COMPASSION AS AN INTERRUPTION OF THE POWER OF INSCRIPTION. A CONTRIBUTION TO DIACONAL STUDIES

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Compassion is a demanding and almost outdated theological word, still I think that H.-G. Heimbrock would prefer to have the word in his theological vocabulary. And so would I. Therefore, here is my laudatio to a very compassionate and good colleague. My starting point is that even if the word compassion seems outdated the parable of the compassionate Samaritan is rather simply about taking responsibility for another person’s body and discovering that the other person’s body makes a claim on us. In current discussion of ethics and diaconal studies, this appears an imprecise and difficult assertion. The theme of the body is, however, at the centre of a number of central theoretical perspectives, from Løgstrup over Merleau-Ponty to Foucault and most recent feminist research. The assertion that compassion presents itself as physicalness should therefore be qualified. What does this mean? I would like to point at a possible solution based on Foucault. A central thought for him is that the power of power presents itself in other people’s bodies. My idea is that if compassion is to mean anything of significance, it has to be interpreted from this central point. It must be able to wrestle with the power in others’ bodies and open up perspectives other than the one that breaks down and controls.

Body as Inscription

For Foucault this focus on the body implied the assertion that the body was a text from which contemporary cultural and social power could be read off. Bodies are written in (inscripted) with a history. In an interview published in 1977 Foucault says:

The body is the inscribed forms of events. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body. Its task is to expose a body imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body. (Foucault 1977, 148)
This implies that interest in the body is associated with interest in the significance the body has as a sign of history. One of our modes of accessing the modern subject is through the body. So the study of the body is important. It is a matter of being able to present and interpret the way modernity writes subjectivity into bodies. This is, therefore, also concerned with what Foucault calls discourses, the linguistic modes of inscription. Through the various investigations of the history of punishment, madness, and medicine, Foucault portrays the way in which different discourses form what it means to be criminal, mad, or sick. Within the diverse historical eras, these discourses construct the image of what the mad, sick, or disabled are.

What emerges is not the essence of what it is like to be marginalized or sick, but the various ways the different eras inscript madness or sickness into a person. The point is that it is the particular logic of these discourses that forms the image of what it means to be poor, sick, or mad. Professionals have to know these kinds of discourses, be aware of them, and practice self-control so they do not automatically and naively become a part of them. They have to hold themselves back from naïve encroachments. That is the difficult challenge for all professional work, not only for Christian deacons. Can they still claim compassion?

Concerning this extremely important field, the American theologian E. Wyschogrod has written a fascinating and deeply demanding book (Wyschogrod 1998) that in the midst of all its learning is marked by a desperate undertone: How can a historian track down the truly nameless other without always and everywhere objectivising the nameless, or even worse, objectivising the unnameable terrible genocide? Wyschogrod is presumably influenced particularly by Derrida, but still poses general questions as to whether language and knowledge can reach at all into the pain which the nameless other has gone through. As soon as we capture the other in words, something slips away:

The ascription of properties to the other interprets her as an object of thought, affect, or action so that her alterity is subordinated to a thought-act whose content she has become. Not only can the other be manifested discursively, but, it can be argued, she ought not to be so manifested. The effort to suppress alterity is an act of violence and thus inadmissible on ethical grounds (Wyschogrod 1998, 9).

This desperation of capturing the other is a thought that Wyschogrod connects—amongst others—to Foucault. This is central for him: “...his achievement lies less in altering the fortunes of any particular