

Between Christian love and professional orientation: Reflections on the double bind code of Christian social workers (deaconesses and deacons) in Germany

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This article highlights the challenges and opportunities of Christian social workers in the tradition of deaconesses and deacons in today's Germany. Their professional self-conception as social workers between church and society is analysed. By this, a new approach of linking up a theological perspective with diaconal professionalism, is presented.

Introduction

In many countries, churches run hospitals, and nursing homes for elderly people or specialised facilities for the support of people with disabilities. Today, the employees in these social and healthcare services work according to professional standards; at the same time, the services are steered by the church or belong to her and are understood as social-diaconal engagement influenced by Christian values. This raises questions concerning the diaconal identity of these faith-based organisations. Modern hospitals are characterised by medical standards rather than Christian care for sick people. This article questions the diaconal identity in light of growing professionalisation of 'benevolent acting'. The article puts forward the following thesis: Because of its 'double orientation', diaconal acting differs from care and assistance options offered by other social service providers: on the one hand, diaconal acting is refinanced and integrated in the welfare system and, therefore, based on standards of the *professions* and underlying *scientific disciplines* of the social and healthcare sector; on the other hand, it is defined as help from the *churches*, because Diaconia can be understood as part of the church's nature and, therefore, has to be justified theologically. The Christian foundations of Diaconia serve both as motivation and inspiration for care actions. In the form of a *theological agenda*, they also determine actions and provide important stimuli for professionals in the respective sectors. For this reason, Diaconia offers need-oriented services, and the definition and formulation of goals are based on the biblical option for the poor, which is in the perspective of the Study of Christian Social Service an option both *for* and *with* the poor. In this respect, if Diaconia did not care mostly about the disadvantaged or persons experiencing social and economic hardships, it would miss its goals.

Thus, the *diaconal organisations* are viewed as faith-based organisations as well as social partners which have to position themselves within the governmental framework conditions. They are between Christian love and professional orientation. Additionally, in many countries, the introduction of competitive conditions in the social sector has led to a stronger social-economic orientation of diaconal organisation, putting into question the diaconal goal and acting for and with the poor in times of 'profitable' (quasi)-social markets. A triangle consisting of Christian foundations, professional expertise and economic efficiency is often used to illustrate the position of *faith-based organisations* like Diaconia between its different determinations.

This short outline already shows that a purely theological perspective on the orientation of the *diaconal organisations* is insufficient, because the concrete challenge lies in the transfer of central theological doctrines – such as the doctrine of justification – to the conditions and action-theoretical basis of 'benevolent acting', in this case, professional knowledge.

Today, diaconal orientation knowledge always refers to interdisciplinary findings, because a theological agenda cannot be the only crucial reference point for diaconal acting. Professional knowledge and expertise should not be played off against a theological justification: interdisciplinary transfer does not mean the exclusion of an aspect for the benefit or authorisation

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of another, but brings together both references to generate a fruitful discussion. This approach can be successful – despite the sometimes protective rhetoric of secular social work science which implies ideological neutrality – as Christian tradition contributed in many ways to the justification and development of social (health) work. In this sense, diaconal professionalism can build a bridge between Christian and professional orientation and deepen the Christian profile of diaconal institutions. To demonstrate this, in a first step the development of professions theory will be illustrated, in order to gain a differentiated understanding of the professionalisation concept. The connection of this concept in social work with the Christian faith perspective will be shown through interviews with deaconesses and deacons. As employees of the German *Diakonie*, they were asked about their religious orientation. The results show how individual experiences of faith can build the background for professional work in diaconal institutions. Finally, the results and observations of the survey are to be reflected in a theological perspective with a special focus on the connection between professionalism and theology.

Constructions of professions theory

In the following, professionalisation is understood as a *specific* consequence of the differentiation of modern societies (cf. Stichweh 1996:49–69). This consequence is *specific* in so far as the concept of professions is normally understood in a narrower sense. It serves as a term for academic occupations that are highly prestigious; require a special expertise, a high degree of professional organisation as well as autonomy at work; and are bound to professional ethics. Law, medicine and theology are considered as classic professions. Today, the use of the term *profession* is also discussed in relation to social work. In a broader sense, however, professionalisation does not only comprise the debate on the appropriateness of the understanding of professions in regard to different professional occupations but also comprise the *occupationalisation* of volunteer or private work. This development usually leads to standardisation, which entails quality progress and increasing efficiency.

The broad understanding of professionalisation is characteristic of the development of the modern *diaconal organisations* since its foundation phase in the 19th century in European countries. During the 20th century, numerous waves of professionalism led to a significant increase in skilled workers. In the 1960s, the expansion of the welfare state in many countries not only differentiated the fields of action and was accompanied by a quantitative increase in institutions and personnel but also improved the standards of social work as a result of the employees' professionalisation and the economisation of professional approaches (cf. Jähnichen et al. 2010). At the same time, this period was characterised by far-reaching societal changes, which indicated the decreasing binding effect of denominational milieus and contributed to the de-traditionalisation of denominational institutions.

Professionalisation in a narrower sense can also be examined in a German case study with regard to deaconesses and deacons within the *Diakonie*. They have a double qualification as certified social workers with an additional theological qualification (cf. Zippert, Beldermann & Held 2016). For this reason, they are particularly qualified for discussing the topic of current diaconal objectives in regard to 'professionalisation instead of eternal life'. On the one hand, social workers are – in light of newer discussions – considered as professionals in a narrower sense¹; on the other hand, they try to combine their professional expertise in social work with their theological competence. Their motto is not 'professionalisation instead of eternal life' but 'professionalisation is congruent with the perspective of eternal life'. Following the approach of Merz, I will further develop this thought below (cf. Merz 2007). Firstly, I would like to take a closer look at the understanding of deaconesses and deacons as members of a profession.

From a symbolic and interaction-theoretical perspective, the debate on professionalisation focuses on the negotiation processes about the minimum structure within the respective profession (cf. Blumer 1986; Hughes 1971; Kranz 2009; Kurtz 2002; Schütze 1987:520–553). In addition to the structural dimension, the debate is centred on content and orientation of the professionalisation processes (cf. Mieg 2005:342–349). In this context, deaconesses and deacons work and belong to three different fields of action (cf. Merz 2007:69). (1) In the legal-administrative field, they are responsible for both practical help and control within social work. (2) In the field of counselling, therapy and education, they aim at supporting personal autonomy of the users. (3) In the diaconal-theological field, they bring in religious interpretations concerning the sense of life, transcendence and otherworldliness. According to Rainer Merz, 'this triple orientation leads to a "clash" of legal, hermeneutic and religious logics of action within a social-diaconal work environment' (Merz 2007:70).² This results in the challenge – often referred to as the 'dilemma' of diaconal professionalism – to respond at the same time to all three fields of action with their inner logics of action. From a practical perspective, this means that 'deaconesses and deacons in social work have to balance and to bring together the offer of a Christian orientation of life with social welfare aspects and inclusion efforts'. (Merz 2007:70–71). A key feature of diaconal professionalism, therefore, is 'the dynamic integration of theological and professional competence when it comes to social action and communication' (Schmidt 2003:332). Merz refers to this process as 'diaconal congruency' and develops in this context the following thesis: "'Diaconal congruency" becomes a specific "competence to act," which could be the basis for a professional identity or a professional social-diaconal self-conception for deaconesses and deacons' (Merz 2007:71).³

1. With reference to the discussion about social work as profession, see Dewe et al. (1986). An overview about recent approaches is given by Heiner (2004) as well as by Pfadenhauer (2005). In relation to the diaconal-social economic part, Andreas Langer presented a study focused on profession (Langer 2013).

2. All quotes have been translated by the author.

3. With reference to diaconal competition, see Benedict (2005).

These considerations lead directly to the differences between deaconesses and deacons and 'secular' social workers: In addition to the authority to act *ex-officio*, they possess a specific 'license' 'namely because of the specific methodology of "diaconal congruency"' (Merz 2007:81). Even if both elements of diaconal professionalisation need further theoretical clarification and have not been implemented structurally to a satisfying degree – considering, for example, the debate on the ordination of deaconesses and deacons in Germany – the concrete actions show a number of characteristics of professionalisation. One has to admit, however, that 'their fragmentary character leads to experiences of disorientation and plausibility losses on almost a daily basis' (Merz 2007:81). These experiences of disorientation and plausibility losses do not militate against further professionalisation, because they are part of the paradoxes of professional actions. In the case of social deaconesses and deacons, feelings of insecurities should lead to increasing self-reflection in regard of one's own religious orientation. According to Schütze (1992), these paradoxes of professional action ultimately stem from the:

separation between the symbolic field of orientation, on which the professional orients his own attitude, and the real world, in which he and his clients are living and working together. (p. 137)

This issue is likely to result in further reflections on the individual professional understanding of social deaconesses and deacons, because important elements of their professional role, such as the understanding of ministry and profession, remain unresolved and a great number of clients do not necessarily adhere to a Christian way of life. According to Karl-Fritz Daiber, 'only church members who are connected with the organisation are capable of expressing their religious concerns in an appropriate way' (Daiber 1988:135). The constant wish to confirm one's own professional objectives should entail further analysis of the performance power and aspirations of religious orientations. From this theoretical perspective, the following thesis seems reasonable: The inner paradoxes of their professional actions encourage social deaconesses and deacons to reflect and integrate religious interpretive patterns in their individual professional self-conception. In the following, the validity of this thesis will be examined on the basis of empirical findings.

The professional self-conception of deaconesses and deacons

In view of the broad understanding of professionalisation discussed above, the thesis of an increasing reflection and integration of religious orientations resulting from paradoxes of social-diaconal professional actions has to be contradicted. The 'occupationalisation' of formerly volunteer work in combination with the 'loss' of the female deacons in sisterhoods, the 'Diakonissen' who were the original representatives of diaconal ethos, has led to a growing distance between the majority of the *Diakonie's* employees and the Christian tradition. Today, the personnel are almost as pluralistic as our society.

A very interesting empirical study done in diaconal hospitals in Germany supports this insight. The ongoing study 'The power of faith as the basis of Care? Or: How are the care givers in diaconal hospitals doing?' (cf. Lubatsch 2012)⁴ underlines this development and shows two important findings: (1) The religious resources do not significantly influence the relation between work satisfaction – professional fulfilment and the occurrence of burn-outs. (2) Only 10% of the personnel wish, according to the first finding, to receive more information about faith and/or religious activities. About 26%, however, wish for support in dealing with questions of meaning. The fact that Christian faith could help in dealing with questions of meaning is often not perceived by the caregivers. The force of orientation of Christian faith must be made visible through special offers and services, because a religious (pre)-understanding of the personnel can no longer be presumed. At the same time, the study shows that an obligation to participate in Christian training programmes for employees of the *Diakonie* makes little sense, as, according to the study, only 15% of the caregivers are interested in such offerings. This roughly corresponds to the number of the highly religious in western Germany, as reported by the 'Bertelsmann Religionsmonitor 2008' (cf. Bertelsmann Stiftung 2009).

Within diaconal institutions, however, these findings are interpreted as inquiries on the diaconal identity of institutions. Religious activities in the context of a diaconal corporate culture, as well as training programmes in relation to questions of faith, can be seen as attempts to find answers and as inner-organisational discussions on a diaconal identity marker (cf. Bertelsmann Stiftung 2009:9–19). It would, therefore, be too narrow to state that the *Diakonie* has become secular. Studies from organisational research indicate that only 20% – 30% of the employees can shape the culture of an organisation (Hauser, Schubert & Aicher 2008). An adequate group of employees within the *Diakonie* would, therefore, be sufficient to create and introduce a specific diaconal identity. Deaconesses and deacons are particularly qualified for this task, because their twofold qualification covers and reflects diaconal objectives of social work. The deaconesses and deacons, however, should not be confused with the above-mentioned 15% of employees who are interested in religion, because only a small number of deaconesses and deacons work as caregivers. So what can we learn about the social-diaconal professional self-conception of deaconesses and deacons?

In his doctoral thesis on diaconal professionalism, Rainer Merz pointed out the occupational-biographical self-conception of deaconesses and deacons through qualitative interviews. Two of his main findings, which relate to our question, are to be explained: (1) Merz sees spirituality as an occupation-specific fundamental attitude of deaconesses and deacons who work in church-related diaconal fields of action (cf. Merz 2007:260–262). It should be stressed that he uses the term spirituality as equivalent for 'piety':

⁴The original title of the study is 'Pfleger aus der Kraft des Glaubens? Oder: Wie geht's den Pflegenden in diaconischen Krankenhäusern?'.

A characteristic feature of the work of deaconesses and deacons within church-related diaconal work is the connection between professional action and personal religious conviction, a connection which they express and which makes them accessible for religious topics. (Merz 2007:260)

Piety is part of their professional habitus and results in a positive attitude towards life, which is, according to Schmidt, revealed in 'resistance to disappointments' (Schmidt 2003 in Merz 2007:272). Often, personal experiences of faith are used as explanations for certain actions. Theological findings and conceptions, as well as findings of the Study of Christian Social Service, are usually not easily transferable to practical situations, and therefore, they do not imply a direct professional relevance. The perception and interpretation of religious points of reference in different professional settings and their careful integration in one's professional actions happens primarily through the concrete personal definition of one's own professional role in light of personal experiences of faith (cf. Nübel 1994:10). (2) The interviews with the deaconesses and deacons show that they see their profession as some sort of 'alternative world' which is contoured by a specific diaconal perspective: the image of a fair world based on solidarity, especially for the marginalised and the poor (Merz 2007:243–244). From this perspective, experiences of injustice play an important role for their personal motivation. The biblical tradition serves as a reference for the individual conception of social justice. According to the interpretation of Merz (2007):

For them, diaconal acting is inspired by faith and hope in another world. The core of their benevolent actions consisted in the question: what could make the difference for the people we want to help. In the end, their actions were about creating spaces for a new, a different life. (p. 283)

In the context of practical-diaconal acting, it became obvious that there was no specific methodology which helped to transfer abstract-theological messages to professional actions or which contributes to theological-ethical reflections on these actions (cf. Merz 2007:273).⁵ Diaconal professionalism in a narrower sense does not displace theological orientations, but underlines the necessity of developing methodological procedures to combine theological orientations with practical knowledge.

Theological perspective on diaconal professionalism

In the last step, the developed strategy is to be examined from a theological perspective. This leads to further clarification in form of 'connecting lines', but also raises more questions:

Connecting lines: Professionalisation is not necessarily contradictory to theological conceptions, but it can also be understood as a consequence of the trend towards universalisation

5.Cf. Merz (2007:273): 'The difficulties concerning the differences between theory and practice or, in other words, between the semantic world of the professionals and the existential world of the clients is a particular challenge for diaconal professional training, since the accumulation of ethical-theological knowledge alone is insufficient for developing actual expertise, if their use in practice is not trained at the same time.'

of ethical orientations, which is also visible in the New Testament. Based on the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10), Gerd Theißen (1998) points out that religious motives cannot be regarded as exclusive and primary sources for social motivation to help:

The classical narrative for the justification of Christian motivation to help, the parable of the Good Samaritan, is only a weak base for the justification of a specific Christian motivation to help. And it does not imply that a universally human motivation to help is worthless. Quite the contrary! The story can be interpreted as a request for all of us to discover our motivation to help and to actually help. The motivation to help is superior to cultural and religious boundaries. (p. 383)

At the same time, this recognition of universally human motivation to help leads to a fundamental change, because the 'right' behaviour does not imply 'right faith' anymore, but only aims at alleviating the plight. Not the religious but the functional aspects of help are now in the focus. In the parable, the host can be seen as the caregiver; he has the knowledge, rooms and competences, and therefore, he is referred to by some theologians as the 'basic type' of a social worker. According to the social work scientist Hans Thiersch, professionalisation already starts in the New Testament: 'The host deals with the problems; he has the equipment and the qualification' (Thiersch 1995:56). From here, we can draw further connection lines to Luther's promotion of the secular occupations or even to the rational understanding of professions as modern interpretation of the reformatory view on professions. With this in mind, Traugott Jähnichen recently proposed a new profile for Luther's conception of 'profession' in describing people's professional self-determination and responsibilities as 'ethos of professionalism':

The ethos of professionalism is an important aspect of the ethos of life, which – with regard to Luther's broad understanding of 'professions' – reflects the diversity of human actions and the social recognition based upon them. (Jähnichen 2007:42)

(2) Another 'connection line' between the debate on professionalisation and theology can be found in the context of the question of eternal life. Significantly, this question can be regarded as the frame plot of the parable of The Good Samaritan, and it is introduced by the question of 'what is the right thing to do?' The parable of the Samaritan answers this question, and the answer is even confirmed by Jesus himself: 'Do this and you will live' (Lk 10:28). Gerd Theißen (1998) concludes:

If the illustration of the 'right thing' is the saving of a human being who is described as 'half-dead', this cannot be a coincidence. There is an inner connection between the required ethical behaviour and the 'reward': Those who save a life will have eternal life, a life which is no longer threatened with death. (p. 392)

In this way, Theißen proposes an interpretation of the concept of eternal life that comprises different theological ideas of present or future eschatology in one aspect: life 'beyond the principle of selection' (Theißen 1998:393). He demands another interpretation of life which is not determined by a biological perspective that is marked by the unequal distribution of reproduction, survival and death and results in different

sequences of generations. "The awareness of an eternal life means "going beyond the principle of selection"" (Theißen 1998). However, the purely functional interpretation of benevolent actions is not concerned: 'As long as life and help is only seen and justified in a biological context, which focuses on what is biologically (and evolutionary) functional, the act of helping can no longer be justified – especially with regard to Christian love which aims at the poor, disadvantaged, desperate and helpless people, who are only a mere shadow of their former selves' (Theißen 1998). The idea of eternal life defines another interpretation horizon. Life beyond the principle of selection, beyond biological life and death with evolutionary functions, leads to a new perspective. Eternal life means life with a different determination, because it means participating in God's life in the here and now: 'We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other' (1 Jn 3:14). Therefore, the answer of the parable of The Good Samaritan to the scribe's question is: If you want a life beyond the principle of selection, you cannot but respect this principle: Save what is lost!' (Theißen 1998). Christian love witnesses and is part of God's eternal life. The core of 'diaconal congruency' therefore, consists in carefully integrating this knowledge in the context of social work.

(3) The social-*diaconal* understanding of professionalism which differs from a functional understanding influenced by social work is crucially dependent on the justification paradigm for benevolent actions. From a theological perspective, Christian love is:

the social *gestalt* of faith. It is not only the attitude of a believer engendered by God, but at the same time a renewal of God in form of human affection. (...) Those who are justified in their faith derive their strength from Christ whose power is made perfect in weakness. (Schmidt 2003:328–329)

In order to develop diaconal objectives on the basis of the doctrine of justification, the religious self-awareness of the ones concerned is fundamental. This was also confirmed by the occupational-biographical interviews with the deaconesses and deacons. At this point, a question concerning the social form of religion has to be raised.

Many studies about the sociology of religion have led to an individualised understanding of religion: the decisive factor lies in the subjective plausibility (cf. Luckmann 1967).⁶ The changes in the form of religion occur primarily within the church's religiosity:

According to Pollack, within religion systems no one is forced to decide and the people appreciate the fact that they do not have to take a position, a particularity which explains this certain vagueness concerning religious matter. (Karle 2010:61)

Church and syncretistic as well as individualised forms of religiosity, therefore, are not mutually exclusive: 'Content-related criteria such as the inner logic which justifies the coherence of dogmas are abandoned in favour of more subjective and personal criteria' (Eurich 2002:49). The

⁶With reference to the discussion about a reawakening of religion, see Habermas (2005).

adaptation of religious contents according to their subjective relevance contrasts with the purpose of faith which is legitimised through 'the awareness of God's presence in our reality' (Dalferth 1996:425). The subjective moment of awareness is addressed here, but it encompasses the introduction in the perspective of faith and not the subjective choice: 'In order to better understand our reality on which believers measure their lives, we have to be open to faith' (Dalferth 1996), says Ingolf Dalferth. The motto is not: 'I decide what God is', but 'God decides who we are', so that God's reality becomes the touchstone for the truth of the faith (Dalferth 1996). Faith is, therefore, more than its functional meaning for all believers, and it knows the difference between God's reality and the belief in it. 'Christian faith is about the experience of reality which is based on God' (Dalferth 1996:429). In view of the relation between professionalisation of diaconal acting and the question of diaconal identity, a functional concept of religion is of little help: according to Luckmann, religion can be found outside of traditional religious rites and symbols in the private sphere and it can even *be related to this world*: 'The psycho-analytical cultivated self-thematisation and the self-sacralisation of the body in fitness centers' (Karle 2010:18) are just as much part of the social form of religion as religious rites within the institutionalised religion of the church. Christian faith, however, leads the individual from its personal subjective religiosity towards God's reality, which can be discovered in faith but is not equal to it. The believers' certainty of truth is a certainty within the communication of faith. This communication 'has always included (approaches) to communicate on faith and therefore the willingness to be open to new publics' (Karle 2010:427). These other publics are determined by their own communicative processes. Through these constantly evolving differences to the convictions of its social environment, diaconal professionalism develops into Christian identity. Its point of reference is the orientation towards God's future. The difference between Christian faith and society can be justified eschatologically, because it is based on the eschatological hope in God's world (cf. Volf 1995:363).

In view of the formation of diaconal professionalism, this relation implies, however, the introduction to and the orientation towards Christian faith. The Christian occupational self-concept of the persons interviewed by Merz is characterised by their connection to the church. The experience of extreme situations of injustice often led to a 'turning towards the church', which offers space to deal with these experiences and to develop a longing for a new world. If faith becomes more personal, then religious concepts become more colourful and the church must inevitably face these challenges. The church still plays an important role when it comes to the expression of religion. Here, the challenge is how to establish a structural as well as a substantial and theological link between the church and professionalised Christian social work. On the one hand, many church congregations are centred around middle class families and do not really show concern for social issues like social work for the marginalised. On the other hand, churches set up diaconal services and agencies that put Christian love into practice in accordance with professional standards. Even if such agencies belong

formally to the Church, they often operate as independent faith-based organisations. Complex societies require such specialised and professional organisations. However, one pitfall of this development is the multitude of local congregations, which have lost both: (1) their ability to touch the lives of others outside the boundaries of the local church and (2) their ability to establish a working relationship with *Diakonie's* services in their neighbourhood or city quarter. Thus, social projects have been delegated by the Church to *Diakonie* organisations, which have developed high professional standards but often lack strong ties to the Church.

This situation creates serious challenges for both sides: local congregations seem rather member-oriented and attend primarily to the needs of their congregation, often unaware of the needs of marginalised populations. Faith-based organisations, on the other hand, struggle to maintain their Christian mission. If local congregations and *Diakonie* service providers were to collaborate on specific projects, both could end up with positive experiences and take advantage of a win-win situation (cf. Horstmann & Neuhäuser 2010; Rausch 2015). Deaconesses and deacons may play a decisive role in bridging both sides through their ministry, thus contributing to social welfare work as a part of both, church ministry and community-based Christian social welfare work (cf. Hödl & Zippert 2016).

The responsibility, therefore, lies with the church and the *Diakonie*, because traditional social forms of religion function as the constitutive feature of faith – as suggested by the findings mentioned at the beginning: ‘Even if it is theoretically possible to believe in God outside of the church, there are only a small percentage of people who actually believe without the church’ (Pollack 2006:132).

Thus, the question is how diaconal professionalism can be trained in the context of an ideologically pluralistic organisational philosophy. In addition to the above-mentioned mediation methodologies, which are supposed to complete the ‘instrument case’ of deaconesses and deacons, Diaconia has to open more spaces for experiencing faith. The realisation that the world is not necessarily unredeemed but the centre of a new creation is only possible if one is open to the perspective of Christian faith. If this happens, professionalism does not replace the concept of eternal life, but can be seen in a diaconal sense as the saving counter selection, as witness for God’s sovereign love which saves what is hurt in this contradictory world:

Diaconia that is inspired by Christianity shares the dignity of natural help as well as all contradictions that come with the act of helping – but it relies on the hope that these contradictions do not have the last word. (Theißen 1998:401)

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