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Interview with Manuel Stetter

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Nordic Journal of Practical Theology is meeting with Manuel Stetter at the Societas Homiletica conference in Groningen, the Netherlands, to talk about his research on death and funerary practices. We get together at the lovely public library in Groningen, which is actually not so unlike Deichmanske in Oslo.

As of October 2022 Manuel Stetter holds the Chair (Lehrstuhl) of practical theology at Rostock University, in the North of Germany. Prior to that he served as assistant at the practical theology Chair of Professor Birgit Weyel in Tübingen. During his time in Tübingen, Stetter completed and published his dissertation *Die Predigt als Praxis der Veränderung* [Preaching as Transformative Practice] as well as his post.doc. research, which is the reason we have booked an appointment to have a conversation on funeral practices.

Field work in the funeral parlour's cellar

TONE STANGELAND KAUFMAN You have recently conducted a big project on death and funerals. Could you tell us a little bit about your research journey with this project?

MANUEL STETTER The project dealt with funeral practices.¹ I was interested in how the dead are dealt with in that context and what is made out of them. There's obviously a kind of constructivist intuition in the background. I think that death should not be understood only as a natural fact, but it always depends on funeral practices and learning practices. So, when we talk about the dead, how we think they are and where they are, and how we interpret death, all this depends on practices. That was the background for the project and for my questions. It was also an ethnographic project, so I conducted participant observations in the context of funeral parlours. I had the role of an intern, a "Praktikant". And this was the way I tried to access the field. And I have been an intern in three funeral parlours where I stayed for about three to four weeks in each.

KAUFMAN And what was that like?

STETTER It was a strange experience, especially at the beginning. But that was the idea of the project, not just to focus on the funeral services and the celebrations, with which I'm familiar as a pastor in the Lutheran church, the Württembergische Landeskirche. The idea was to get access to other practices with which I'm not so familiar. It will always be a kind of strange experience, but also an instructing one. For me, it was a fruitful way to get new perspectives and optics on funeral practices. It was especially interesting to be involved in practices that are dealing with the dead. I was in the cellars where the funeral parlours prepare the dead bodies, and that was an exciting but also an ambivalent experience. You are confronted with the dead in a way that you are not as a mourner or a pastor. It has to do with the smell and the human waste. To prepare the dead with needles and thread, to set up a ligature, to wash them and to re-clothe them. This was exciting and ambivalent too.

KAUFMAN Is this a thing that you think that theological students should do? Do we need this kind of knowledge?

1 It will appear as the monograph *Die Konstitution der Toten. Eine Religionsethnografie der Bestattungspraxis* in 2024. Stetter is also co-editor of *Kasualien als Familienfeste. Familienkonstitution durch Ritualpraxis* (Praktische Theologie heute), Stuttgart 2022 (hg. mit Katharina Krause und Birgit Weyel). For further publications, also related to death and funeral practices, please see <https://www.theologie.uni-rostock.de/fachgebiete/praktische-theologie/prof-dr-manuel-stetter/>.

STETTER That is a good question. I'm not sure. For me it's a certain way of getting a new perspective for research. I don't know if it is so necessary for students or pastors. But it gives you a sense that the practices you are involved in as a pastor always depend on a set of other practices. To perform religious practices depends on very mundane practices. The bodies have to be prepared for being able to be involved in religious rituals. This is important, I think. Only as a prepared body are they able to be integrated in religious communications and practices.

The embodiment of funeral practices

STETTER Also, you learn about the historical and cultural *ontologies* of bodies, how we see the bodies, and what concepts we as cultural beings have concerning the body. It seems important for us in "Western societies" that the body is a *bounded* and not an *unbounded* entity. There are certain borders of the body getting re-established in the cellars of the funeral parlours. You also learn that there's something about bodies, and the question becomes what makes it possible that a body can be seen as a body of a certain person. What makes it possible that we are able to see a body as a body related to a person? Here you can learn something about the complex connection between body and person, as these bodies are prepared. The funeral directors, for example, model the face. The hands and face are the main focus. When you talk with these people, they tell you that what they are trying to do is to model the face so that it displays certain emotions. They are modelling emotions, I would say. So, the deceased should smile a bit, they should look quite "Zufrieden", content. When a body is prepared and re-established, it can present certain emotions, and thus also represent a self.

This is further connected to how we tend to see bodies as bodies of individuals. And it's also an individual self which is created by the funeral director, with the help of clothing, jewellery and other things and materials that are connected with the body.

KAUFMAN So that mourners can recognize their mother and father or child or the one they've lost?

STETTER Yes, so that they can recognize neither "somebody" nor "a self", but a specific self, an individual, *their* mother, *their* daughter and the like. And I think we can learn that we should not take these things for granted. Rather, they are based on certain social and cultural practices.

KAUFMAN And this insight that you gained by doing this field work, how did it shape your research more overall?

STETTER Well, I think in a number of ways. Just to give one example. Not right from the beginning, but by being involved in this research, I recognized that funeral culture in general is really an embodied culture. And it has to do with central perceptions. This is the reason why the body and the senses have moved into the centre of attention in my research. And it makes a difference. One point is that we are familiar with the idea that reality is socially constructed, but primarily it is socially constructed by discursive practices, by words, by language. But for me, it is important that it's not only constructed by means of *discursive* practices, but *embodied* practices, practices involving things and artifacts and objects. And these practices construct the dead.

For example, I tried to describe different ways of relating to the dead in terms of sensual perception; how they are touched differently by the mourners on the one hand, and by the funeral directors on the other. There is a difference. We construct relationships to other persons by the way we touch them. When the families touch the body, there is a sense of intimacy. The practices of touch conducted by the funeral directors have more to do with preparing an object, with bringing the dead from A to B. It's a kind of logistics. And I tried to describe such different ways of relating to the dead by touch or through touching them, for example.

You can say the same when you are concerned with smell. There are some rituals of viewing the dead body in which you have perfume, the favourite perfume of the deceased. When you compare that to the smells in the cellars of the funeral parlour, then you can learn something about the relevance, the important role of smell in the sense of how we are relating to other people. Similarly with practices of looking. There are different practices of looking at the dead. By the way you are looking, you can make something into an object, but looking is also a way we are shaping our personal relationship with another person. Hence, I try to describe such different ways of relating to the dead, not only through language, but also through the sensual perceptions.

Of course, you also have discursive practices in this context, not only preaching or speaking, and not only speaking in the sense of speaking about the dead, as we do it in our sermons for example, but of speaking *with* them. They are getting addressed as a "you". And I think this is one way of constructing the dead.

KAUFMAN Do they do that both prior to the funeral in the time when they might have a viewing or when they were relating to the dead body before it was put in the casket, or only during the funeral service?

STETTER In both situations, I would say. Before the religious rituals in this sense and during them. So, you have a lot of practices involved in the ritual that are

structured in a sense that here the mourners are addressing the dead and talking with them, and not only about them. I think this is especially the case in rituals constructed by so-called independent funeral speakers.

KAUFMAN Not as much in church?

STETTER I would say that there's a kind of a little difference here.

New perspectives on the religious funeral

KAUFMAN You also did participant observations in the religious, or ecclesial, funerals. Can you say a little bit more about that?

STETTER Here too I was interested in the dimensions of these religious rites that often are overseen or ignored. So, for me it was important to establish a perspective, an access, to these situations that makes it possible to see something different, something more than just the perspective of a pastor. For example, it was important to focus on the interactions between persons and artifacts. This goes, of course, for the relationships between the officiants and the casket or the urn. But also between the mourners and the pictures of the dead, which is a big thing right now; you can hardly participate in a ritual that does not involve portraits or pictures of the deceased. Then you can describe and research different ways that people are dealing with these pictures. You have practices of bowing to them, of touching them, of talking to them, and, of course, you have practices of looking at those pictures. It's possible to describe different practices of getting involved with these images and pictures in the sense of looking at them. So, for me it was important to grasp aspects of rites that we are not so familiar with. I think we normally do not concentrate on these aspects in our research, but they are important for the setting, and for understanding what religious rites all are about.

Continuing bonds as mediated

KAUFMAN So, this is what you would see as your main research contribution to this field?

STETTER Yes, but may I add one more point. In our society, we have an understanding of death as a phenomenon of separation. We know about the research on "continuing bonds", but this research literature is very often focused on the mental activities inside the head of persons. This has to do with the fact that it comes out from psychology, with its interest on the mental activities and mental constructions. But I think that when we are talking about continuing bonds, we have to look at other practices, through which we construct the dead

as persons and as an entity we relate to. So, it's not only about separation but also about *relation*, about continuing bonds. Hence, it was important for me to search for practices that establish a continuing bond concerning the dead.

KAUFMAN Do you think that this is a possible way forward for a field that has been dominated by psychology with its mainly mental focus, and that there is a new trajectory, so to speak, within the continuing bonds literature, more concerned with practices?

STETTER Perhaps. I think we now have more research conducted in the context of cultural anthropology, ethnography and sociology. And with these approaches, it's more about material things and complex practices, rather than just looking at the inner mental processes of the learners. I think that's important, because the picture is getting more complex in a sense. So, for example, I talked to a person who had lost his wife many years ago. He talked about rituals he conducts in his living room, and that may be seen as personal and also, in some sense, individual. Every evening he's sitting down with a picture of his wife. He lights a candle, and he has a certain stone which he touches, and by touching the stone he is talking to his wife. This happens every evening. He not only has a mental, inner relation to his deceased wife, but engages in these practices. We don't communicate with each other like, let's say, angels without bodies. But we talk and relate to each other, and even to the deceased ones, as bodies involved in complex practices.

KAUFMAN If you were to suggest a research project following this project, if you would do a follow-up, what would that be like?

STETTER I think it would be very interesting to focus more on post-funeral mourning practices. This was not in the centre of my research, but I tried to catch some of those perspectives. I was involved in practices in the context of a hospice, albeit for one week only. This was interesting, because in the hospice you have the living persons, and once they die, immediately the relatives and the employees who had related to them as living persons now have to relate to them as dead persons. I tried to compare those two ways of relating to them, and I think there are a lot of continuities between the two, which tells us something about our concept of the deceased.

One example is a woman who worked at a hospice. I observed her right after a person had died. We approached the door, opened it and went in. One may have thought that it was not important whether we made noise or not, but this person was very careful and opened the door very, very slowly, as if there was a living person in there. I find this very interesting. We do not deal with the dead body in this context, or other contexts, as a "pure object" but as an object that is related to the deceased person, the deceased subject. And we should not take

this for granted but should explore the practices that construct or produce this relation between the dead body and the deceased person.

Ecclesial rites between the local parish and larger areas

KAUFMAN If you would describe this field of research, of researching funerary practices and researching the dead, so to speak, what is at stake right now? Like if a doctoral student would come to you and say, hey, I am interested in doing something within this field. Are there any interesting discussions as you see it? Are there any unexplored areas?

STETTER That's a good question. One thing especially in Germany right now, and in a church perspective, is that we are thinking about new ways of organizing funerary practices, and ecclesial rites of passage. In Germany we have "Kasualagenturen", there are big ones in Hamburg and in Berlin, for example.

KAUFMAN These are not funeral parlours where you did your observations?

STETTER That's right, and they are not reduced to funerals either, but include wedding ceremonies, and ...

KAUFMAN So, what we in German and Norwegian refer to as "kasualia"?

STETTER Yes. It is something that the *churches* are responsible for, not the funeral parlours, and no other agencies who try to connect the mourners with independent funeral speakers. It is an ecclesial offering. In Germany we have the tradition that for centuries, the funeral rites and the wedding ceremonies etc., are located on the level of the parishes, the local communities and the pastors working there. Whereas the Kasualagenturen, they are situated on a higher level.

KAUFMAN How high?

STETTER In Germany it's the "Kirchenkreis". The point is that if your parent died, normally you would have to go to your pastor, the parish that you belong to, and now you have another possibility. These Agenturen have websites and try to open up new ways for people to find them, via Social Media and websites. I don't know how it is in Norway, but in Germany we see that a lot of people do not know their pastor, with whom they should talk now, and how to get in touch. These Agenturen try to reorganize the whole practice of rites of passage in this way. They are quite different from each other. On the one hand, you have agencies that identify as mediators, establishing contact between the mourners and the pastors who belong to the local parishes. On the other hand, you have Agenturen who are conducting and developing rituals by their own.

KAUFMAN In Norway, I would say, a lot of people would also not know their pastor, and not know exactly what to do. But they would always turn to a funeral agency, and the agency would know, and bring the family in touch with the church.

STETTER The same goes for Germany.

KAUFMAN So, is this a case where the church tries to take back a mediating role, where they get in touch with the mourners right away?

STETTER In the case of funerals, yes, in a sense. But they also want to ensure that it is clear who in the church is the responsible part, not least so that funeral agencies know whom to contact. A lot of funeral parlours are complaining that “we don’t get in touch with the pastors, and we need an immediate contact now, we have to organize all these things”. The *Kasualagenturen* try to be a kind of “Ansprechpartner” (mediators) for the funeral parlours in the field of funerals.

When we are talking about wedding ceremonies, for example, the situation is very different. Here, some *Kasualagenturen* even have a stand on the big bridal fairs, in order to make church weddings better known. It’s more difficult to go to such events for the local parishes.

KAUFMAN It is a kind of a specialization?

STETTER Absolutely. The pastors working there are focused on *kasualia*, the rites of passage. And of course, many criticize these *Agenturen*, they say, well, isn’t it good that we have local pastors conducting funerals and wedding ceremonies who are involved in other situations meeting the persons and so on. So, they criticize the specialization in the field.

Some are trying to develop, let’s say, new rituals or new forms of relating to people. So, they try to go out into the streets, or to go on the Christopher Street Day [the Berlin Pride Celebration in July], for example, and offer persons a blessing. It’s a more outgoing practice of rites of passage, in a sense. The idea of blessing is in the centre of the *Kasualagenturen*, as they consider new rituals through which people can receive a blessing. This includes the development of rituals that are concerned with other life transitions. For example, when you retire from work, or when school ends and the holidays start. They are thinking about ritualizing those life transitions and giving ideas how these life transitions can be dealt with through rituals.

KAUFMAN So, what do you think? Is the *Kasualagenturen* a good idea or not? You mentioned the critique that they have also encountered.

STETTER Well, generally speaking, I think this is a good offer and a good development concerning the field of ecclesial practices, because it tries to react and relate to certain social transformations. It’s obvious that a lot of church members are not so involved in the local parishes, so you need other ways to get in contact with them and let them know what the church has to offer. There are some narratives supporting this kind of practice. They point to the fact that some who want to be baptized, for example, in this context and not in the local parish. They both say it is more innovative in a sense, or “here I can be present

as I am.” So, for example, it is a discussion that the traditional forms of baptism are excluding persons who are educating their children alone. There seems to be an implicit norm that you have to live such and such family lives, as the tradition of baptism seems to stand for a certain idea or ideal of family. People who are working in the *Kasualagenturen* tell us about persons who say that here it doesn't matter that I don't have a husband, so it's no problem to get my children baptized here. In the local parish they fear, perhaps, that they are in focus, and that everybody is talking about them or something like that. Perhaps.

KAUFMAN Talking about baptism, do people in Germany celebrate baptism in the ordinary Sunday morning worship service or is it more usual with Saturdays or in the afternoon or a more private service? What's the most common?

STETTER I think the most common is the ordinary service on Sunday morning, but you have other possibilities to separate. And we have more and more so-called baptism events, with celebrations of baptism with a lot of persons, and you can say, “this is my way of being baptized”. Often, they are not in the church, but maybe at a river or something like that outside. It's a *Tauffest* (baptismal celebration). Often, the *Kasualagenturen* are involved in that. We have so-called drop-in baptisms and pop-up weddings. You do not have to contact the *Agentur* before, but you can go there spontaneously and say that you want to be baptized. You then have a little conversation with persons from agency and then you are baptized there.

KAUFMAN And then it would be a pastor working for this agency conducting this baptism or wedding.

STETTER Yes. The discussion is also about legal issues. Is it necessary for people wanting to be baptized that they also become members of the church? Is it necessary that you are a member of the church when you want to have a funeral ceremony or ritual? These are broad discussions in the German context right now.

Becoming baptized – and becoming a church member?

KAUFMAN Is the current kind of regulation and law that that you have to be a member to have a funeral at church?

STETTER That is the tradition, yes. You have always had the possibility that pastors “auf Seelesorgerische Grunden” are able to conduct funerary rites and rituals concerning people who weren't in church or aren't church members. But it's more common or, well, I'm not an expert in legal affairs, but it's more common and maybe it's the norm, legally speaking, that you have to be a member of the church when you want a funeral ritual.

KAUFMAN In Norway, if you're not a member, you have to pay for it. But if you are a member, you don't. The same goes for weddings. If you're a church member, you don't pay. But if you are not, you pay. Or if you are a church member in a different parish and you would like to have your wedding in this parish, then you have to pay a little extra for the personnel or those people conducting it.

STETTER People are discussing these things in terms of that, too. I think most of the *Kasualagenturen* say that it is not necessary. Our practices are not offered only to people who feel a certain connection with the church or are, legally speaking, church members. But we are a church for others, and this is our service to others and to our society, and it's not necessary that you are a member of the church. So that's an important part of their self-understanding, I would say.

KAUFMAN When the *Kasualagenturen* conduct a funeral, you don't have to pay then? Or do you have to pay?

STETTER No, you don't have to pay.

KAUFMAN Are there local pastors who express criticism towards this because they feel that the *Agenturen* "steal" their baptisms or funerals?

STETTER Some pastors do feel that persons who would normally come to them are now going to the *Kasualagenturen*. And clearly, these rites have been very important for the local parishes, as they are an important way of relating to people and being situated in society. And the pastors fear that this connection to society and to people more generally is weakened. And some of them complain, not explicitly, but more implicitly, that the *Kasualagenturen* perform very beautiful and innovative, well-done rituals, whereas the local rituals seem boring, traditional, and strict in comparison. I don't think that is necessarily the case, but they feel that there's a kind of implicit imagery or idea that emphasizes that difference.

Researching new forms of rituals

KAUFMAN You mentioned that you're doing a project on this. Could you tell me a little bit about this research project?

STETTER I cooperate with David Plüss from Switzerland and Gerald Kretzschmar from Tübingen in Germany, and the project is situated in the so-called "Liturgische Konferenz". This is a context where researchers and persons from church are meeting twice a year to reflect on issues of liturgy. Here, we try to get a group together researching and studying the *Kasualagenturen*. We try to do this in an exemplary way, describing at least four agencies, in Hamburg, Berlin, Bavaria in the Bayerische Landeskirche, and then the one in Switzerland. We even have a case of one such *Kasualagentur* that didn't manage to

be established but failed. I think that's an important and interesting case. To study why it was not successful. What we try to do is to talk with the persons working there, and let them describe their work in their own words. Then we try to establish our own access to the field, we are conducting participant observations, we try to interview persons, and then we want to compare our findings and to interpret them in terms of practical theology.

KAUFMAN You are also interviewing people like mourners and others?

STETTER Yes. There's a lot of research being done right now, but it's mostly quantitative studies, and it has more to do with giving the *Kasualagenturen* evaluation research that can improve their practice. What we try to do, is to establish other perspectives here and integrate other and maybe more critical voices. I think that's important, and we think that our findings will be helpful for the agencies as well.

KAUFMAN Does the project have a timeline?

STETTER We try to bring together our findings at the end of this year, and then we hope that we get a first publication out maybe in the midst of next year or perhaps sooner. I hope so. It is important to not wait too long with our findings and reflections and analysis, but to publish it very soon, because there's a lot going on, and it's an ongoing conversation. We are talking about doing some delimited case studies; it's not the aim to get a comprehensive view of the whole field.

But I have to say that when we interview people who are involved in the *Kasualagenturen*, we find them to be very motivated, and they love thinking about the *Kasualien* in new ways, and they love to get in contact with their church as a church that is dynamic and do new things, not just the traditional things. And while in Germany we have these narratives of decline everywhere, here you have a form of ecclesial practice that is flourishing in a sense. It might even give you a new idea of what church can be like in the future. So maybe it's not all about being structured in local parishes anymore, but it's more about [old] practices and offers that are situated and structured in another way.

We end our conversation on funeral practices here to participate in another new-old practice, namely *Evensong* inspired by the English tradition in the Martini Church in Groningen, and I thank Manuel for his time.