On January 23rd, practical theologian Wilhelm Gräb of Humboldt University Berlin passed away. He would have been 75 this summer. Far from resting in his retirement from the Berlin Faculty of Theology, he stayed engaged in many projects even as an emeritus, because scholarship was his vocation. On March 21st 2020, he wrote to me, “I have been spared from Corona so far, but I am sorry to report to you that it has got me much worse.” Despite an aggressive form of cancer, he worked unabatedly in the field of Practical Theology – a Practical Theology which he shaped as an academic discipline, but also lived as a way of dialogue.

Wilhelm Gräb was born on August 21st 1948 in Bad Säckingen in Baden, near the German-Swiss border, and was raised in a pastor’s household with an affinity for art and culture. He studied Protestant Theology at the Seminary (Kirchliche Hochschule) in Bethel and at the Faculties of Protestant Theology in Göttingen and Heidelberg. In 1979, he received his doctorate in Göttingen with a thesis on Friedrich Schleiermacher’s concept of humanity and history. Schleiermacher’s thoughts would have a strong influence on him for the rest of his life (Humanität und Christentumsgeschichte. Eine Untersuchung zum Geschichtsbegriff in Schleiermachers Spätwerk, Göttingen 1980). The Schleiermacher renaissance in Systematic and Practical Theology since the 1980s owes essential impulses to Gräb. In 1996, together with Ulrich Barth and other companions and friends, Gräb founded the International Schleiermacher Society in Halle, serving on its board for many decades. From 1980–1988 he was assistant to religious educator Christoph Bizer in Göttingen. During this time, he wrote his habilitation on the concept of preaching (Predigt als Mitteilung des Glaubens. Studien zu einer prinzipiellen Homiletik in praktischer Absicht, Göttingen 1988). In this book, he developed an understanding of the practical task of preaching as the situational interpretation of a biblical text that releases its potential for meaning.

A central insight of Gräb’s, which he made fruitful throughout his life, is that the concept of authority must be abandoned in favor of the question how religious communication can prove to be relevant. He explored this question in all practical
fields of the church community, but especially for the sermon. Besides Schleiermacher, he was influenced by Ernst Lange’s dialogical homiletics. Starting in 2000, Gräb served on the editorial board of the famous book series “Predigtstudien”, a homiletical manual for pastors founded by Lange in 1967, and from 2013 to 2021 he was its managing editor.

After his habilitation, Gräb became a campus chaplain and adjunct professor in Göttingen. He held this position until he received a call as full professor to the University of Bochum in 1993. Then, from 1999 until his retirement in 2016, he held the chair for Practical Theology with a focus on Homiletics and Practical Ecclesiology at Humboldt University in Berlin. The professorship in Berlin, a city marked by shifts and transformation, was tailor-made for him. With great passion, he served as the University Preacher in the Marienkirche on Berlin Alexanderplatz, dealt with the dynamic processes of secularization and de-churching, and built bridges between church and art. He invited his students to participate in his research projects: He took them to the international art exposition Documenta in Kassel, had them preach in parishes in Berlin in the Homiletic Seminar, and invited interlocutors from the arts, culture, and church into his classes. When the number of ministry students at Berlin declined, he very early and farsightedly, in 2003, promoted the master’s program “Religion and Culture” together with other Berlin colleagues. Today it is one of the most successful master’s programs at theological faculties in Germany. Also close to Gräb’s heart was the institutional cooperation with South Africa, especially with Stellenbosch University, where he held the positions of Senior Advisor and Extraordinary Professor even in retirement. More recently, Gräb cultivated intensive research collaborations based on dialogue and reciprocity: one on “Religious Communities and Sustainable Development” and another titled “Transformative Religion. Religion as Situated Knowledge in Process of Social Transformation”, which is an International Research Training Group of the German Research Foundation (IRTG).

Gräb cared deeply about guiding his students and PhD students, inspiring and advising countless doctoral theses. The Arbeitskreis Empirische Religionsforschung, an association founded in his office at the Berlin Faculty in 2013, now has more than 80 members. It forms a platform for scholars to discuss their research projects on religion in terms of principles and methods in a friendly atmosphere.

Last year, Wilhelm Gräb commemorated the beginnings of the International Journal of Practical Theology 25 years ago and the roughly simultaneous foundation of the International Academy of Practical Theology. In his anniversary comments, he describes how important the internationalization of Practical Theology seemed to be to its progress as an academic discipline, as well as its consolidation in terms of scientific theory (IJPT 26.1, p. 12). “The founding of the International Journal of Practical Theology (IJPT) was guided by the intention to continue the open discussion
about the subject matter and the academic standard of practical theology and to bring the globally different views of the self-understanding and task of this discipline into conversation with each other.” Not only was Gräb a leading thinker in both projects, the Journal, and the Academy – he was exceptionally dedicated to the nitty-gritty work of developing them. He served as managing editor of the IJPT from 1997 to 2013. Ever since the first meeting of the International Academy of Practical Theology took place in Princeton in 1993, he did not miss a single biannual meeting. In 2007, Gräb invited the Academy to Berlin to discuss Secularization Theories, Religious Identity, and Practical Theology. Most recently, he served as co-editor of the International Handbook of Practical Theology. A Global Approach, which appeared in 2022. The volume underlines his dynamic understanding of an intercultural and interreligious Practical Theology as “cross-border learning” (IJPT 26.1, p. 14). When the book was presented at the Conference of the Society for Practical Theology in South Africa at Stellenbosch University in January of this year, Gräb was sadly unable to attend.

It is not easy to interpret the work of a practical theologian who was so versatile and enormously productive. Gräb’s seemingly tireless style of work, his warmth of heart, his occasionally pointed reviews, his conciliatory nature, the matter-of-factness with which he took on work without hesitation, his sense of humor, and his gift for gathering so many different people and bringing them into contact with one another shaped not only his work but were also parts of his personality. “Religion is part of being human. It does not allow man to be absorbed in what is already there.” (Vom Menschsein und der Religion, Tübingen 2018, 217.) This insight is at the core of Gräb’s thought. He found this idea in the Enlightenment, in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher but also in that of Desmond Tutu. Religion is the “sense of the infinite” (Religion in der Mediengesellschaft, Gütersloh 2002) that forms the multifaceted object of Practical Theology. Practical Theology is therefore a discipline of cultural hermeneutics that understands how to make this sense visible in contemporary culture, e.g. in literature, media like cinema, fine arts, popular music, within and beyond religious communities. It was always Wilhelm Gräb’s concern to assert the religious productivity of the people, pushing back against those theories of secularization which equate the decline of church membership with a disappearance of religion, but pushing back also against the church as an institution insofar as it keeps its distance from lived religion and the religious practices of people. Practical Theology, thus, is the theological discipline that makes people’s religion visible, and its academic character essentially consists in doing this through rigorous scholarly procedures.

Gräb’s colleagues in Berlin aptly say in their obituary: “When it comes to him, no distinction between person, scholar, pastor and theologian is possible.” Wilhelm Gräb will be missed in every respect.