



## Obituary: Prof. Dr. Wilhelm Gräb

On 23 January 2023, the renowned Protestant theologian Wilhelm Gräb passed away in Berlin at the age of 74, after a long and serious illness. On his death, the academic field of practical theology has lost an outstanding, nationally and internationally recognised personality. The Faculty of Theology at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin mourns Wilhelm Gräb and is, however, proud that from 1999 to 2016, as holder of the Chair of Practical Theology with a focus on homiletics and church theory, he devoted his extraordinary abilities to the service of the Faculty of Theology and the Humboldt-Universität.

Wilhelm Gräb was born on 21 August 1948 in Bad Säckingen. After studying Protestant theology in Bielefeld-Bethel, Göttingen and Heidelberg, he was awarded a doctorate in Göttingen in 1979, with a thesis on the concept of history in the late work of Friedrich D. Schleiermacher. This doctoral thesis, "Humanität und Christentumsgeschichte" (Humanity and the History of Christianity), was written in close exchange with his theological teacher Hans-Walter Schütte and marks the beginning of a lifelong engagement with Schleiermacher's work. From then on, the combination of systematic and practical theology was an essential feature of his thinking. Dogmatics, he argued, was basically a piece of practical theology. This thought took concrete shape in his habilitation thesis "Predigt als Mitteilung des Glaubens" (The Sermon as Communication of Faith). In this work, submitted in the winter semester of 1986/87, also in Göttingen, Wilhelm Gräb reflected upon a "theological self-understanding of practical preaching" and entered into dialogue with three antipodes of modern homiletics - Karl Barth, Emanuel Hirsch and, again, Schleiermacher. The work was written during an assistantship with Christoph Bizer, from 1980 to 1988. From 1988 onwards he worked in Göttingen as a student pastor and private lecturer, before he was appointed to the chair of practical theology at the Ruhr University in Bochum in 1993, where he also served as the university preacher. In 1999, Wilhelm Gräb accepted a call to the Humboldt-Universität, to which he remained faithfully connected until his retirement in 2016 and beyond, and for which he held twice the office of dean. Associated with the professorship was the directorship of the "Institute for the Sociology of Religion and Community Building" (now: Research Institute of Modern Religious Cultures, Institut zur Erforschung moderner Religionskulturen).

Wilhelm Gräb was a passionate, tireless and extremely successful teacher and researcher – after his retirement as a senior advisor. As a theological teacher, he shaped generations of pastors by hearing their first sermons in the homiletic seminars. The sermon was to be understood as a religious speech, oriented towards the religion of the people and less towards the dogmatic doctrines of the church. His plea for contemporary and people-oriented religious language also shaped his commitment as a university preacher in Berlin – he held this office during his entire active time at the Humboldt-Universität – and as the managing editor of the renowned "Predigtstudien" for many years. But also beyond that, Wilhelm Gräb always aimed to make students aware of the concept of "lived religion", and it proved to be a great stroke of luck that he always closely linked teaching and research interests. In various research projects,

he discovered and evaluated "lived religion" in numerous cultural forms and formats – in movies ("media religion"), on the football field, at the Documenta ("art religion"), but also in pastoral contexts and ritual worship practices. Together with colleagues from Berlin and Stellenbosch, he initiated the Master's programme "Religion and Culture" (MRC) in 2003 with the aim of introducing students who were not planning to study theology to the immense potential of a religious hermeneutics of cultural practices and a cultural hermeneutics of religious practices

Wilhelm Gräb systematically built up and expanded contacts and cooperations with colleagues from Stellenbosch, but also from other universities in South Africa and cultivated them intensively: during his many years of commitment to the "International Academy for Practical Theology", as co-editor of the "International Journal for Practical Theology", through guest professorships, as an associate professor in Stellenbosch, through countless lectures in numerous countries and through participation in large international associations such as the "International Schleiermacher Society". In recent years, these international contacts and perspectives have been based in the research field "Religious Communities and Sustainable Development", in the International Research Training Group "Transformative Religion. Religion as Situated Knowledge in Processes of Social Transformation" (IRTG) and in the recently published "International Handbook of Practical Theology". On 25 January 2023, this extensive volume was presented in Stellenbosch at a conference of the Society for Practical Theology in South Africa.

Wilhelm Gräb understood practical theology fundamentally as a hermeneutical task - essentially about turning to the "religion of the people", taking it seriously, appreciating it and bringing it into conversation with the symbolic language of the Christian faith. For him, the religion of the people became imaginable and recognisable in the question of meaning: "People are looking for meaning" – with these words he opened his practical-theological *opus magnum* "Lebensgeschichten – Lebensentwürfe – Sinndeutungen. Eine Praktische Theologie gelebter Religion" (Life Stories – Life Plans – Interpretations of Meaning. A Practical Theology of Lived Religion). Questions of meaning arise, above all, in liminal experiences and thus, they lead to religious questions. People associate the question of meaning with their effort to integrate the fragments of their lived life into an overarching interpretative context, a cohesive effort that is becoming increasingly difficult and demanding in late modernity. It was precisely here that Wilhelm Gräb attributed religion, in its various forms, a central function and he suffered visibly from the fact that the church, in his view, was at least carelessly casual in dealing with religion's potential and thus also with her own possibilities. Whilst considering the significance of lived religion for the various spheres of religious and pastoral practice, he steadily developed this concept into a cultural theology. He increasingly described the task of practical theology as the hermeneutics of religious culture. As opposed to the idea of a secular modernity, Wilhelm Gräb insisted that religion belongs to the human condition, though not necessarily in its ecclesiastical form. It is Wilhelm Gräb's lasting achievement to have made the liberal-theological tradition of German-speaking Protestantism shine. Along with Paul Tillich, Schleiermacher remained the central interlocutor of his theological thinking.

His firm belief in the religion-producing power of modernity directed his research gaze increasingly to non-European, highly vital Christianities, especially in southern Africa. His research on the significance of religious communities for processes of sustainable development subsequently focused not only on individuals as subjects of their lives and beliefs, but also on communal religious practices.

Wilhelm Gräb was an outstanding practical theologian, much sought-after, active, passionate and warm. He did not avoid somewhat tough theological disputes, although these usually ended with a conciliatory drink and hearty, shared laughter, often into the early hours of the morning. He possessed a thematic range, intellectual openness and curiosity that had a defining effect on the field of practical theology and will continue to do so – not least because of the many colleagues he was able to win for practical theology through doctorates, habilitations, joint projects and publications.

With Wilhelm Gräb, we have lost a practical theologian who was highly esteemed worldwide and an admired and popular teacher who was also a friend and long-time companion to many. What made him fascinating and inspiring is that he really lived and embodied his theological convictions, closely connected and often supported by his wife, Doris Gräb. When it comes to him, no distinction between person, scholar, pastor and theologian is possible. For Wilhelm Gräb, practical theology was always also existential hermeneutics. In an interview on the occasion of his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, he said the following with regard to dying and death: "... when we approach death,, and this self-awareness of an interpretation of life that generates itself from the Gospel comes into play and is able to, so-to-say, fulfil a function in the ability to die, then it is precisely this: That I can absolutely know myself held and carried in the divine – because founded in the divine – beyond my finite existence, because precisely the divine – or if I transfer it into the personal conception of God, which however does not necessarily have to be – because God is infinitely greater than I myself in the limitedness of my finite existence. That is the greatest achievement of religious awareness, to be able to process the experience of finitude in this way."

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