

**Response to lecture Jörg Lauster**

**Petra Laagland Winder**

Thank you so much professor Lauster for your interesting and highly relevant lecture. You touched on many important topics for the future of liberal Christianity, and dare I say Christianity in general. I feel truly honored to give a response.

In your lecture, you discussed the 'essence of liberal Christianity' as a "certain way of religious encounter with the world." It is a way of interpreting, dealing with and honoring experiences that open a frame beyond our immanent life. In more traditional terms, we could perhaps describe this as a living in the awareness and knowledge of the presence of the transcendent/ God. You described liberal Christianity not as a theological "fast-fashion-trend' but as a critical movement or attitude within Christianity, part of its structure itself. That does not mean that liberal Christianity debunks Christianity 'from the inside' – you argue that liberal Christianity cherishes its tradition, but at the same time is no blind follower of it.

In my response I would like to focus to two aspects of your lecture: the element of passivity in religious experience, and the importance of community.

### **The (partly) passivity of religious experience**

You rightly note that within religious experience, it is not just passive: there is also an activity happening: one interprets these experiences through language or other articulations. Let me focus on passivity. James *Varieties of Religious Experience* describes passivity as a one of the core characteristics of a mystical, religious experience. He argues that such an experience has to do with a certain sense of being 'overcome' by the divine – of becoming one with something greater. The experience of the Czech poet you mentioned is a helpful illustration.

But perhaps, we can rephrase and reconceptualize passivity as 'givenness.' I think we can all relate to experiences in which we feel like we are the one receiving. To give a practical example: we did not choose our lives ourselves. As life continues to be a mystery, in a tragic, euphoric, and often just boring sense, these experiences function as a reminder and realization of something beyond our immanent reality.

I think to recognize and acknowledge this givenness, would be a good 'anti-poison' against something that in Dutch we would call the 'maakbaarheidscultuur.' Not everything can be made, produced, staged, realized, promoted by an influencer on Instagram: things are given, and often, things are not. These experiences remind us of the surprise of life, of longing and expectation. Even when we do not receive what we would like, I believe the Christian traditions offer ways of articulating and dealing with that experience.

### **Community**

Now I will move on to my second point: community. It is up to us to *receive* this givenness, to be overcome, and interpret these experiences. You argue in your lecture that community is pivotal to Christianity.

I noticed that there growing sense of Christian illiteracy. You rightly argue that new language needs to be found that is suitable for us in 2022. However, your proposal of new language seems to assume an underlying understanding of the Christian tradition, which, I

am afraid, might simply not be present anymore: so it might be too optimistic.

It is not just that traditional Christian language seems to be absent, but language about the an explicit transcendental dimension in general. It turns out it is quite difficult to articulate these experiences of being overcome and givenness – to say more than ‘it was special’ or ‘it was beautiful.’ It seems like a language has gone missing. But to not talk about the ineffable, to fall back into silence, makes it impossible to share this experience with others. (and it is a question of hermeneutics whether you can even have an ineffable experience without language).

It might be precisely the Christian (liberal) community that has opportunities to conceptualize traditional doctrines and words in contemporary language – to explicitly search for new language to uncover its underlying concepts. It means that liberal tradition must do two things: to present the tradition, and their ways of dealing with it. Because if the Christian tradition and its concepts such as sin, grace, and redemption, are no longer present in the back of our (post)secular minds, how could we possibly understand the new answers given?

To conclude: you mention that our supposedly secular present in the West realizes more of Christian values and ideals than ever before in history. If truly most Christian values have been realized, would that imply that Christianity and the church has no function anymore? Is it past its prime? It is a thing of the past? Perhaps, it is precisely when the historical and moral *ground* of those values start to disappear from the public mind, it is the task of the church to stay in conversation with these old sources and traditions and re-enter the public sphere with their perspective. Christianity and the church have a lot to do with history and genealogy and cultivating an ability to articulate these experiences of givenness. And that could potentially be the biggest asset for her future.