Research Article

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To Be Oriented and to Orient: Considerations on Principles, Requirements, and Objectives of an Inductive Systematic Theology

Abstract: It is usually assumed that protestant systematic theology has a contemporary relevance and engages with the present in its work. However, it is unclear what significance the present in the form of findings and observations of social developments – including faith expressions embedded in practices and the belief(s) of the laities – have to the research of protestant systematic theologians, especially in north-west Europe. This article introduces inductive systematic theology as a form of systematic theology that incorporates theological statements from laypeople and non-believers, often obtained through empirical methods, into its work. It aims to initiate a discussion on principles, requirements, and objectives of inductive systematic theology. Therefore, a particular focus is set on arguing for the necessity of a respectful and open stance toward subjects of inquiry. It is furthermore discussed, why and to what extent this stance entails self-reflection and transparent articulation of one's positionality. Using public theological statements on self-love as an example, it is illustrated how such assertions can orient systematic theologians in their research by showing certain connections and indicating possible inquiries.

Keywords: systematic theology, inductive systematic theology, normativity, empirical theology, priesthood of all believers, theologianhood, self-love

1 Introduction

The contributions in this issue stem from papers presented at the inaugural workshop on inductive systematic theology in May 2023. During the workshop, my role was not to present an approach of my own, but rather to sum up and reflect on the discussions, supplementing them with my own insights, and illustrating the relevance of inductive systematic theology in my ongoing research. In this very research, I explore the possibility of a positive Christian understanding of self-love. However, my interest in this topic is closely tied to fundamental questions of inductive systematic theology: To what extent are the findings and observations of social developments – including faith expressions embedded in practices and the belief(s) of the laities – relevant to the research of systematic theologians, and what significance do they hold?[1] As I will expound later, the disparities between the "common understanding" and "classical systematic theology" as it is practiced in German-speaking academia are particularly evident regarding the topic of self-love. But it is precisely this discrepancy that brings the questions of an inductive systematic theology to the fore for me.

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1 These were leading questions in the workshop description.

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To disclose my own position on both topics, self-love and inductive systematic theology, I must note that I received my education in Germany and Denmark and have recently started working in the Dutch context. Thus, I feel at home primarily in North-Western European theology and I am predominantly influenced by a Lutheran tradition. Especially in German theology, questions of an inductive systematic theology are only being considered very recently. Therefore, what might be regarded as common ground in other places is still a new endeavor in this context.

My contribution starts with synthesizing and structuring the ideas of others alongside my own thoughts. Some of these reflections may already be commonplace from certain perspectives. However, given that inductive systematic theology is still in its nascent stages in Germany as well as the working group is still in its infancy, it is imperative to establish such understandings. Other aspects may be less apparent and require validation – or even revision – during subsequent workshops. Moreover, certain aspects warrant further development.

In a second step, the resulting (interim) principles, requirements, and objectives of an inductive systematic theology are – to the limited extent possible – applied to my research concerning self-love within Christian frameworks. Through this, I illustrate the implications of this approach in the practice of systematic theology.

2 Inductive Systematic Theology as a Complement to other Existing forms of Systematic Theology

In general, German protestant systematic theologians agree that their discipline bears significant relevance to the present.[2] However, this does not imply that every form of protestant systematic theology must have a direct connection to contemporary issues. Despite the subsequent considerations, it is clear that there exist meaningful historical works which aid us in comprehending past ideas without necessarily yielding immediate implications for contemporary theological discourse. Nonetheless, the focus here is not on such works.

Furthermore, asserting that systematic theology holds strong relevance to the present does not yet specify how this relevance should be demonstrated or what precisely it should address. The inherent apologetic task of (systematic) theology is to elucidate, interpret, and rationalize the tenets of the Christian faith in light of present circumstances and for the respective individuals.[3] Yet, there are various ways to do this. Not only can (systematic) theology and the present be related to each other in various ways, but the manner of this relationship often varies depending on the respective communication partners: From a Lutheran perspective – from which I am writing – and when addressing laypeople, this is undertaken with the objective of providing comfort, support, guidance, and orientation, as well as inviting believers to engage in their own reflection and positioning.[4] In terms of format, one might consider, at least in Germany, so-called "Denkschriften," which are typically co-authored by systematic theologians. The objective shifts when, on the one hand, systematic theologians engage in discourse with each other or, on the other hand, participate in interdisciplinary conversations, either intra- or extra-theological. In the former case, the focus often moves toward proving one's

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2 For example, Danz, *Systematische Theologie*, 4, where the task of systematic theology is described as "asking for the identity of the Christian faith in the tension of past and one's own presence" (translation my own) and systematic theology is characterized as a discipline related to the presence (cf. Ibid., 6). Similarly, Rochus Leonhardt writes: "The overall subject area of Systematic Theology is considered to be the intellectual account of Christian beliefs; the aim of such an account is to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of the Christian faith," Leonhardt, *Grundinformation*, 15.
3 Cf. Rosenau, "Sinn," 163–7.
4 Cf. Holm, "Trost," with special focus on pastoral care, as well as Holm, "Funktion," with focus on the role of doctrine. Of course, Luther himself would not have invited to a positioning of one's own, as for him, the truth of the Gospel was essentially established, and only the manner of its articulation could vary. Encouragement for one's own positioning is a relatively new phenomenon, but it certainly follows from Lutheran theology and motives such as the priesthood of all believers.

own views and positions. In the latter case, questions of mutual knowledge exchange and the resulting gain in understanding take center stage.

What is apparent is that in all these descriptions systematic theologians play a primarily productive role: they serve as apologists, comforters, organizers, persuaders, mediators, and much more. One could then say that systematic theologians speak to a certain audience and aim to orient them with their work. What systematic theologians usually do not do, however, is let themselves be oriented, maybe even let themselves be corrected by the opinions of the laity and "ordinary people" *in a transparent way*.[5] This is where inductive systematic theology comes into play.

Inductive systematic theology can be seen as a necessary complement to other existing forms of systematic theology because it emphasizes a receptive role of research regarding the laity and sometimes also non-believers. Thereby it can enhance the relevance of systematic theology. Without this complement, systematic theology runs the risk of failing in its tasks to relate to the various forms of the present life and ultimately become irrelevant: An approach that primarily wants to orient instead of being oriented risks disconnecting from relevant needs, trends and developments, and overlooking topics that are of current interest to people. Its perspectives and insights then could be perceived as insignificant to the religious, societal, and academic audiences it seeks to engage – not because they actually would be insignificant, but because they miss to connect with relevant voices of the present by showing *that* they hear their position(s) and *how* they react to them. Therefore, systematic theology can only establish a strong connection to the present when at least some systematic theologians engage in dialogue with the broader public – also in order to incorporate the insights gained there into systematic theological discourses. In these dialogues, they should then allow themselves to receive orientation from others just as they seek to give orientation in return. How being oriented can occur is, of course, a question of its own, and I will address it later.

3 From the Priesthood of all Believers to the "Theologianhood" of the Laities and Non-Believers

A wind of change is blowing in German-speaking (systematic) theology. In some places, it is already strong, in others subtle, but it is undeniably there. For almost 40 years, the faith expressions embedded in practices and the belief(s) of laities as well as self-identified non-believers are becoming a subject of research and are being taken more and more seriously.[6] While initially this research primarily took place and was received within practical theology, it is now increasingly attracting the attention of systematic theology, too – as evidenced by the mere aim of this working group. But whose faith expressions and belief(s) are of relevance?

If one assumes the priesthood of all believers in the tradition of the Reformation, then in principle every believer is legitimized and qualified to make (systematic-)theological statements.[7] Referring to this priesthood of all believers, systematic theologian Hanna Reichel even speaks of a "theologianhood" attributed to individuals regardless of their belief, baptismal status, and denomination (or lack thereof).[8] In their recent monograph, Reichel argues that "if theology is concerned with God and with the shape of the relationship between God, self, and the world, then a lot of cultural formations and political commitments contain implicit

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5 Of course, researchers are always embedded in a particular society and thus influenced by it (cf. e.g. Herms, "Selbstverständnis"). The distinction between giving orientation and receiving orientation is artificial but has heuristic value. See also Section 5 for further details.

6 Cf. Kalbheim, "Grundlagen," 263.

7 Certainly, Luther's concern was not yet about systematic-theological statements in the contemporary sense. Nevertheless, in his discourse on the priesthood of all believers, there is a certain equality of all Christians concerning faith implied by him (Luther, "Adel," 407.19–408.35). Similarly, when he was still engaged in the authority conflict with the Roman Church, he repeatedly referred to a decree highlighting explicitly that any Christian can be right, even against the Pope, if he has the better arguments (Cf. Zeller, *Schriftverständnis*, 41–67).

8 Reichel, *Method*, 4.

assumptions that are distinctly theological."[9] It is only consistent, therefore, to assume that people negotiate these theological assumptions in various ways, often implicitly but sometimes also explicitly.[10] In Reichel's words, "they wrestle with assumptions and experiences, with conflicting interpretations and ambiguous implications, and often articulate their own position over against other implicit theologies."[11] Academia is only one place where these wrestles take place and systematically guided scholarly investigations are only one way to wrestle.[12]

Just as a specific education cannot establish a general theologianhood, neither can a specific age determine it. Practical theologian and religious educator Saskia Eisenhardt has attributed this status of being theologians to youths who are distant from religion.[13] In her study, she convincingly demonstrates to what extent these young people are capable of profound theological insights and reflection.[14] These expansions of the theologian concept necessitate a more precise definition of what constitutes a theologian and theologianhood, also considering that this is an attribution from others, which in many cases probably would not be self-designated. Similarly, it is questionable how the various ways of being a theologian relate to each other, whether they are considered equal or hierarchically assigned to one another.[15] These are points, that also the working group will need to address in the future.

Put differently, (inductive) systematic theology is not about the *knowledge* about faith and its contents, but about the *reflection* of faith (not necessarily one's own) and its content in normative, evaluative, and historical-hermeneutical respects and with regard to their expressions in past and present. Hence, systematic theologians are not "faith experts" in the sense that their faith would be in any way "better" than that of the laity. Essentially, the articulation as well as reflection of contents of belief in a scholarly, systematic theological manner is just one way among others – and not only associated experts are capable of engaging in systematic theological reflections. All of the ways of faith reflection can be relevant for (inductive) systematic theology for the reasons mentioned above. Additionally, if systematic theology is concerned with the present, it should be aware of the present's pluralistic and diverse nature and pay attention to views held by non-believers, too.[16] Therefore it befits the (inductive) systematic theologian to also listen to the testimonies of others' faith and expressions of belief(s) or the reasons for their lack thereof. Potentially every (non-)believer can formulate plausible, further-leading, inspiring (as well as inspired) theological insights – not in the sense that all of these insights are intended to be theological by those who express them, but because they provide valuable material for reflection by (inductive) systematic theologians.

Moreover, this does not mean that all in the broadest sense theological content expressed by laypersons and non-believers is always correct or true or that they are all equally valuable for everyone. Undoubtedly, there is bad theology (and one has to argue about what constitutes it).[17] Therefore, criteria for evaluating theological statements become all the more important. Ideally, this, too, will be part of the discussions of the working group. To articulate such criteria comprehensively, however, one must also pose questions about how theological content expressed by laypersons and non-believers is accessible and how the empirical and the normative are intertwined in this accessibility.

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9 Ibid., 3.

10 Cf. ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Cf. ibid., 4.

13 Eisenhardt, *Gott*, 11.

14 Ibid., esp. 80–134.

15 Cf. for all these questions Eisenhardt, *Gott*, 81–88.281–285.

16 This should also follow from the classic apologetic task of systematic theology, for how should one constructively defend Christian faith and its contents when the beliefs, arguments, and rationales of its critiques are not known and properly understood?

17 Cf. Reichel, *Method*, 1–2.

4 How to Access Theological Content Expressed by Laypersons and Non-Believers

In the German-speaking academic theological context, the faith, beliefs, and religious experiences of the laity appear to primarily fall within the domain of practical theology. Elsewhere, either disciplinary boundaries are less rigidly drawn, and/or systematic theologians do not hesitate to adopt corresponding methods. However, it is evident that depending on the relevant education, the systematic theologian's access to the beliefs of a respective group is never direct, but mediated either through their own empirical research or the empirical research of others.

It became clear at our workshop that an inductive systematic theology is to be understood less as a specific method and more as a bouquet of methods: There are, of course, all the methods of empirical theology. Unfortunately, I am one of those German systematic theologians, who has not been trained in empirical methods and hence I leave the description as well as discussion of the different options with their advantages and disadvantages to my more capable colleagues.[18] But, as the contribution of Katharina Peetz illustrates aptly by investigating the role of narratives for Christian theology and ethics, inductive systematic theology is not limited to these methods.[19] This is only appropriate, as methods are not applied for their own sake, but serve a certain research interest and concern, which can vary greatly within systematic theology.[20] Therefore, Graff-Kallevåg's position has to be supported at this point: Empirical methods (as well as approaches that focus, e.g., on narrations) are intended to complement the systematic theological canon of methods, rather than replacing existent methods.[21]

What all these methods of inductive systematic theology – which certainly have to be mapped out and categorized further – share are underlying assumptions and premises, namely that the voices thus obtained have something to tell us.

While the untrained systematic theologian may not be able to evaluate all the details of an empirical investigation (or a treatise from another discipline), they can (and should) still engage with them critically. They can, e.g., address hermeneutical aspects inherent in such investigations and the conclusions to be drawn from them.

Next to these admittedly brief considerations regarding the diverse methods within inductive systematic theology and their shared emphasis on the significance of collected voices, it is crucial to explore the intertwined relationship between the empirical and the normative aspects within this framework.

5 The Intertwining of the Empirical and the Normative

In inductive systematic theology, it is clear – as the workshop participants also agreed – that the fundamental reference to statements of faith is not only to tradition but also to the present, *as it is (mainly) identified with empirical methods*. It is also seen that the normative element of a so-called "classical theology,"[22] which makes reason and revelation the standard criteria for religious and theological discourse, and the empirical approach

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18 Cf. for a brief overview Kalbheim, "Grundlagen," 267–9.
19 Cf. Peetz, "Ways."
20 Cf. Rosenau, "Sinn," 162.
21 Cf. Graff-Kallevåg, "Normativity," 8.
22 Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki distinguishes between empirical and classic theology. She argues that – oversimplifications aside – empirical theology, i.e., a theology that draws its claims from empirical inquiries, and classical theology, i.e., a theology that draws its claims from reasons and/or revelation, can be differentiated in the following way: "[E]mpirical theology refers to that tradition which takes experience itself (variously interpreted) as the fundamental source of religious insight, whereas classical theologians place a primacy on revelation and reason (often speculative) as complementing sources of insight. Revelation is posited as coming into history from a transhistorical source in God, in which case the locus of truth has no essential relation to history; whereas for empiricism, the locus of truth *is* history," Hewitt Suchocki, "Theology," 83.

of accessing present statements of faith are – at least to a certain degree – inseparable and always occur together.

There are normative elements at play in empirical investigations: The selection and formulation of interview questions do carry normative elements such as choosing certain questions over others or by pre-structuring possible answers. Similarly, certain decisions are necessary in the analysis of the results, like coding the apprehended answers, which in turn carry normative implications by, for example, evening out certain nuances. The normative content of empirical theology is most obvious when one looks at its intention: In the rarest cases, investigations are conducted just to see what people believe. Usually, answers to specific questions are sought in order to derive certain actions from them or to respond with certain actions.[23] For example, above-mentioned practical theologian Saskia Eisenhardt carried out her investigations in order to better assess the role of non-religious youth in religious education and to promote their teaching and learning processes in dealing with them.[24] Similarly and on a broader scale, the German Protestant Church carries out a church membership survey every ten years, which results are considered important for the future development of the church.[25]

Conversely, it holds true that a (systematic) theologian with their thinking is always integrated into their experiemtial world.[26] Hence, the empirical is always already shaping the normative. Accordingly, workshop participant and systematic theologian Florian Höhne claims that depending on the relevant theologian and their institutional as well as societal context, the said theologian will see and interpret the reality, to which they refer, differently.[27] He further points out that especially younger theological approaches since the 1960s "come together in the intention to treat the social, political, public, colonial, or medial reality of the academic praxis of theology itself explicitly as a part of the reality that theology reflects on."[28] These insights are increasingly spreading within the northwest European systematic theological community, too: For example, German systematic theologian Christiane Nagel highlighted the epistemological probity of making transparent one's own positionality in order to enable intersubjective verifiability of the relevant research and its process.[29] Anyhow, the "conviction" that "[t]heology's social, political, discursive, and therewith contextual reality impacts theology's perspective on reality,"[30] still does not seem to be an opinio communis; at least not in terms of its consequences, namely, to take a leave from universal claims and to acknowledge the necessity to make transparent one's own positionality as a part of one's research. When, how many, and which aspects of one's own positionality should be made transparent is a question in itself. Certainly, not every essay needs to include a comprehensive autobiographical context. However, the absence of any contextual positioning does seem unreflective in this methodological and epistemological framework.

Both the normative within the empirical and the empirical within the normative challenge us to reflect on our potential biases and blind spots at various stages of the research process, in order to minimize the influence of our own judgments as much as possible. Similarly, it is important to make transparent our positionality regarding the research question and subject matter for the readership, to the extent possible and deemed necessary,[31] thereby also indicating possible biases. To say it with Höhne's words in his contribution: "theology's references to reality happen within the framework for which the social reality of the theologian allows."[32]

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23 This is also where Kalbheim sees the normative aspect of Empirical Theology, cf. Kalbheim, "Grundlagen," 264.

24 Cf. Eisenhardt, *Gott*, 301–2.

25 Cf. https://www.ekd.de/kmu-kirchenmitgliedschaftsuntersuchung-75049.htm.

26 This insight, well-known since the Enlightenment, is currently being reexamined in the so-called practical turn. As a brief example, how this is true especially in a church context see systematic theologian and ethicist Sarah Jäger who demonstrates the significance of religious practices aimed at public engagement, both historically and currently, and explains to what extent theories of practice offer suitable analytical tools to make the implied skills and knowledge accessible to scientific reflection, Jäger, "Adressaten," 131–40.

27 Cf. Höhne, "Imaginaries," 2.

28 Ibid.

29 Cf. Nagel, "Theologie," esp. 214–7.

30 Höhne, "Imaginaries," 3.

31 Of course, there will always remain some blind spots.

32 Höhne, "Imaginaries," 2.

Nonetheless, it is heuristically meaningful to distinguish between empirical and normative intentions. Only by doing so is it possible to differentiate the levels at which one is currently thinking and speaking, and to clearly assign the respective intentions, as well as responsive reactions, and potentially criticize them.

When distinguishing between normativity in the empirical and normativity of "classic theology" it is worthwhile to understand normativity as distributed among different parties. Following Geir Afdal, workshop participant and systematic theologian Kristin Graff-Kallevåg introduces the concept of "distributed normativity" and asserts that "[t]heological normativity can be found in academic theological accounts of doctrines and everyday religious practices."[33] I largely agree with Graff-Kallevåg's perspective and would like to further differentiate between the normativities involved: Depending on the context, normativity is often distributed among not just two, but at least three parties. The classical systematic theologian, lacking training in empirical methods but interested in inductive systematic theology, seldom engages directly with the lifeworld and the lived faith present there in a manner that consciously makes it the focus of their research. They rely on mediation. Consequently, normativity is divided among the empirical data, the researchers who gather it, and the systematic theologian who reflects upon it. Furthermore, when a topic is researched from various fields, it can also be relevant to draw on insights from other disciplines. Hence, depending on the relevant method and necessary knowledge import, the number of involved normativities can raise.

In inductive systematic theology, the aim is not to discuss, in a kind of power struggle over interpretation, which normativity prevails (usually that of the person writing a publication). As Graff-Kallevåg writes, "not acknowledging this distributed normativity means being ignorant of theological resources outside the academic discourse, whereas the theological normativity of everyday practices may be a resource for academic theology."[34] Therefore, it must rather be a concern of inductive systematic theology to make the different normativities visible and engage them in a critical and constructive dialogue.[35] Instead of asking who is right – which still often seems to be an intention in classical systematic theology – we should uncover the implicit arguments,[36] and ask what we can learn from each other.

6 How to Assess Theological Content Expressed by Laypersons and Non-Believers

Returning to the question of how empirically obtained statements should be evaluated, it appears from the last two chapters that the categories of "right" and "wrong" or "true" and "false" offer only limited suitability for assessment. If an (inductive) systematic theologian takes seriously the contextual embeddedness of both the academic and non-academic (systematic) theology, then they cannot claim that their statements have universal validity or a universal claim to truth.[37] Expressed dogmatically, systematic theology does indeed contemplate questions concerning the ultimate, but it always does so from the perspective of the penultimate and can hence only reach penultimate answers.

From a hermeneutic perspective, one must also arrive at this conclusion: (inductive) systematic theology does not reflect on faith itself, but on always already reflected expressions of faith, on always already reflected

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33 Graff-Kallevåg, "Normativity," 4.

34 Ibid., 6.

35 To this, Graff-Kallevåg suggests a three-step-model in her article; cf. Graff-Kallevåg, "Normativity," 7.

36 Cf. Höhne, "Imaginaries," demonstrates how this applies to social imaginaries that shape our thinking and thus embody normativity; cf. also Peetz, "Potentials," who shows how this applies in the context of narrative ethics.

37 In this present issue Höhne writes in his own article: "[T]he fact, that theology's perspective on reality is constituted by its own social reality, this very theologian will, as an individual, not be able to formulate universal truths," Höhne, "Imaginaries," 3. For how such a theology, that relies on the discourse with others, can look like, read Höhne's article in this issue. Peetz, with her reference to Gruber, is implicitly also arguing in this direction from an ethical perspective and points out that that "[f]rom a deconstructive and radically hermeneutic point of view, narratives, *including their truth* claims, are ... inevitably particular," Peetz, "Potentials," 6 (italics in original).

testimonies of faith. This leads to a double relativization, firstly because the people articulating their experiences of faith do so from their respective contexts and secondly because the reflection on these articulations is always contextually bound itself.[38]

Yet, abandoning the discourse of a metaphysical or universal truth does not lead to an "anything goes." While I advocate for distancing ourselves from the categories of "right" and "wrong," this only applies to the evaluation of accounts of religious experience and their reflections. Beyond that, there are, of course, many respects in which there are right and wrong statements in (inductive) systematic theology. At a very basic level, quotes can be incorrectly attributed or dates incorrectly stated. In empirical studies, factual errors can occur, which, e.g., can lead to an incorrect enumeration of the number of responses exhibiting a particular tendency. Also, giving up on the categories of "right" and "wrong" when assessing accounts of religious experience and their reflections, does not mean that every statement and reflection on faith should be accepted uncritically. I suggest using categories like "plausible," "appropriate for the situation in question," "recognizable with regard to other accounts of religious experience and their reflections" and last but not least "consistent" as well as "coherent." None of these categories are guarantees for truth, yet they help assess a theological position without denying the representative of that position that what they believe is true.

7 A Preliminary Conclusion

Inductive systematic theology serves as an additional approach to existing ways of doing systematic theology and is led by the aim to constructively incorporate the belief(s) and perspectives of laypeople and non-believers into systematic theological reflection. The (predominantly empirical) methods employed by inductive systematic theology are hence intended as supplements to existing methods rather than replacements. A comprehensive classification and assessment of the various methods of (inductive) systematic theology, along with their strengths and weaknesses relative to different research interests, is still to be elaborated.

The diverse approaches to inductive systematic theology are unified by a stance of respect and openness toward the subjects under inquiry, as well as a willingness to learn from them. In any approach to inductive systematic theology, it is imperative to reflect upon and, to a relevant degree, transparently articulate one's own positionality and stance toward the research at hand.

As a scholar, one is a normative instance among others. It is important to make the different normativities with their relevant argumentations transparent and engage them in dialogue with each other. Hence, an inductive systematic theological approach also requires certain "dialogical" competences from the relevant actor. The exact nature of these needs to be further explored. As a first direction, I suggest that these competences entail – next to the already mentioned stance of respect and openness toward the inquired other as well as the willingness to learn from them – empathy (the ability to empathize with the perspective of the inquired other and understand their concerns and thoughts, depending on the situation maybe also their feelings and needs) and reflective capacity (the ability to reflect on one's own thinking and actions during the dialogue and, if necessary, adjust them).

One of the challenges inherent in inductive systematic theology lies in identifying what constitutes "doing theology" and the role of "theologianhood," as well as establishing relationships between the various modes of theological practice.

8 The Understanding and Conception of Self-Love as an Example

In the following, I am to demonstrate what I have outlined above by using part of my own research as an example. As stated at the outset, my research focuses on self-love. Some individuals in the north-western

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38 For how this applies to biblical texts cf. Zeller, *Schriftverständnis*, esp. 210–7.

European context associate self-love with hashtags found under Instagram posts or TikTok reels that promote personal well-being or self-improvement. Others encounter references to self-love in lifestyle articles, self-help books, and life guides.[39] Those familiar with mindfulness theories and practices may regard self-love as highly esteemed and essential. Some may also recall the ideas of psychoanalyst and philosopher Erich Fromm, who posited that individuals can only love others if they first learn to love themselves, and that those who neglect others often harbor hidden self-contempt.[40] I am inclined to agree with Fromm's perspective, at least to a certain degree. Yet, while I personally recognize the importance of self-love, I must admit that my understanding of it remains somewhat vague – a stance shared by many, among them also researchers.[41] Nevertheless, the majority of mentions and references to self-love regard it as something positive, something people should strive to have and maintain. When I engage with the topic of self-love in an inductive systematic theological manner, I cannot ignore the positive connotation that the term holds in much of the north-western European context. It does not orient me toward the idea that self-love would necessarily have to be something positive, but it certainly suggests to me that an engagement with the concept, particularly in terms of how a positive conception might look in a Christian context, could be worthwhile.

However, when consulting academic systematic theological literature, one finds that in north-western European systematic theology, self-love is not typically held in high regard. In many Protestant theological traditions[42] and also in some contemporary publications,[43] it is equated with egocentrism and selfishness and viewed as *the* expression of human sinfulness. Even though, as mentioned, I have no clear definition of self-love, the notion that it consists solely of egocentrism and selfishness does not seem plausible to me. Rather, I am under the impression that the term is used to refer to different phenomena without this distinction ever being examined – a fortunate circumstance for anyone seeking a book topic.

From this, two tasks emerge for me. One is to gain a better understanding of the phenomena that the negative conception of self-love refers to in its theological context. The other, and more relevant task in this context, is to attempt to conceptualize a positive theological understanding of self-love. The starting points for this endeavor include not only the few exceptions in German-speaking systematic theology and some voices from German-speaking practical theology but also (systematic) theological literature from other theological contexts (such as womanist theologies), as well as the way self-love is understood outside of the academic, systematic theological context, particularly among Christians in the church and its environment.

To the best of my knowledge, there is no empirical study that inquires how Christian believers, specifically Protestant Christian believers living in Germany, understand and assess self-love. This is a pity. Therefore, I turned to public church statements to see if the negative connotation found in many academic systematic theological publications is adopted by these trained theologians and conveyed in their communications with the laity.

Surprisingly, when I examined public church statements I found that self-love, when mentioned, is mostly positively connoted. Here, it is obvious that the term "self-love" is understood differently than in the above mentioned classical systematic theological examples. Let me briefly summarize my findings: Searching on the website of the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) for the term "self-love" yields not an abundance of results, however, various sermons, lectures, and publications do mention it. Loving oneself is then understood as something decidedly biblical. There is talk of the necessity to balance self-love and love for one's neighbor, and a close, sometimes "inseparable" connection between love for God, oneself, and one's neighbor is asserted multiple times.[44] One concrete manifestation of this connection is expressed as follows:

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39 A quick search on the search engine of one's choice should yield numerous examples.

40 Cf. Fromm, *Art*, 59f.

41 Cf. Henschke and Sedlmeier, "Self-Love."

42 Cf. for example Luther, *Werke (WA)*, 3–528, 517, 14f. In this context, Anders Nygren's work is especially well known: Nygren, *Eros und Agape, Erster Teil.* 1930. sowie Nygren, *Eros und Agape, Zweiter Teil.* 1937. Other examples can be found in Bonhoeffer, "Sanctorum Communio," 108 as well as in Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik IV/2,68*, 832f.

43 Cf. Pattison, *Phenomenology*, 143.

44 Cf. for example: Volz and Zulehner, "Männer," 118; Rosowski and Ruffing, "Aufbruch," 411; Kammer für öffentliche Verantwortung der EKD, "Welt," 24; EKD, "Handeln," 46; EKD, "Freiheit," 214.

> The self-love inherent in human beings – understood as a gift from the Creator – commits them to love for the other, yet simultaneously sets their humanly possible limit. … Those who know themselves affirmed by God can affirm themselves and, precisely because of this, affirm the right to life and the dignity of all who bear the human face.[45]

In one sermon, self-love is explicitly postulated as "the core of our evangelical work."[46] Referring to self-love as part of the commandment to love one's neighbor is also used to justify boundary-setting by workers in the social diaconal field.[47]

Rarely is there talk of self-love without also mentioning love for one's neighbor.[48] A hierarchization of self-love and neighbor-love occurs in a joint publication of the EKD and the Association of Evangelical Free Churches which speaks of a "priority of love for one's neighbor over self-love."[49] Self-love is critically denounced only in two sermon texts.[50]

In addition to the official website of the EKD, there is also the website of the EKD's media portal, which refers to other websites closely affiliated with the EKD. Here, too, references to self-love can be found. In 2020, rundfunk.evangelisch.de aired a morning devotion on Deutschlandfunk, in which self-love was highlighted as "[o]ne of the traces" in the search for God, who is love.[51] It is supposedly "a process – increasingly recognizing how I have long been recognized."[52]

Evangelisch.de features "A Listening Course on Love in Ten Lessons," with its seventh lesson devoted to self-love. Though somewhat restrained, self-love is justified here with creation theology and the commandment to love one's neighbor:

> 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' says the Bible. The second part of the sentence is all too easy to overlook: As yourself! Every person is allowed and encouraged to recognize God's handwriting in their life, even in their body. We are a visible image of the invisible God. We are his creatures. Like everything on earth, we are valuable and inexplicably beautiful. Therefore, we should treat ourselves with care, like everything else God has created. In this sense, we are even allowed to be a little self-loving. Before returning to self-criticism.[53]

A more nuanced perspective is presented in an article on Chrismon:[54] In the title, the author explicitly distances himself from an alleged commandment to love oneself. Later on, in his text, he explains that self-love is not demanded but presupposed in the biblical commandment to love one's neighbor. Similarly, in the Old and New Testaments, self-love would refer less to a feeling, as is the case today, but would rather denote a mode of action. A perceived tension between self-interest and love for one's neighbor remains unresolved.

The compilation above yields several orientation points for a systematic theological inquiry into self-love – without saying that they would be "true" or coherently fitting with other systematic theological motives. Clearly, in the given context, self-love is not predominantly identified with selfishness or egocentrism, although a precise definition is lacking. The various statements suggest exploring how self-love could have been understood in biblical texts, particularly in the love commandments that speak of love for God, neighbor, and oneself. This triadic relationship warrants a closer examination of its historical reception and impact, too.

Regarding love for one's neighbor, the relationship is not clearly defined: there is talk of balance, but also of prioritizing love for one's neighbor over self-love. Based on the gathered voices, it appears that the combination of self-love and love for one's neighbor prevents selfishness and egocentrism. This raises the

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45 EKD, "Gestaltung," (my own translation).

46 Felmberg, "Gottesdienst," (my own translation).

47 Käßmann, "Bibelarbeit."

48 Cf. Bahr, "Sinn;" Bahr, "Freiheit;" Bedford-Strohm, "Predigt."

49 EKD, "Räume," 59 (my own translation).

50 Leicht, "Kinder;" Schindehütte, "Predigt."

51 Richter, "Morgenandacht."

52 Ibid.

53 Muchlinsky, "Lektion #7."

54 Cf. Weitz, "Nächsten."

question of whether self-love can even be discussed in a Christian context without reference to love for God and neighbor. Anyhow, further theological work is needed to elucidate this relationship and propose a definitive understanding.

In the context of love for God and oneself, it can be questioned whether there is a certain understanding of self that leads to love for God, as suggested in one of the statements. How could and would it have to be conceptualized? Similarly, questions arise about what it means in the context of self-love to recognize oneself as known by God. It is intriguing that one statement suggests that a connection between love for God and oneself would lead to a particular way of relating to oneself. This connection warrants more investigation and elaboration.

The reference to self-love to prevent (self-)exploitation primarily raises ethical questions and calls for attention to real-life situations, such as those faced by employees in caregiving professions. It also prompts the task of reconciling self-love with the biblical mandate for sacrificial love in discipleship. Insofar as following Christ is generally (and for good reasons) understood as self-sacrifice for the sake of the neighbor, this presents a particularly sensitive issue for a positive Christian understanding of self-love.

The recurring emphasis on creation may spark hamartiological reflections: while God may have endowed humans with self-love, everything with which humanity was created has been corrupted by sin. What does this mean for a Christian discourse on self-love, if self-love is not to be universally condemned as negative?

It becomes evident how these statements from public theology can orient systematic theological research by indicating questions and possible directions. With the corresponding findings, it would then be incumbent upon the systematic theologian to engage in dialogue with practitioners and laypersons, and to propose suggestions for a Christian understanding of self-love. This does not mean that all ideas from the examined communications are simply adopted positively and enriched systematically-theologically. Rather, it is about a critical examination, possibly rejections, and open further thinking. By doing so, systematic theologians can offer orienting stimuli for their audience in their expert own way.

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