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REFLEXIVE SELF-DISTANCING AS A WAY OUT. MEMORIES OF THE FIRST "SELF-DETERMINED" INTELLECTUAL LEARNING PROCESS[1]

ABSTRACT: The text relates the detached relationship the author had as a child and young man to the religious practices of his family of small farmers, lay preachers and small government employees in central Germany. The author describes in particular the central importance for his own intellectual development of the German Lutheran theologian Rudolf Karl Bultmann, a major figure of early-20th--century biblical studies. Through his intense occupation with Bultmann's ideas, the author as a young man freed himself from the grip of family piety and developed a sceptical attitude towards intellectual mainstreams and overly rigid professional settings which remained a formative characteristic of his practice as a researcher. He sees in his trajectory dramatic social ascent entailing loss of social "home", a result of 'reflexive modernisation' – which he sees as a very theoretical term for self-organised learning. Despite harbouring scepticism regarding certain late modern concepts of individualization, the author remains attached to the idea of a Community of politically committed researchers who remain interested in the civil shaping of world society (and may occasionally achieve success).
KEYWORDS: Evangelical fundamentalism, Bultmann, demythologisation, educational advancement, reflexive modernisation.

I come from the rural artisan milieu. My grandfathers were both simple smallholders in northern Hesse, Germany. One earned a little extra income as a carpenter in the "state mental asylum", which was housed in a former monastery in the neighbouring village. His sons certainly had clear ambitions for advancement. The eldest did an administrative apprenticeship, the second became a forester and the youngest, my father, decided to study interior design at the School for Applied Arts in Kassel (Germany) after a successful apprenticeship as a carpenter and after passing the examination to become a master carpenter.

The maternal line remained small farmers. There were no intellectual role models in this family tradition. The first to go to university was my older brother. When I had just turned three, we left the village and moved into a small rented flat in the nearby city. We brothers both had a pleasant time at school, which led to university without any problems. This step seemed self-evident to both of us. But the connection to my parents' home village remained.

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[1] The following text is the specially revised and expanded English-language version of an essay originally published in German (Hoffmann & von Rein eds., 1998).

The grandmothers were still alive. There was a small farm to take care of and a large garden. However, the close relationship had another side. In the early 1930s, my parents' home village had been swept away by a "tent mission" modelled on late 19th-century American fundamentalist revivalist movements that attempted to turn young people in particular into *Decided Christians*[2] – with undeniable success.

My parents lived this religion with great seriousness and remarkable consistency. Every day began with a "a word of the day" and prayer, the weekly Bible studies and the Sunday services were an absolute must. And in this context there was also the care of the "community" which in our case was a broad circle of family and relatives. So the *déjà vu* of the village had a "setting".

Not all of my relatives were as exaggeratedly "pious" as my parents. An uncle I loved in particular used to ridicule the Christian posturing on occasion. There was also human abuse beyond rigid moral concepts, even marked sexual transgressions. It was said of one uncle that he had to provide maintenance for an illegitimate daughter in a distant village, while another had a relationship with an equally pious female neighbour for many years. I later learned that he had even sexually abused his daughter and granddaughter. One of the itinerant preachers was undeniably a paedophile. But nobody talked about it, or only behind closed doors.

For as long as I can remember I have had a detached relationship to the religious rituals, perhaps even an "intellectual" relationship, if that term is appropriate for a boy of six or seven. I always felt like an observer. One of the reasons for this was the fact that both my father and my mother, when they practised their piety, slipped into a kind of new physical state: they changed their way of speaking when they prayed, adopted very different gestures and physical postures and just seemed "foreign" to me. My mother was a very practical, assertive, and kind woman in everyday life, and of course I loved her. The "stranger" who now confronted me made me feel ashamed. She wasn't "my mother" anymore. My father was also a very emphatic person in everyday life. His fracture was less sharp. I experienced him nevertheless as strangely submissive during religious practices, not at all the sometimes short-tempered *pater familias* that I otherwise knew, feared and loved.

In short, my parents' evangelical devotion seemed somehow disingenuous to me for as long as I can remember. There was never identity in my own mimicked practice. I found the "hours" of Bible study that we children were expected to attend deadly boring, and with my cousins of the same age, some of whom were brought up much less strictly than I was, I looked for excuses to avoid them.

[2] The organisation of evangelical Christians that emerged in Germany in those days called itself "entschiedenes Christentum" (*Decided Christianity)* (*Entschieden für Christus Deutschland*).

A family figure, my mother's eldest brother, in whose house the village rituals used to be held, represented the whole ambience in a certain way. His authority seemed absolutely undisputed, even within the larger family circle. He was a good-looking, warm-hearted person whom, although I admired and loved him, I had occasionally experienced as a choleric "ranter". This uncle, who was, by the way, a talented musician, full of humour and very devoted to us children, also saw himself as the ideological centre of religious family practice. At larger celebrations, there were regularly ambitious discussions about theological questions. One name came up particularly often and always with an almost hateful emphasis: *Bultmann*[3].

This person didn't seem to have a first name, and it was unclear where, and whether indeed, he actually lived. In the authoritarian religious environment in which I first heard of him, he quickly acquired "incarnate" status. At the time, of course, I was just as uninterested in Bultmann as I was in the "hours" of tedious sitting. But I remembered the name. Not everyone seemed to think the same as the devout family circle. My uncle, who railed against Bultmann most violently, was a farmer and had little opportunity for further theological training. He gleaned his knowledge exclusively from pious hate pamphlets which (as I only discovered much later) came from a reactionary professor of theology at the University of Erlangen and were distributed among "decided Christians". Of course, the uncle was unable to understand Bultmann's theology and really justify his theological condemnations.

"Bultmann" then became the key to explicitly breaking away from the piety of the parents, an educational experience of a special kind. The discussions in the family circle obviously didn't let me go during puberty. A certain sense of justice that I developed towards the hypostatised "bad guy" at the time required that I had to deal with him myself – a willingness that I didn't see in the criticising family members.

In the first year of my confirmation class, I went to my parish pastor and asked him to advise me on the Bultmann question. But the pastor reacted in much the same way

[3] *Rudolf Karl Bultmann* (1884-1976) was a German Lutheran theologian and professor of the *New Testament* at the Philipps-University of Marburg. He was one of the major figures of early--20th-century biblical studies. A prominent critic of liberal theology, Bultmann instead argued for an existentialist interpretation of the New Testament. His hermeneutical approach to the New Testament led him to be a proponent of "Dialectical Theology" (most prominent representative: the Swiss theologian *Karl Barth*).

Bultmann is known for his belief that the historical analysis of the New Testament is both futile and unnecessary, given that the earliest Christian literature showed little interest in specific locations. Bultmann argued that all that matters is the "thatness," not the "whatness" of *Jesus*, *i.e.* only that Jesus existed, preached, and died by crucifixion matters, not what happened throughout his life.

Bultmann relied on demythologisation, an approach of interpreting the mythological elements in the New Testament existentially. Bultmann contended that only faith in the "kerygma", or proclamation, of the New Testament was necessary for Christian faith, not any particular facts regarding the historical Jesus.

as my uncle: nothing, he clarified, warranted a closer study of this theological seducer. And in any case, of course, he didn't possess any of his questionable publications. And for me as a thirteen-year-old there would certainly be more appropriate reading than Bultmann.

Going to the 'Murhardsche' State Library in my hometown Kassel was my only way out. I knew our public library, where I had borrowed young adult literature for many years. The halls of a scientific library, however, inspired me with great awe. I think I turned up at least twice in vain before I plucked up the courage to ask a friendly librarian how to go about borrowing books and where to look to find certain books at all. In any case, her patient willingness to show me everything and her astonishment at my interest in Bultmann in particular helped me to hold a book by this much-reviled man in my hands for the first time.

My first reading was the *Jesus* book. I was amazed, apart from a few Latin or Greek words, that I could understand what the author was saying. The book was almost interesting. In any case, I did not find any theological seductions, not the "devil" in the form of a famous theologian. A feeling of righteous indignation welled up in me: How could uncle, father and all the others slander this theologian without obviously ever having known him? Subsequent readings, however, were far more difficult. I quickly put the *Theology of the New Testament* aside because of the large amount of Greek, as well as other important interpretations of the Bible. The scientific vocabulary seemed overly complicated to me. But I had *read* Bultmann. And what the pious circles spread about him was at least not the whole truth.

At one of the next family celebrations, when I had just turned fourteen, I got involved in the adult discussions and even dared to ask my influential uncle: *'How can you actually talk about Bultmann like that when you have obviously never read anything by him?'* – The uncle seemed outraged. He got up, turned his face to my father and thundered: *'Tell me, Konrad, what's the matter with your son?'* My father's silence shamed me. I left the room and still had the feeling that I had gone through a learning process that nobody could take from me.

In the years that followed – also with the help of progressive pastors – I dealt very intensively with Bultmann's later writings on "demythologisation". I bit my teeth into Heidegger's *Being and Time* in order to fully understand Bultmann's thinking. In the process, I began to understand why the pious family circle reacted so dismissively to ideas that were in the good tradition of the Enlightenment. But I had evidently still not freed myself from the grip of family piety.

Shortly before my Abitur – my plan to study maths at university seemed to be absolutely certain – I decided to study theology: not to develop my own piety (my great

distance remained), but to institutionally "ratify", so to speak, the process of intellectual replacement that had begun.

It is one of the ironic coincidences of my own biography that I had the opportunity to live in Rudolf Bultmann's house during my studies. That gave me the chance to "demythologise" the intellectual enlightener of my late puberty. Old Bultmann, who regularly summoned me to report on the political ambitions of the student movement, which I was part of, turned out to be an intolerant and ill-tempered arch-conservative, at least to me.

Nevertheless, the traces of that first autonomous intellectual learning process have accompanied me throughout my academic life. I have – undoubtedly to the detriment of my academic career – developed a sceptical or even negative attitude towards intellectual mainstreams and overly rigid professional settings, which was often interpreted as arrogance. The desire for autonomous science has remained linked to a great distance from those who have always known better. But in principle I owe the opportunity for intellectual work, for interested and precise observation of my social world, to the early acquired skill of distancing myself. As I said, my grandfathers were small-scale craftsmen.

"Socioanalytical" postscript

Of course, the described memory is not just a personal experience. It documents the side effects of a dramatic social ascent in the succession of three generations. Even the parental adoption of a religious pattern, which focuses on personal commitment to a staged, non-grown form of piety, can be interpreted as a distinctive symptom of *individualisation* (Beck, 1986: 205). It "contextualises" a forced social advancement that is economically conditioned. The small farmer's handicraft existence of the grandparents' generation no longer offers the parents any social basis. Educational advancement becomes an inevitable "emergency solution". The personal awakening experience as a cohort adventure compensates for the individualisation process. The loss of the grown village tradition is offset by the artificial staging of a religious "community" – self-organised learning, without a doubt. But this community seems "put on." It appears to the following generation as an adopted attitude that counteracts the lived habitus. This third generation, forced to distance itself reflectively, is now experiencing the process of individualisation and unexpectedly finds itself in the status of an unpredictable "intellectuality," The price of this rise is the loss of social "home" (Alheit, 1994; 2022; 2024). The result is *reflexive modernisation* – a very theoretical term for self-organised learning.

But this new condition also appears to be the basis of a fragile autonomy. It turns against the established patterns of knowledge organisation and is looking for

experimental alternatives. The development and crises of the late modern scientific system cannot be understood without this learning process. Of course, it remains to be seen whether there will be any lasting changes. That is by no means excluded.

Autonomous, self-organised educational processes, as shown by my own example, are often much less personal merit than "social destiny". The dramatic intensification of individualisation dynamics in the second half of the 20th century forces us towards individual modernisation processes (Alheit, 1997a; 1997b; 2024), in which (self--organised) education occupies a central space: the socially integrated small farmer, whose secondary craft activity is already a breaking up of the village order, the interior designer staging an artificial community whose solution is only concealed by the village context, and the urban intellectual whose enforced self-reflection becomes a secularised "tool", they all prove processes of reflexive modernisation, which particularly affect the lower Middle classes in Western societies. Klaus Eder, in fact, once spoke of the "experimental petty bourgeoisie" (Eder, 1989: 356), following Pierre Bourdieu (1983) and at the same time in a critical examination of Bourdieu's often sarcastic portrayal. Here are also very interesting roots of the compulsion – that we cannot let go of – to learn in a self-organised manner. In the individual we easily recognise the social universal. Self-organised learning is one aspect of this.

Post-Postscript

The memory to which the text refers is now over 60 years old. Reflecting on this pivotal experience, for the first time a quarter of a century ago, it becomes clear that it was lasting and – in any case – defined my academic life. But it brings to light another insight: the way we look at such formative memories, the theoretical sensibility with which we interpret them, *is changing*. The young person who discovers his own intellectuality and critical faculty is fascinated by the effect that a rational, scientifically based insight has on his own world view and on the reaction of his hitherto influential "others", his family, the religious community and the relevant peers. The always somewhat dubious self-evidence of their authority is now in question and is being replaced by an "instance" that is concretely expressed in the figure of *Rudolf Bultmann*, a theologian of the century: *the critically enlightening science*.

The double irony of this important insight is: it arises in an uneducated and largely "unenlightened" religious milieu; and through the direct encounter with the idealised scientific figure, through the closeness to everyday life of living together, it finally leads to a *demythologisation* not only of Bultmann as a person, but also of the bourgeois-elitist foundations of his theological thinking. The activity in the student movement

of the '60s sharpens and changes the repertoire of scientific analysis, which becomes socially critical.

The critical impetus is not lost in the decades that follow, and the interest in changing social conditions remains alive, but the strategies and justifications shift. The influence of Marxist-oriented theoretical concepts is declining a little, without completely disappearing. Critical-theoretical as well as social-phenomenological and symbolic--interactionist concepts are becoming more important – simply because of increasing qualitative-empirical research interests. The central problem becomes a deeper understanding of the dialectic of social-structural influences on the inescapable uniqueness of individuality, which should be identifiable by empirical reconstruction. Here, the insights of modern neurobiology – in particular the work of Humberto Maturana and his research group (see representative Maturana & Varela, 1975) – have an interesting influence on the formation of my thinking. My idea of *biographicity* (Alheit, 2024) is a modest theoretical suggestion to understand this challenging issue.

So I look back on an interesting journey through theoretical landscapes, marvel at Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* and, of course, his *"Other" History of Philosophy*, am annoyed by the theoretical "glass bead games" of Luhmann's system theory, enjoy the continuation of Bourdieu's ideas, like Foucault's historical essays, although I find his discourse theory peculiar, don't feel wholly at home with the theoretical "ego politics" of post-structural and post-colonial conceptual attempts, feel inspired by Eribon's brilliant self-analyses, admire the almost journalistic elegance of Reckwitz's contemporary diagnosis *The Society of Singularities*, whose praxeological deconstruction of modernity, however, doesn't really convince me, and believe – despite all my scepticism about current developments – in the idea of a provisionally unfinished concept of a Community of politically committed researchers developed in early American pragmatism, especially by Charles Sanders Peirce, who remain interested in the civil shaping of world society and may occasionally achieve success.

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