

Academic Goals, Conception, and Object of Investigation for the Research Symposium:

“Witnessing. Cultural Roots, Media-Related Forms and Cultural Memory”

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1. The Relevance and Aims of the Symposium

‘Witnessing’ is a form of speech rooted in a long and divergent tradition; yet at the same time it remains effective today despite a multitude of modifications. While witnessing originated in the context of religious and legal praxis, the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries saw three fields of praxis and reflection where ‘witnessing’ has taken on a prominent position:

- a) in remembering and bearing witness to the *Holocaust* and in reflection upon the Holocaust from the perspective of the *cultural and historical sciences*;
- b) the analysis of television by the *media and communication sciences*;
- c) *philosophical* as well as *theological* discourses on epistemology and hermeneutics.

This planned, specialist international and interdisciplinary conference aims to examine critically the topic of ‘witnessing’ from the perspective of multiple disciplines and to explore its viability as a bridging concept for the cultural sciences. In particular, the phenomenon of ‘witnessing’ has the potential for promoting an original and fruitful comparative perspective for a series of current cultural issues: the representation of the suffering of others, technology and ‘human agency’, epistemological issues surrounding forms of communication, media ethics, the social organization of knowledge and experience, media and alterity, and not least the communicative construction of cultural memory with its ethical aspects. The significant academic fruitfulness of the concept of ‘witnessing’ stems from the fact that at high, functional concentrations in specific discourses we can see a simultaneous increase in both convergence *and* differentiation. The concept of ‘witnessing’ allows for a connection between high degrees of specificity and far-reaching comparative perspectives.

Thus our exploration of convergences and divergences does *not* aim at a unified conception of ‘witnessing’ but rather at:

- a) the formation of a typology of current, *culturally efficacious forms* of witnessing,
- b) the further development of a discipline-specific *research apparatus*, and
- c) decoding the cultural praxis of ‘witnessing’, which is then able to promote an understanding of current culture in the *public sphere*.

Three specific reasons can be mentioned for explaining why interdisciplinary discourse on ‘witnessing’ is so highly relevant for the discipline of academic theology — to which the applicant belongs:

- a) An *ethics of remembrance*, which participates in developing a framework for the responsible formation of a culture of remembrance, is a particular challenge for German theology. To date, an ethics of remembrance remains a highly sought-after theological-ethical goal.
- b) ‘Witnessing’ is a key concept, not only for philosophy but also for theological media ethics.
- c) While the praxis and the conceptions of witnessing are *deeply rooted in the religious traditions of reflection*, they simultaneously connect with *current discourse in the cultural sciences*. Involvement in

the development of this discourse is part of a responsibly-constructed ‘public theology’, which participates in the public discourse from the position of its own traditions of reflection.

2. ‘Witness’ and the Practice of Witnessing in Philosophy and Theology

The concept of ‘witnessing’ is closely connected with the limits of the knowledge of pure reason and of unmediated, human experiential knowledge. Conversely, this same boundary to human cognitive ability also points out questions dealing with the limits of knowledge gained through the witnessing or testimony of others. If witnessing is dependent upon its own, temporally specific standards of certification and verification, then it is hardly surprising that its status in the history of philosophy has been so controversial, and that it has been viewed with such skepticism. To what degree is an individual’s testimony based on empirical observations, and to what degree (hermeneutically speaking) is it influenced by the extended experiences of the witness? Against this difficult background, witness testimonies are located within increasingly extensive, though not necessarily transferable, constructions of reality. Thus all knowledge which is based upon witness testimony can be analyzed to see if the reality to which it testifies is accessible (a) in principle, (b) by contingent fact, or only (c) under very specific conditions. It is expected that the specifics of varying types of witnessing would then appear at this point. Clearly, forms of witnessing closely connected with the concept of ‘revelation’, or which refer to absolutely singular events, would branch off here.

Within the Western history of reflection, the evaluation of witness testimony in regard to its value as truth may well be a key component in understanding that which has been counted as truth. If witnessing is strictly separated from science and truth, then that historical knowledge which is mediated by witnesses will be systematically neglected while simultaneously promoting a specific differentiation between faith and knowledge. Conversely, if one recognizes the fundamental perspectival nature of all knowledge and the social anchoring of epistemological processes then witnessing gains a strong positive valuation and can be located within a social epistemology. If the program of tracing witness-supported knowledge back to witness-independent knowledge proves to be impossible (in theory as well as in practice), then we are still left with the question regarding the status of witnessing in the process of the communicative construction of reality. This issue, together with that surrounding the problem of the ‘media-based’ nature of *any* act of witnessing reveals points of contact with those media-theory discourses on audiovisual witnessing.

Furthermore, it is striking that the topos of witness testimony or the practice of witnessing has taken such a prominent position in protestant theology of the twentieth century — above all in the theology of Karl Barth, which developed a differentiated and complex model of witnessing. Barth used the idea of the witness in an attempt consistently to envisage the relationship between (a) the unattainability and inaccessibility of the divine, (b) the limits of human speech and experience, and (c) the divine self-revelation to humanity. In witnessing, a person refers away from him or herself to that God which bears

witness to himself — although the moments when, and the degree to which, God himself appears in that witnessing human speech remains a contingent event. In this way, witnessing becomes a key religious category which captures the disconnection from physical co-presence (distance) as well as the ‘reinvestment’ into physical presence (of the actual witness). In the twentieth century, witnessing allowed for the articulation of both the distance and nearness of God. As a parallel to the reflections of those who witness to the Holocaust victims, there arises in theology a model of ‘secondary witnesses’.

3. ‘Witness’ as an Analytical Category of the Media and Communication Sciences

A question which has arisen within the media and communication sciences is whether the media acts to transform people into witnesses? If so, what are the implications here? Without doubt, in the last two decades the communicative media have (to an undreamed-of extent) compelled people to watch crimes, catastrophes and emergencies impact upon others whom the viewers do not now (and never will) personally know. In the media industry, it has become the norm that viewers across various genres are subjected to the witness of others (journalists, news readers, film makers, etc.) thus becoming witnesses to their testimony. This particular form of medial witnessing prompts a question regarding the moral and epistemological status of that ‘knowledge’ which viewers gain through the testimony of those who were (or purport to have been) ‘there’. The more closely the events testified to are connected with suffering, the more urgent this question becomes. Over against legal, religious or historical witnessing (which are connected with interaction), the audiovisual media have not only proliferated such witnessing but have altered spatial and temporal dimensions. This leads to a skew in the characteristic constellations between individual experience, historical interpretation and collective memory. The media public are transformed into observers of the ‘conserved’ witness of others who use this method to communicate and convey past events. Over against traditional forms of witnessing, which in real interaction is bound to the power or helplessness that comes with physical presence, a complex, organizational and technical apparatus now comes between the witness and those viewers being addressed. This leads to a rush of new questions: Does the media’s witnessing ‘close off’ ‘secondary witnessing’? To what degree does audiovisual witnessing still depend upon a high regard for eye-witnesses and the presumed truth of images?

A particular amalgam of different traditions of witnessing is represented by the religious/political martyr, who is not only geared toward the news reporting of the media but even transforms television into an instrument and medium of his or her own witnessing, calculating and depending upon journalists to act as ‘secondary witnesses’.

4. Witnessing to the Holocaust

The third field in which testimony and witnessing are of fundamental importance is in the attestation and remembrance of the violent crimes of National Socialism. In this field, not only do we see the convergence of many questions from the disciplines of epistemology, theology, and the media sciences, but it also may well be the field in which the reflections of the human and cultural sciences attain their highest *public relevance*.

It is hardly a point of contention that the speech-forms of witnesses are pushed to their limit in the complex and many-layered process of dealing with the Holocaust as a ‘negative memory’ (Kosseleck 2002). On the one hand, the Shoa demands witnesses if the material and the factual aspects of the event are to be passed down. On the other hand, these testimonies bear witness to that which is unspeakable. As Avishai Margalit stressed, the so-called moral witness is the one who knows suffering in its empirical form and yet is also an observer of evil as that which is unspeakable. This strong restriction of moral witnesses to the victims of that to which they testify raises the question whether one can (or may) ever have ‘secondary witnessing’. Even if a qualitative difference is maintained here, then the ‘witnesses to the witnesses’ are faced with the task of preserving remembrance of the Shoa while simultaneously honoring the unfathomable uniqueness of the primary witnesses — so that this witness never fails. The difficult co-presence of familiarity and strangeness as well as of silence and speech in the witness to the Shoa are only slowly coming to light today.

Here, we clearly see the points of contact with those discourses dealing with the ethics of remembrance as well as memory and media theory: Do those media collections of individual testimonies gathered over the last years represent for their recipients powerful ‘hot witness’ or merely ‘cold narratives’? Which transformations are subject to the testimony of these living witnesses in these mediatizations — particularly in the context of the medial inflation of such testimony? How does ‘stored witness’ relate to other recipients as secondary witnesses — especially when we no longer have the binding effects of physical co-presence? The currently occurring change from an interactive-communicative cultural memory of the Holocaust to one which is supported by the media displays the extent to which the question of the replacement of moral witnesses and the related reconstructions in our culture of remembrance is no longer merely academic. As for the next generation, could narratively-staged audiovisual representations of the Shoa assume the function of eye-witnesses?

5. Points of Focus for Structuring Future Research Dialogue

If we are to expect advances in knowledge from interdisciplinary discourses, then they must have thematic dimensions or points of focus. For this projected research symposium, a request has been made of participants in advance, that their contributions display four dimensions:

- a) *Performative Dimension*: The performance of witnessing and its connection with physical presence, or the production of such presence
- b) *Epistemological Dimension*: The testimony's capacity for truth, credibility of the witness; Why is the witness privileged?; speaking and remaining silent
- c) *Factual Dimension*: The hiddenness and inaccessibility of witnessed reality; the dialectic of revelation and concealment; the danger of trivializing testimony
- d) *Social Dimension*: work on collective memory; the production of areas of consent and/or dissent.

A final note regarding those thematic aspects which can only be touched upon briefly in the planned research symposium: The relation between witnessing and processes of transmission (an issue particularly relevant to the historical sciences), will only be addressed in the context of the Holocaust — even though a more general connection does exist here. The highly charged issue of politico-religious martyrs can only be addressed in passing. However, since these issues (regrettably) lack a thematic concentration, one cannot expect advances in knowledge to develop here to the same degree.

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