THE PERFORMATIVITY OF PERCEPTION
AND ITS THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE.
THE EXAMPLE OF PASTORAL CARE

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The Importance of Perception

Perception is one key concept in the academic work of H.-G. Heimbrock. In many facets he demonstrated how important and productive it is to reflect thoroughly on perception, opposing all tendencies to understand perception as something trivial (e.g. Failing & Heimbrock 1998; Heimbrock 2003).

This preoccupation with perception has never been an isolated endeavor; on the contrary, it was part of a broader movement, uniting several academic disciplines. One important aspect of this movement was the rediscovery of phenomenological concepts, especially of E. Husserl and his French successors. Another important element was the connection to the pictorial turn in the cultural studies, for which perception has always been an important issue (cf. Mitchell 1994; Boehm 1994).

One result of the whole interdisciplinary undertaking was the insight that perception is a multidimensional process that can never be fully analytically described, especially not because it is grounded in the body. Thus, the expression “art of perception (Kunst der Wahrnehmung)” (Hauskeller 2003) is often used in this context.

Within theology this focusing on perception had far reaching consequences. Sensual perception was for a long time considered to be theologically nearly insignificant: At that point the political-critical theology of the 1970s was in agreement with the Barthian tradition (cf. Heimbrock 2003, 60). But for today’s theological discussions it is state-of-the-art to stress the importance of perception. This applies to academic theory discourses as well as to church strategy papers; In its latest edition an important theological encyclopedia now includes an
article on perception, and in a publication of the German Protestant Church one can find the following statement:

A fundamental prerequisite for the assessment of missionary possibilities and tasks in the future is thus only possible by a thorough and precise perception of the general and the ecclesiastical context conditions and development perspectives (Kirchenamt der EKD 2007, 14; translation C.S.).

Both perspectives meet when they stress the importance of perception for the professional life of pastors:

The pastor should be able to perceive, appreciate, and co-ordinate multiple perspectives in the congregation. He or she should, trained in anthropology, psychology and sociology, develop a sophisticated perceptive faculty regarding the complexity of human relationships” (Karle 1999, 8; translation C.S.).

Bringing these different aspects together, perception can be described as a “pastoral competence” (Söderblom 2007).

To sum up this brief overview, we can say that today there is no danger that the importance of perception is underrated. But it remains a problem that we quite often find a concept of perception which is not complex enough. On the one hand, perception is occasionally reduced to a mere preparation for research or practice. On the other hand, it is sometimes understood as a (mechanistic) reproduction of reality. Following Heimbrock’s argument and referring to a phenomenological concept of perception it is most important to stress that perception is itself a constituent part of research and practice and that it is an activity that contributes to the perceived.

This aspect can be clarified by paying attention to the productivity of perception. Perception is neither a one-by-one transfer, nor is it a pure receptive process. On the contrary, in this process the impressions of the surrounding reality are actively sorted and formed into the actual perception. This becomes most obvious by the fact that the same object is often perceived differently by two persons, not only because two different bodies are involved in the process of perception. But this productivity must not be confounded with a constructive approach. The way reality appears to an individual is not a pure construction, but it is shaped by the objects we are confronted with as well as by the activity

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1 In the fourth edition of Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart there is an article on “Wahrnehmung” [Perception] (Volume 8, 2005, 1259–1264).