices of it from the point of view of our carrier. Cf. Schwab, U.:

centred biographical reflection, the preparation of a so-called “life path,” group presentation of family photos, bibliodrama, narrating our personal stories, meditative methods, searching for life locales, writing biographical novels, poems, dialogue between generations, presentation of local history through eyewitnesses (oral history), or “conversation clubs” (Erzählcafé). The purpose of biographical work is to strengthen social relations. Participation in such groups demands time and energy of the participants, but this is what people of the present age need most of all:⁴¹⁹ places for conversation, where people mutually influence one another, where they can find models, patterns, and sometimes even personal mentors. Personal identity is strengthened not only by self-consciousness, but by the help of common reflection. It is more than mere self-knowledge: this is involvement into a kind of community. But the question is whether we can use biographical work in the church, and if so, how we can give this work a Christian characteristic.

6.3. THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF BIOGRAPHICAL REFLECTION

Hans-Jürgen Fraas writes about three basic needs in connection with identity formation.⁴²⁰ The first is the level of materiality: we need certain conditions and objects around us. The second is the need of social *rappports* which include human relationship, the need for a hiding place and the desire for acknowledgement. But beside these there is a further need, a relation with the Whole that Fraas calls the transcendental dimension. Since we cannot comprehend the whole, we can reach a meaningful world only at a transcendental

Familienreligiosität – Religiöse Traditionen im Prozeß der Generationen. Stuttgart, 1995, Kohlhammer.

⁴¹⁹ Fodorné Nagy, S.: Igehirdetés a posztmodern korban – szószéken és katedrán. *Református Szemle, Az Erdélyi Református Egyházkerület a Királyhágómelléki Református Egyházkerület és az Evangélikus – Lutheránus Egyház hivatalos lapja.* 99. évf., 2006, 387-400. 387.

⁴²⁰ See Fraas, H.-J.: *Bildung und Menschenbild in theologischer Perspektive.* Göttingen, 2000, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 207-228.

level going beyond everyday life. Thus biographical reflection can be religious not only from a religious aspect (mythobiography), but “reflection itself contains a religious dimension.”⁴²¹ So asking about the finiteness of life leads us to transcendent questions.⁴²² For the individual seeking an explanation of an external viewpoint, however, this is not necessarily explicitly religious. The role of Christianity is not in asking questions itself –it is not itself a religious phenomenon– but in the answers to the questions people ask to find the ultimate meaning for their lives. Christianity assigns a particular perspective and a concrete content to the formation of identity.⁴²³ In terms of religiosity it is important that the questions present in every human life take on a conscious formulation, which lead to a demand for what religion offers: an explanation of life and the surrounding world.⁴²⁴ The Christian answer to the ultimate questions is that one cannot find the meaning of one’s own existence in oneself, and one is unable to justify oneself using one’s own resources. We are dependent on God who sees our life as if from above, from its beginning to its end and beyond. He is the One in whom everything reaches its place, where we can find the meaning of everything we do not understand now; we can always be sure that the deeper meaning of things is hidden with Him. In a life story we can see the work of God’s hand in a personal way and understand correlations which God wants to show us through our own lives. It is a particular Christian message that no-one can live a whole life without the transcendent. We need to live our days consciously, reflecting, in connection with God.⁴²⁵

Helping somebody to find an external perspective from where he can see himself and his situations almost as these are seen by God is a particular kind of self-reflection.⁴²⁶ This kind of urge for self-reflection

⁴²¹ Luther, H.: *Religion und Alltag – Bausteine zu einer Praktischen Theologie des Subjekts*. 121.

⁴²² Cf. Gräß, W.: *Der hermeneutische Imperativ – Lebensgeschichte als religiöse Selbstausslegung*. In Sparr, W. (ed.): *Wer schreibt meine Lebensgeschichte?* 87-88.

⁴²³ Németh, D.: *Hités nevelés – Valláslektani szemléletmód a mai valláspedagógiában*. 61.

⁴²⁴ Cf. Ritschl, D.: *“Story” als Rohmaterial der Theologie*. 19.

⁴²⁵ Cf. Fraas, H.-J.: *Bildung und Menschenbild in theologischer Perspektive*. 219.

⁴²⁶ Cf. Luther, H.: *Religion und Alltag – Bausteine zu einer Praktischen Theologie des Subjekts*. 121.

may be a *diakonia* towards people,⁴²⁷ but we can regard it as a form of Christian pastoral care.⁴²⁸ In Friedrich Schweitzer's opinion, working with life stories in a religious context is also a process of forming meaning, because reflecting on our own lives leads us to face the final questions. Questions of why and how emerge on the surface.⁴²⁹ Self-reflection is not a mere possibility for Christian praxis, but belongs to its core: "reflection on the life story and self-reflection are inseparable parts of the Christian program."⁴³⁰ Christianity, and more precisely Christian theology, interprets human life essentially as embedded in the dimensions of remembrance and hope, and locates human life on the horizon of finality. Thus religion is always an urge to reflection in human life. "Religion appears partly as a product, and partly as an engine for finding truth in the life story narrative."⁴³¹ Religion can appear as mythobiography, the sum total of the religious aspects of our identity, or as an interpretational pattern that keeps together the whole of our identity. It can appear as questions about the final things, or our wish to see our life acknowledged and justified.

6.3.1. The Christian Character of Life Story Work

As I have already mentioned, interpreting one's life is an increasingly bigger challenge for humans today, and even though there are interpretations, purposes and implicit axioms behind our every deed, it is not self-evident that we can interpret the events of our life. In order to be competent in our own life decisions and orientation, we

⁴²⁷ Cf. Bierlein, K.H.: Arbeit an der religiösen Biographie. *WzM*, 48. 1996, 400-10., 401.

⁴²⁸ Cf. Streib, H.: *Heilsames Erzählen – Pastoraltheologische und pastoralpsychologische Perspektiven zur Begründung und Gestaltung der Seelsorge*. 341.

⁴²⁹ Cf. Hahn, A.: *Identität und Biographie*. In Wohlrab-Sahr, M. (ed.): *Biographie und Religion – Zwischen Ritual und Selbstsuche*. Frankfurt am Main, 1995, Campus, 127-55. 137.

⁴³⁰ Mandl-Schmidt, I.: *Biographie – Identität – Glaubenskultur – Zur Entwicklung religiös-spiritueller Identität am Beispiel Thomas Mertons*. Mainz, 2003, Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 33.

⁴³¹ Evers, R.: *Alter, Bildung, Religion – Eine subjekt- und bildungstheoretische Untersuchung*. 56.

need viewpoints from which we may watch ourselves and a social environment in which to accomplish this work.⁴³² The criteria of self-reflection and reflection on people and contexts associated with us are inseparable parts of this process.⁴³³ The sense and knowledge of identity is formed in multiple dimensions at the same time. It changes with time and space. Human narrative identity is, in practice, born during narration, for identity is not a philosophical construction but a product of communication.⁴³⁴

Communication is one of the most important parts of biographical reflection: “during narration, the individual meets himself. In the story, he remembers the life experiences, he judges it, he orders it, he finds a meaning for it, he seeks self-justification. In the narration, the individual not only creates the Self, but he also reflects to it.”⁴³⁵ Our identity is shaped by this conscious reflection. The identity of an individual is not a concrete basis on which he or she can build, but is rather something to be built before everything else. The task of biographical work is to move our existent image of identity through the introduction of new viewpoints. The purpose is so that out of a haphazard mass of events we arrive at a life story reflected from a Christian point of view. Biehl considers it a pedagogical purpose: “the basic task of religious pedagogy is that through the creative, inspirational, and transforming power of poetic language the fragments of everyday life are reconstructed, renewed and thus helped towards the future task of processing experiences.”⁴³⁶

⁴³² Cf. Keupp, H.: *Subjektsein heute – zwischen postmoderner Diffusion und der Suche nach neuen Fundamenten*. 13.

⁴³³ Cf. Kähler, R.: *Was können wir dafür, dass Gottes gute Botschaft ankommt? Kommunikationstheoretische Einsichten*. In Böhme, M, Naumann, B., Ratzmann, W., Ziemer, J. (ed.): *Mission als Dialog – Zur Kommunikation des Evangeliums heute*. Leipzig, 2003, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 207-33. 215.

⁴³⁴ Cf. Veith, H.: *Das Selbstverständnis des modernen Menschen – Theorien des vergesellschafteten Individuums in 20 Jahrhundert*. Fankfurt am Main, 2001, Campus, 253.

⁴³⁵ Schulze, T.: *Erziehungswissenschaftliche Biographieforschung – Anfänge, Fortschritte, Ausblicke*. 347.

⁴³⁶ Biehl, P.: *Erfahrung, Glaube und Bildung: Studien zu einer erfahrungsbezogenen Religionspädagogik*. 23.

In Lott's opinion there are five components that ensure the Christian character of the biographical work:

a. Thematic component

Life stories have central themes that have key roles in considering our existence. These themes are sorted in the axis of our personal interpretation.

b. Written component

Lott distinguishes written and narrated self-reflection. The use of written records limits self-reflection, because it postulates a higher level of abstraction and distancing.

c. Personal reflexive component

Lott here refers to an inner dialogue formed between the experiencing and the narrating self.

d. Social-communicative component

Through conversation with another we do not meet a story only, but we can draw power from the other's attitude and spiritual strength.

e. Metaphorical component

This is based on the observation that every individual has central thoughts which reappear again and again in different contexts and thus help the process of self-interpretation.⁴³⁷

Contrary to Lott's five aspects, Biehl sees three basic tasks of biographical work.

a. to help people to build and form their identity through interactions

b. to based their judgment on experience, to help them to become involved in a community

c. to find meaning in a specific situation by considering God's promises, with the help of symbols, metaphors and narratives

We can see that both these lists describe a space of communication where two connected identity-forming factors are present: diachronic and synchronic processes. An individual does not only mature in self-knowledge, but also does this in a Christian community, and

⁴³⁷ Cf. Lott, J.: *Erfahrung – Religion – Glaube. Probleme, Konzepte und Perspektiven religionspädagogischen Handelns in Schule und Gemeinde*. 133-134.

through common self-exploration the members of this community grow together in understanding and love.⁴³⁸

Biographical work can be Christian if these two factors are present: the viewpoint from which I interpret or reinterpret my life, and the context in which I do that. In understanding myself, in forming my identity, my relationships with God and the other are equally important.⁴³⁹

6.3.1.1. Connection with the Other Individual

The model of metaphorical reality simultaneously emphasises two things: one is the importance of relationships between people, while the other is the usage of Christian narratives, metaphors, and symbols appearing in this web of relationships.⁴⁴⁰

Given the steadily growing need to participate in a community, the church can find a way to reach people through building a network of relationships.⁴⁴¹ People may be reached most of all through human relationships, as they look for models and mentors who authentically represent values and are thus worthy to be followed.⁴⁴² Christian reflection has to build a bridge between community and individual: “It is of basic importance to find the connecting points between the personal life story and the community’s story, because our story can be understood only as embedded into the common story.”⁴⁴³ The purpose of biographical work is not to enhance the coping abilities

⁴³⁸ Cf. Kähler, R.: *Was können wir dafür, dass Gottes gute Botschaft ankommt? Kommunikationstheoretische Einsichten*. In Böhme, M, Naumann, B., Ratzmann, W., Ziemer, J. (ed.): *Mission als Dialog – Zur Kommunikation des Evangeliums heute*. Leipzig, 2003, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 207-33. 211.

⁴³⁹ Baumgartner, I.: *Pasztorálpszichológia*. Budapest, 2003, Szechenyi Egyetem TE/ Párbeszéd (Dialogus) Alapítvány / HÍD Alapítvány, 558.

⁴⁴⁰ Cf. Piroth, N.: *Gemeindepädagogische Möglichkeitsräume biographischen Lernens*. Münster 2004, LIT Verlag, 295.

⁴⁴¹ Cf. Nassehi, A.: *Die Form der Biographie – theoretische Überlegungen zur Biographieforschung in methodologischer Absicht*. 59.

⁴⁴² “It is hard to believe in God if we don’t see models.” Luther, M.: *Operationes in Psalmos 1519-1521* Köln, Weimar, 2000, Böhlau Verlag, 515.

⁴⁴³ Pohl-Patalong, U.: *Seelsorge zwischen Individuum und Gesellschaft*. 258.

of the autonomous man, but to integrate him into a community.⁴⁴⁴ It is important for the church to reflect human life: this is the real help it can offer to the individual, who, in turn, can reflect on God's work in his or her life. Therefore church practice must reflect the church's attention to people's lives and stories. It is a matter for debate whether this approach should affect the topics of our prayers, the normal "church" biography, or define the relationships the community as a whole has with people.⁴⁴⁵ Christian community must become able to form the energies and narcissism of postmodern man into a positive energy. In Heiner Keupp's opinion the most important motive behind human identity is the wish to be acknowledged.⁴⁴⁶ Christian community may be the place where this natural need is fulfilled for the good of the community. It is a community where one can experience the fulfillment of Jesus' principle: "and whoever wants to be first must be the servant of all." It is a community where taking responsibility and making a sacrifice for the other are acknowledged, where the work, the time, and the service of the individual is important.⁴⁴⁷

6.3.1.2. *The Metaphorical Characteristic of the Transforming Space*

In addition to the role of the community, it is also important to pay attention to the faith-based content which appears in relationships, because this introduces the story of the Kingdom of God through metaphors and symbols which connect present and future, the inner and the external world.⁴⁴⁸ The use of Christian metaphors connects

⁴⁴⁴ Cf. Josuttis, M.: *Praxis des Evangeliums zwischen Politik und Religion – Grundprobleme der Praktischen Theologie*. München 1974. 114.

⁴⁴⁵ Cf. Piroth, N: *Gemeindepädagogische Möglichkeitsräume biographischen Lernens*. Münster 2004, LIT Verlag, 28.

⁴⁴⁶ See Keupp, H., Ahbe, T., Gmür, W., Höfer R., Mitzscherlich, B., Kraus, W., Straus, F.: *Identitätskonstruktionen – Das Patchwork der Identitäten in der Spätmoderne*.

⁴⁴⁷ Cf. Osmer, R.R.: *Teaching for Faith – A Guide for Teachers of Adult Classes*. Louisville, Kentucky, 1992, Westminster / John Knox Press, 106.

⁴⁴⁸ Cf. Ricoeur, P.: *Die Interpretation – Ein Versuch über Freud*. Frankfurt am Main, 1969, Suhrkamp, 473.

us to our predecessors and to future generations,⁴⁴⁹ with considerable symbolic power to evoke unconscious and subconscious dimensions: they have a deep effect on the human soul, and make it possible to recount the inexplicable phenomena and unspeakable feelings of our lives. It is hard to imagine describing the motivations and purposes of our actions, or understanding our environment, without the concept of the unexplainable mystery.⁴⁵⁰ Symbols and metaphors name these inexplicable phenomena so that they have significance beyond themselves.⁴⁵¹

Metaphor –as we know– invites us to interpret things again and again: its meaning cannot be fixed. It contains a mystery we can approach through finding analogies, but we cannot match it precisely. The meaning of the expression is diffused in it, and can take another shape again. It introduces suspicion, and produces a feeling of something lacking, which is connected with the very diffusion it generates. Metaphor works not through its meaning, but through its usage.⁴⁵²

The process of interpretation cannot be without metaphors. Interpretation takes shape in stories, where facts and metaphors are present simultaneously. Only on a subjective, meta-level can we find meaning for biographical facts and data, and the metaphors help us to consider events with no causal connection as a whole. “From a theology where biblical tradition appears in connection with human life stories and in relationship with God the Redeemer, a practice ensues that takes human life embedded in stories and human biographies seriously in the everyday life. It gives a religious orientation and interpretation to everything people are unable to interpret rationally.”⁴⁵³

⁴⁴⁹ “We are participants of Abraham’s story to the present day.” Ritschl, D: *Zur Logik der Theologie – Kurze Darstellung der Zusammenhänge theologischer Grundgedanken*. 20.

⁴⁵⁰ Cf. Frank, A.W.: *The Wounded Storyteller – Body, Illness, and Ethics*. Chicago, 1995, University of Chicago Press, 84.

⁴⁵¹ Tillich, P.: *Der Protestantismus als Kritik und Gestaltung*. Stuttgart, 1962, Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 133.

⁴⁵² Gulyás, G: *Kierkegaard teste Az esztétikai tapasztalat és interpretáció című konferencia előadásai* Debrecen, 1998.

⁴⁵³ Witt, I.: *Lebensgeschichte und Alltag – Zum Verständnis der Amtshandlungen in der*

6.3.2. From Christian Perspective to Christian World Reading

Faith appears as hermeneutics, and the contents of this penetrate our attitudes through which we interpret ourselves, our relationship with other people and with the world.⁴⁵⁴ The aspects of doctrine appearing in the sphere of metaphorical reality influence the way we experience life. The difference between Christian and non-Christian identity does not lie only in a different interpretation of the same events, but even in a different form of experience. Christian reading is a criterion that influences our subsequent experiences. Those whose hermeneutic circle contains concrete faith-based components experience the world differently, which further influences their way of collecting and processing experiences. In Gerkin's view the purpose of religious worship is to make people put their lives into a context wider than their everyday lives.⁴⁵⁵

But there horizons do not only widen, they blend.⁴⁵⁶ The biblical text becomes present, and its interpretative power makes possible that it is not I who read the text, it is the text that reads me.⁴⁵⁷ If I interpret my word and myself according to a biblical horizon, I will obtain a new approach to life. "Every narration is an inner creating of connections during which people regard their lives from the viewpoint of their faith, and they shape their faith from the viewpoint of their lives."⁴⁵⁸ In addition, Grözinger calls our attention to the fact that the final

Volkskirche. In Grözinger, A, Luther, H. (ed.): *Religion und Biographie – Perspektiven zur gelebten Religion*. München, 1987, 233-43. 241.

⁴⁵⁴ Cf. Ratzinger, J.: *Schriftauslegung im Widerstreit – Zur Frage nach Grundlagen und Weg der Exegese heute*. In Ratzinger, J. (ed.): *Schriftauslegung im Widerstreit*. Freiburg, 1989, Herder, 15-44. 43.

⁴⁵⁵ Gerkin, C.V.: *Prophetic Pastoral Practice – A Christian Vision of Life Together*. Nashville, 1991, Abingdon Press, 59.

⁴⁵⁶ Gadamer, H.-G.: *Wahrheit und Methode – Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*. Tübingen, 1975, Mohr, 288.

⁴⁵⁷ "The spheres of experience where the biblical texts are present carry the possibility of a connection where the Word of God becomes present in the individual story. *Accedit verbum ad textum et vitam*." Bergold, Ralph, *Unter – brechende Ethik, Ein neues religionspädagogisches Konzept für etische Bildungsarbeit mit Erwachsenen*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 2005., Cf. Ricoeur, P.: *A szöveg világa és az olvasó világa*. In Thomka, B. (ed.): *Narratívák 2 Történet és fikció*. Budapest, 1998, Kijarat, 9–42. 22.

⁴⁵⁸ Fuchs, O.: *Narrativität und Widerspenstigkeit – Strukturanalogen zwischen*

interpretation of our life does not happen through its integrating into the Christian meta-narrative, but through its connection with the Word of God.⁴⁵⁹

6.3.2.1. *The Story we Rewrite as God's Children*

The Word of God can give a new perspective to my interpretation of life because I am not merely the person the others see or I consider myself to be. First of all, I am God's child and I can view my life story as such. I can define myself in the light of the Word of God and of my relationship with that Significant Other. Donald Capps calls this phenomenon "reframing."⁴⁶⁰ In biographical reflections it means that I do not interpret my life according the usual, proven (or not proven) scripts, but I rearrange the things of my life as part of the story of the Kingdom of God. This way, I am not just a human who experiences different sufferings, contends with situations, and realises the fragmented character of life, but I can consider myself and my future way as God's saved child. The "success" of the story is in being related to God as a child and acknowledging this independently of social or also ecclesiastical expectations. We can come into conversation with God who overcomes the Law, and completes our fragmentedness. This is basically what Wagner-Rau means when he talks about Christianity in human communication as the space of blessings (Segensraum).⁴⁶¹ In the particularly Christian spaces of human life, such as a service or a pastoral encounter, a so-called "transitional space" is formed where everyday phenomena possess a metaphorical characteristic, having significance beyond themselves. A pastoral conversation consists not

biblischen Geschichte und christlichen Handeln. In Zerfass, R, (ed.): *Erzählter Glaube – Erzählende Kirche.* Freiburg, Basel, Wien, 1988, Herder, 87- 123. 109.

⁴⁵⁹ See Grözinger, A.: *Die Kirche – ist sie noch zu retten? – Anstiftungen für das Christentum in postmoderner Gesellschaft.* Gütersloh, 1998, Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshau, 120.

⁴⁶⁰ See Capps, D.: *Reframing – A New Method in Pastoral Care,* Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 1990.

⁴⁶¹ See Wagner-Rau, U.: *Segensraum Kasualpraxis in der modernen Gesellschaft* Stuttgart, 2000, Kohlhammer, 9.

only of two people talking, but two followers of Christ, and during pastoral encounters and services we bring our life not only in front of a human community, but in front of God as well. Such meetings, relationships and events all bind people to Christianity. Scharfenberg formulates the meaning of metaphorical reality in human life as the following: “If the ecclesiastical year indeed takes the form of a way of life, that life is primarily Jesus’, and not mine. Still, it happens so that my life would be characterised by a connection with Jesus, and I would understand, interpret, and find a meaning to my life through his story.”⁴⁶²

6.3.3. Transformational Space as the Space of Conversation with God

As Henning Luther says: “the purpose is not to break man, but to free him, and change him.”⁴⁶³ With God all things are possible, even a transformation to a person completely different from one’s previous self. The central metaphors of our faith rewrite our self-interpretations, and make conversation with God possible. The “metaphorical reality,” “transformational space,” or “Segensraum” is actually the space where my Christian identity comes into being.⁴⁶⁴ Transformational space thus is not only self-interpretation, but a space for conversation with another person and with God. If one’s faith is alive in such a way then it can be independent of external circumstances, including Christianity’s exasperating ways of appearance. The inner dialogue deep inside the human soul will go on even when the pastoral minister is no longer present, when there is no message in the Sunday preaching, or the support of the congregation cannot be felt any longer. It turns out that different events, actions, and decisions are

⁴⁶² Scharfenberg, J.: *Einführung in die Pastoralpsychologie*. Göttingen, 1985, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 79.

⁴⁶³ Luther, H.: *Religion und Alltag – Bausteine zu einer Praktischen Theologie des Subjekts*. 231.

⁴⁶⁴ Cf. Schmidt, H.: *Religionsdidaktik – Ziele, Inhalte und Methoden religiöser Erziehung in Schule und Unterricht, Bd. 1, Grundlagen*. Stuttgart, 1982, Kohlhammer.

not proofs of faith, but it is faith that holds together the whole story, the faith that constitutes the basis of the believer's identity.

6.4. THREE STORIES INTERTWINED

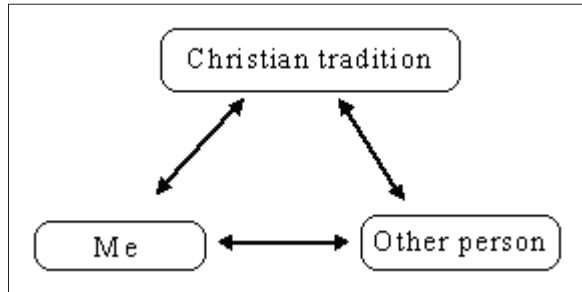
In Dean's opinion the spaces thus formed are not created according to strategic considerations, but in order to make it possible for us to enter God's realm.⁴⁶⁵ The church is more than an answer to the need of society to secure a place for reflection, more than a chance for Christians and non-Christians to converse and influence each other: it is a place for communication through the central metaphors and symbols of Christianity, a communication embedded in the story of the Kingdom of God. "In order to be able to exert a healing power, the God-story has to have an appearance compatible with the experienced uncertainties and wounds of human life. Then the liberating-saving Good News, Jesus Christ himself, will overcome the sufferings we experience and the prison of illness and crisis explodes, because God identifies himself with our cross."⁴⁶⁶ Drechsel writes that in pastoral conversations, we do not deal with two, but three life stories. There are the stories of the participants of the conversation and there is the story of God/Jesus as well.⁴⁶⁷ It is one of the specificities of pastoral conversations. The story of the Kingdom of God means the story of God's love in relation with humanity, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and at the same time the collective story of Christianity as well.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁵ See Dean, K.C.: *Practices and Youth Ministry. Cloud of witnesses – An Audio Journal on Youth, Church, and Culture, Princeton Theological Seminary, Institute for Youth Ministry*. 2007; 11. 2.

⁴⁶⁶ Baumgartner, I: *Pasztorálpszichológia*. 578.

⁴⁶⁷ Cf. Drechsel, W.: *Lebensgeschichte und Lebens-Geschichten: Zugänge zur Seelsorge aus biographischer Perspektive*. 312.

⁴⁶⁸ Cf. Schmitt, K.H.: *Christliche Gemeinschaften – Treffpunkte von Lebensgeschichten*. In Schmitt, K.H., Hoeren, J., (ed.): *Werden unsere Kinder noch Christen sein? – für eine menschnahe Weitergabe des Glaubens*. Freiburg, 1994, Herder, 95-115.

*illustration**

Where people are present in dialogues with Christian interpretations they become actors and co-writers of a collective story.⁴⁶⁹ A common interpretative system, an identical approach to the world does not just offer a community of experience through metaphors and symbols, but also a triologue with God.⁴⁷⁰ In paying attention to ourselves, the other, and God simultaneously, new perspectives can be opened for our lives.

6.5. LIFE STORY WORK AS A WAY TO POSTMODERN MAN

Narration does not only have a self-knowledge, self-seeking aspect, but it also has the opportunity to distance ourselves from our life, to see ourselves from the outside. Theologically speaking, biographical work may be the key to finding a new life, if it is able to make us realise our stewardship, the chances we have missed in our lives, and instead bring us to thoughts we have never encountered before but which God wants to teach us even through the examples of our

* See Gerkin, C.V.: *The Living Human Dokument – Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode*.60.

⁴⁶⁹ Cf. Grözinger, A.: *Erzählen und Handeln – Studien zu einer trinitarischen Grundlegung der Praktischen Theologie*. 102.

⁴⁷⁰ Cf. Kähler, R.: *Was können wir dafür, dass Gottes gute Botschaft ankommt? Kommunikationstheoretische Einsichten*. In Böhme, M, Naumann, B., Ratzmann, W., Ziemer, J., (ed.): *Mission als Dialog – Zur Kommunikation des Evangeliums heute*. Leipzig, 2003, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 207-33. 211.

lives.⁴⁷¹ Pohl-Patalong thus writes: “Pastoral care does not help us only to uncover some biographic threads in order to heal old wounds, but it presents a chance to turn our self-understanding to the object of critical reflection, and by doing so new ways may open to us.”⁴⁷² In our world devoid of visions, the eschatological aspect of our faith may become more important. We have hope and we believe we have a future with God.

Postmodern man, as Ricoeur maintains, is prone to “second naiveté”⁴⁷³ which in our case means that even though man does know what science says about the human soul, society or religion, he still believes – not in spite of it, but along with it. In order for the postmodern man to grow in his faith, we do not have to throw out everything modern. Scientific argumentation and faith go along well with each other, and even strengthen each other.⁴⁷⁴ In postmodern times only those who are able to justify their beliefs remain firm in them. They believe in a reflective manner, they have insight into their motives and objects of faith, and they are able to answer the questions of their contemporaries, the challenges of their age. In the postmodern age believing in Christ does not mean a return to a medieval, magical world, but a post-critical faith.⁴⁷⁵ This faith is aware of the eternal truths, and it is able to live according to them in a given situation.

How can we answer the challenges of the postmodern age? We experience the crisis of traditions. But it gives us a chance to renew our traditions. In the postmodern, we can only be authentic if we take the teachings of our faith and ourselves more seriously than ever.⁴⁷⁶ “Postmodern man does not want the pastor to be the great

⁴⁷¹ Cf. Orth, G.: *Erwachsenenbildung zwischen Parteilichkeit und Verständigung*. Göttingen, 1990. 215.

⁴⁷² Pohl-Patalong, U.: *Seelsorge zwischen Individuum und Gesellschaft*. Stuttgart, 1996, Kohlhammer, 259.

⁴⁷³ See Ricoeur, P.: *Zeit und Erzählung III. – Die erzählte Zeit*. München, 1991, Fink, 41.

⁴⁷⁴ Anselmus: *Proslogion. Canterbury Szent Anzelm – Filozófiai és teológiai művek*. Budapest, 2001, Osiris, 165-204.

⁴⁷⁵ Cf. Eco, U.: *Az új középkor*. Budapest, 1992, Európa, 194.

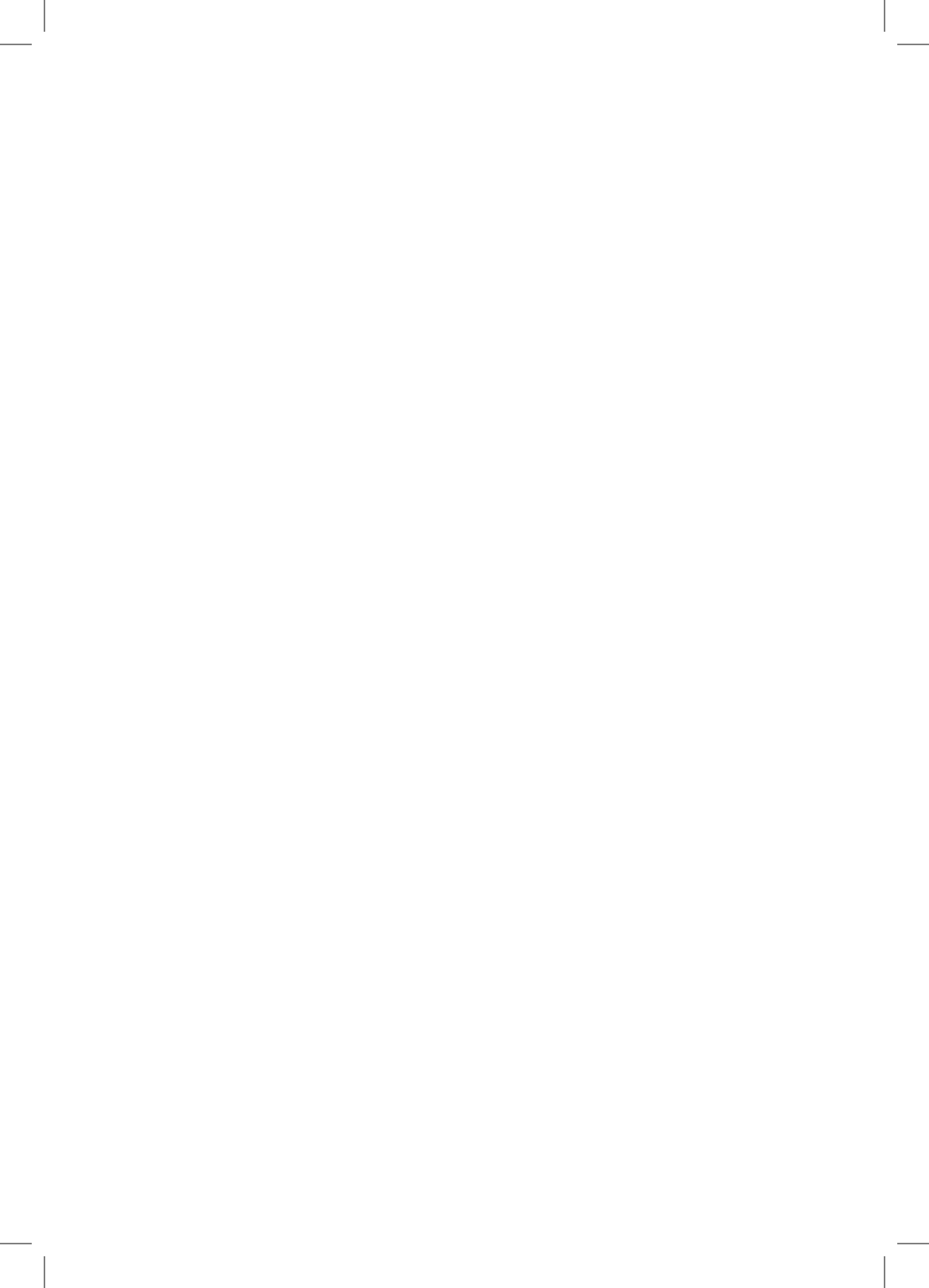
⁴⁷⁶ Cf. Grözinger, A.: *Es bröckelt an den Rändern – Kirche und Theologie in einer multikulturellen Gesellschaft*. 15.

communicator, but an interpreter who can interpret the actual situation in the light of the Christian tradition.”⁴⁷⁷ We have to take humans and their human needs seriously, we have to understand their mentality, but at the same time we have to take ourselves and our mission just as seriously.

AFTERWORD

We live in a time when the meta-story of Christianity turns out not to be the outdated interpretation of life and world it was previously considered to be. Quite the contrary, we can observe the crisis of scepticism, rationality and the modern itself. When Jesus tells us to discover old and new simultaneously (Matthew 13,52), he tries to express precisely the same idea that in a given situation, living in a given society, we ourselves have to discover the eternal truth that God radically loves us, he is able to renew our life story under any circumstances, and we, as God’s children, can write our common story with him.

⁴⁷⁷ Grözinger, A.: *Die Kirche – ist sie noch zu retten? – Anstiftungen für das Christentum in postmoderner Gesellschaft*. 139.



SUMMARY



In the postmodern age, approaching identity from a narrative prospective is not only a novel but a contemporary issue in scientific research. The main argument of my thesis is that in forming of our Christian identity this approach can be fruitful by helping our Christian practice to be more reflective and simultaneously closer to the real life of Christians.

In the first chapter I draw a picture of what living in a postmodern Eastern Europe means. The fact that our world is changing rapidly is especially true in the former communist societies where not only the economical and political systems have changed, but we can witness a gradual change in the human mind as well. Contrary to the modern age, ours is one in which people feel that they are losing control of understanding the different tendencies in our world. The family roles, the economical situation and many other things can change so rapidly that we cannot understand life through rationality. We have to face final questions and make decisions, cross borders more than in any earlier age. Not only crisis situations but even our everyday life confronts us with the difficulty of defining ourselves in the world. And this need of orientation can be a link to the Christian message in the postmodern. People need to lead a self-reflective life and this is also an aim of Christianity—to raise questions and teach people how to understand themselves, find meaning for their lives. It can be taken on as a duty of Christianity to facilitate, provide space for self-reflection.

In the second chapter I examine the *raison d'être* of focusing on human life in Practical Theology. In doing so we have to see the

need of a theology which does not leave out of view the reality in which people live. On the other hand theology cannot be satisfied by inspecting human life as social science does, but theology has to reflect on life from a higher perspective, in the light of the Christian message. Both focuses are important: knowing the people whom we want to reach with the Gospel and simultaneously we have to know the message itself as well. This means that Practical Theology should help the church to foster Christian identity in the context of the present challenges, the real-life world of the people. In doing so, dealing with life-stories can be a good device, because from a sociological aspect life-stories can help us to understand what kind of a role religion plays in people's life. From a pedagogical perspective these stories show how faith grows and from a theological perspective these stories witness God's work, *gubernatio*, in people's life.

The third chapter shows two different ways of understanding, modeling the world. The first approach is the so called paradigmatic modeling and the second is the narrative way of understanding the world. While the paradigmatic thinking makes categories and hierarchies, the narrative form does not need to frame everything in a scientific system but to a story. A story that has a beginning and an ending, a story that has an orientation. And this orientation is one reason why narratives are so important in religious thinking. In science the paradigmatic analysis tries to give answers of understanding the world, the narrative does not analyze but shows an interpretation and a model how to live. The Christian faith is not only in origin based on grand narratives but the logic of the narrative is present in the religious thinking itself. That is a characteristic of religious thinking we should re-discover in an age when the narratives play a more and more important role in creating personal identity.

In the fourth chapter we examine how our personal meta-narrative is created and what the connection is between our personal myth and the grand story of Christianity. Behind these two terms lie two inexhaustible questions: "Who am I in the world?" and "Where is God in the world?" At the first glance it seems that these two have not much in common but in reality they are inseparable, because God's presence in human life has a real effect on personal identity. The

human quest for meaning and God's quest for people in concrete life-stories meet. These two intertwine and effect each other. Personal life and faith experiences of the believers show us what it means that God is present in the world. Many highly detailed stories are combined and added to each other and together form a "never-ending-story." In sharing our stories with each other in Christian setting, we share perspectives of interpretation of life as well. Christianity gives a bound of perspectives from generation to generation. From this point of view being a Christian means that someone takes on a system of perspectives, steps into a stream of stories with God. The story of God helps us to understand our own story, names our wishes, gives wordpower to our feelings.

Through the analysis of narrative interviews the fifth chapter shows three types of mythobiography. In the first type religious themes appear only in separated situations in different spheres of life. In the second type the different religious topics have clear connections to each other and the interviewee can tell a story of his/her religious self. On this level of mythobiography religion is a kind of a segment-identity which can be separated from other identity segments (work, family, spare-time activities). The third type shows another dimension of religion, because on this level religion appears not only in themes or a story of the self but a way at looking at oneself and one's life. In this case religion is not only a segment of identity but a principle that holds together all the segments. The three different kinds of mythobiography show not only how someone's religious story has developed but how religious interpretations are strongly attached to religious content. The religious self-understanding becomes a personal witness of Christian faith, when someone sees his/herself as a part of God's story with humankind.

The sixth chapter, besides summarizing all the previous chapters, shows a model for how to shepherd, foster life-stories. When we talk about explicit religiosity it is crucial that people should reflect on their lives, raise questions. In other words it is necessary to have a need for what religion can fulfill: life- and world-explanation. The special role of Christianity is not (only) raising questions but furthermore giving answers to these questions. In identity formation Christianity

offers special perspectives and concrete content. But what makes self-reflection, Christian self-reflection? First of all the context where this caring for life-stories takes place, because from a hermeneutical point of view the frame always effects the content. On the other hand in Christian setting reflection always happens in a communication sphere. Self-reflection is a communicative action, either we talk to God or to others in the Christian community. Besides the Christian setting, the Christian message is also an identity forming factor. The use of the grand metaphors, symbols, images of our Christian faith is crucial, because they have a symbolic power to involve us into the story of God, making connection between previous and coming generations, and linking our conscious to the collective subconscious dimensions of human life. From a theological approach life-coaching can be a chance to see our lives from a new perspective and understand what God wants to teach us through the story of our own life.

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