
CHAPTER 1

The Religious Demands of Postmodern Life

Challenges for Practical Theology

When “postmodernity” came into the picture a little less than twenty years ago, it was often connected with Jean-François Lyotard’s now famous prediction that all “master stories” had come to their end.¹ Interpreters of postmodernity tell us that all attempts at comprehensive description or explanation of society, history, human behavior, or the meaning of life have broken down. Postmodernity was and is seen as a time in which everything is becoming fluid and flexible, pluriform and contingent, fast and ephemeral.

Moreover, no schemes, let alone systems, seem to be available that could hold the increasing varieties of human experiences together. Everything appears to be a matter of which perspective one takes and in whose interest one prefers to speak. Postmodernity is a time of many stories and also of many different voices—the voices of different age groups, of women and men, of different ethnicities, to only mention a few of the many possible perspectives.

What kind of time is this for theology and the church? Is it a time for hopeful new beginnings, or is it a time of ever-increasing difficulties? Listening to ministers, teachers, counselors, Christian educators, and youth workers in the field, we learn of many worries and concerns. Is there still a place for Christian faith if there is no more room for master stories to guide our lives? How are children and youth to find any sense of direction if everything is pluriform

and contingent? What are the guidelines for responsible adulthood? Is it even possible for theology to communicate successfully with people whose lives have less and less in common?

Yet, there are others who happily embrace the advent of postmodernity, even among theologians, ministers, and educators. For them, postmodernity is not a threat to the Christian faith. Rather, in their understanding, postmodernity is opening up new possibilities for those who had been silenced and oppressed by the forces of modernity and who now, finally, dare to make themselves seen and heard—women, minorities, people without power. According to these observers, the end of all master stories does not exclude the possibility of Christian faith. Quite the opposite, the many stories that give expression to the Christian faith can only come to the fore where the master stories of modern science and economy have lost their uncontested dominance. In this view, postmodernity means liberation—liberation for the gospel and no less for the people who want to follow it by leading a Christian life and by shaping the communities in which they live.

So this is a time of hope and a time of doubt and despair—postmodernity has many faces. This book will not address all of them. There are too many aspects involved from the beginning. No single book can claim to cover them anymore. But it will be my attempt throughout this book to become clearer about what postmodernity actually means for theology and how theology and the church may respond to its challenges critically, as well as constructively, by making use of its potentials.

My focus will be on the life cycle—on the life cycle as it is changing with the advent of postmodernity. Yet fortunately or unfortunately, it is not at all clear how to define or to describe the postmodern life cycle. Some people even doubt that it makes sense to speak of a postmodern life cycle. So our first task is to get at least an initial understanding of what we mean by the “postmodern life cycle.”

The Flexibility of the Human Life Cycle: Images of Family Life

In my teaching and lecturing, photographs of different family situations taken at different times during the twentieth century have often been helpful for gaining some understanding of how family life has changed. Such pictures typically capture different scenes from everyday life, from work as well as from leisure activities. In part, they remind us of our own childhood; in part, they refer us to the stories and descriptions that our parents and grandparents have told us. In any case, such pictorial material, which can be found in the

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photo albums of many families, makes intuitively clear that the human life cycle by no means is a constant or an anthropological given that would be exempt from change.

Pictures of this kind look different in different countries. Houses are different, cars are different, clothing is different, manners are different, and so forth. Yet what they all have in common is that they are clear indications of how much things have changed for the family during the last one hundred years.

Readers who have any doubts about this may want to consult their own family photo albums on their living room shelves. I myself very vividly recall three different scenes rendered in a German study on the modernization of childhood and the family.² The three scenes cover a span of sixty years. They come from the 1930s, the 1950s, and the 1990s:

The first scene shows a family in the 1930s. There are ten people in the picture, men and women, children and adults. They clearly belong to three different generations. Two things keep them busy together. They are taking a break from harvesting a field, and they are sharing a meal consisting of simple sandwiches and something to drink, which is poured from a simple pitcher.

The impression that this scene leaves on the observer is far from neutral. The whole situation is highly evocative, breathing peacefulness and also a certain gratitude. The people are enjoying each other. They may not be very rich, but they seem to have what they need. They are content.

The background of this picture is an agricultural society. Family life—here sharing a meal in the fields—is integrated with work. People are working together and they are eating together, and everything is happening more or less in the same place. There are no long-distance commutes. Three different generations are present on an everyday basis. Moreover, all of them are actively participating in the same task of working the fields.

The second scene in this study comes from the 1950s. In the center of the picture is a car, a small and simple car. While today such a vehicle might not even be able to trigger our nostalgia, the car in the picture clearly is more than a car. For many people and in many different countries, such a car was a powerful symbol indeed. It was the symbol of personal achievement and of individual mobility for everyone. But

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the car in the picture has even more implications for the family. The number of seats available in this vehicle tended to define the ideal size of the family: two adults and a maximum of two or three children—a limited family size that would also make it affordable to take a car vacation in the mountains or to the shore. And unless they had their own car, grandparents could not come along. It is no coincidence that the oldest generation is not present in this scene.

This kind of scene stands for the experience of improved living conditions in the decades after World War II. At that time the so-called nuclear family, which is limited to two generations (parents and children), was in the process of becoming the dominant form of family life. For many people, the home had ceased to be the workplace. Mobility included longer commutes, which again was made possible by the availability of cars.

With the third scene, we have arrived in the early 1990s, our immediate past or almost present. It shows how the promises of the 1950s have come to fruition in suburban life. The simple car of the 1950s has been replaced by a much more sophisticated vehicle, which is not only a means of transportation and not only a symbol of personal achievement. This car appears to be some kind of toy that testifies to the new affluence of many middle-class families at that time. The family does not have to go to the mountains anymore in order to enjoy life—it may do so in their own backyard, which might really be a close to perfect piece of lawn. And again, the family has become smaller. Paid work and family life are also clearly separate, but now this separation often applies to both parents. At best, there is one parent left to play with the children. The older generation of the grandparents is not visible anymore, not even in the home of the family. Probably they are living somewhere else, possibly far away. At least, they are not sharing their work and daily life with their children and grandchildren.

It is interesting to think about the question of what kind of scene from contemporary family life we ourselves would pick in order to capture our own situation. What kind of picture could convey the image of postmodernity? It is obviously easier to look back at former times and to realize how far away those times appear to us—the tranquility of agricultural society in the 1930s as well as the time of

the 1950s or even the 1990s. So we may either wait for the future to give us a picture of who we were at the beginning of the new century, or readers may just insert their own observations and images of the postmodern life cycle. For the time being, it may be most appropriate to leave a question mark, which will remind us of the open question of how to picture the postmodern life cycle. At the end of this book, we will be in a better position to answer this question.

For now, it may be helpful to imagine what the different kinds of family experience mean for an individual person on his or her passage through the life cycle. The first scene points to a life cycle that is very much predefined from birth. In most cases, the person moves along through life by taking over the positions that other members of the family had filled—the position of mother or father, of field hand, of working in the house, and so forth. The family with its sequence of generations defined much of one's life. There were few choices to be made about this. One's future looked like the family's past. In industrial societies this continuity between past and future comes under attack. To move through the life cycle now means to strive for achievements that, if possible, will allow the person to surpass his (and sometimes her) parents. There are achievements of education and training, and they are measured by the success of a working life defined by status and income. Choices are becoming more important for the individual, but, for the most part, they are choices between clearly defined alternatives like different kinds of education or work. Probably it is at this point that the experience of an individual person moving through the life cycle today has become most different. Choices have multiplied, and they are no longer predefined. Nor is it clear what the consequences of such choices will be in the long run. The past of one's family does not offer much direction for the future anymore, and society holds no more promises of clear-cut professional futures.

Let me return to my earlier question concerning a preliminary understanding of the difference between the modern and the postmodern life cycle. What do the pictures or scenes from family life tell us about the life cycle? Three aspects seem especially important.

(1) First, it is obvious how much the shape of daily life has changed over the generations of the last fifty or sixty years. The routines in which everyday life is embedded have changed in almost every respect, even within the family. Fewer persons are involved. The character of family life has been strongly affected by moving paid work away from the home and by relocating it in separate institutions

of industry or trade. Consequently, the temporal order of daily life also had to change. In all these respects, the life cycle has been subject to radical changes. To put it into more general terms, the life cycle is not an anthropological given that can never change. Our contemporary situation makes us aware of how flexible the life cycle really is or, at least, how flexible it has become.

It is helpful to think about the life cycle in terms of a threefold distinction between the *premodern*, the *modern*, and the *postmodern* experience. In a traditional agricultural situation, individual life is built into an integrated pattern of living and working together of three or more generations. Consequently, the individual person proceeds more or less naturally and automatically through a life cycle that is, for the most part, predetermined by one's birth into a certain family. By looking at their parents and grandparents, children are able to tell what their own life will be like once they reach the respective age. As pointed out above, there is much continuity between past and future. Given the preindustrial background of this kind of life and society, I call this the *premodern life cycle*.

The designation "premodern" is, of course, not very exact. Taken literally, it means everything "before modernity," which applies to everything from the Stone Age to the medieval period. It would certainly be misleading to assume that the human life cycle has stayed the same through all these different times. When I speak of the "premodern life cycle," my claim is a different one. I do not want to make romantic assumptions about life in earlier periods of history or the former stability of the life cycle. I am interested in a backdrop against which the contemporary changes of the life cycle can be discerned. So let us look further. What happens to the life cycle once agricultural society is on the wane?

Even without considering any details, one thing is obvious. With the expanding influence of industrialization and of paid labor outside the family, the life cycle turns into a much more demanding task for the individual. Not only does family life become separated from work while families become smaller and less stable, the life cycle itself is redefined as a career—a career that for the most part is measured by the economic and social success achieved by the respective individual. In this sense, increasing success and personal achievement are the characteristic ideals of the *modern life cycle*.³

Again, it must be admitted that the designation as "career" is a very preliminary way of describing the modern life cycle, and, as I want to show in the subsequent chapters, it is also a very one-sided, contradictory, or even ideological way of viewing the life cycle. Yet

there can be no doubt about the central influence that the idea of making a career, or of having missed one's opportunity for a successful career, has had on modern life. In this view, the family into which a child is born should not determine the course of his or her life cycle. The model of one's parents and grandparents no longer is the mold for one's own future life. Modern society holds the promise of many opportunities for everyone who is able to make use of them.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, new developments have come into view that are still hard to characterize. Some observers speak of a new type of biography in the sense that life has turned into an individual project and into a matter of personal choice.⁴ Others are more skeptical about whether a postmodern life cycle really exists or if we are just witnessing a further extension of modernity.⁵ At this early point of my analysis, I prefer to keep this question open. Suffice it to say, at this initial stage, that the *postmodern life cycle* must be what comes after the model of the life cycle as career has lost at least some of its power and persuasiveness. This preliminary understanding will be enough to get us started with further investigations into the changes that we are currently observing.

(2) Let me make a second point about the different scenes of family life rendered above. The pictures on which I have based my descriptions are not simply pictures of reality. This is true even though they are photographs. Photographs of the family as they are found in family albums tend to be highly artificial and symbolic. Often, they are not just snapshots taken by chance, and, in any case, they are not the result of realistic documentation. In earlier times, such pictures were often taken only after a lengthy procedure of arranging and rearranging the people in the picture, always attending to the questions of who should be in the picture and in front of what background, with what additional objects like houses, cars, trees, mountains, and so forth. And certainly, not every picture was allowed a place in the album or behind a frame.

This is why such pictures are not to be confused with the *reality* of family life. Rather, these pictures are trying to capture certain *ideals*—ideals of what the family should be, in the eyes of the photographer or according to the views of those who hold on to these pictures.

Consequently, the scenes of family life rendered above are not really documentary. They are not indicative of what the family really was twenty, thirty, or fifty years ago. But they can tell us something about what the family was supposed to be at that time, at least within the traditional middle class. The ideal character of such pictures and scenes also explains why certain realities of family life are absent

from the official photographs. This is most obvious for the situation in the late twentieth century. The suburban family enjoying life is only one side. The other side is, for example, the situation of a single mother who is trying to finish her education while holding her baby on her lap. Most likely this woman is lacking the resources to fully participate in the world of material enjoyments, and her tight schedule does not give her much leeway for playing with the toys of postmodern life.

So there is the *ideal* and there are the many *realities of life*. And obviously, the ideal and the real do not coincide. Yet it is easy to see that the ideal life cycle is not only different from the real life cycle, but that the ideal model also has its effects on the reality of the life cycle—by guiding public opinion, by forming personal aspirations, by shaping policies, and by suppressing those phenomena that do not fit the ideal. For this reason, it is important not only to study the life cycle empirically but also to include the ideal models and renderings of this life cycle. This is why the present study will put a strong emphasis on the ideas and ideals that are connected to the life cycle in contemporary culture.

The inclusion of ideal models and their relationship to the realities of the life cycle is further motivated by the focus on postmodernity. According to some observers, postmodernity especially affects such models or ideas: If postmodernity means, for example, the end of all clear-cut models of the family—some sociologists even speak of the “postfamilial family”⁶—does this also mean the end of all singular models of the life cycle? Does it even make sense to speak of a “cycle” anymore when everything is just in flux—moving back and forth, sideways as well as up and down, but never completing an ideal circular shape or gestalt? This will be another central question to be addressed in the present study.

(3) The third aspect that I want to bring to the reader's attention with the scenes of family life described above has often been overlooked in the discussions about the life cycle. The scenes of family life have not only an ideal and therefore symbolic nature, but they also clearly include a *religious dimension*. They indicate or even prescribe how individual life is to become whole, how it is to achieve a perfect and complete shape. They are images of how life can become meaningful. With this observation, we have arrived at the point where *theology* must enter the picture. Theological analysis is needed in order to come to terms with the images of a meaningful life, not only in terms of acquiring a certain faith but also in terms of evaluating the ideal images of life offered, for example, by the media. Many people

have come to realize, in the different contexts of their life and work, that the images of the meaningful life cycle are not always as harmless as they appear to be at first glance. On the contrary, ideal images of human life have always produced victims—by devaluing all those whose lives do not conform to the ideal image and whose lives are then bereft of meaning and value. And this is even more true once the meaning given to the life cycle is of an ultimate or religious nature. In this case, the lack of meaning will also be ultimate. So the religious dimension of the life cycle is of special importance and deserves special attention, not only for theologians but for everyone who is interested in the experiences connected to the life cycle.

Moreover, it is easy to see why changes in the life cycle inherently are—or at least should be—a topic for Christian theology. In many cases, such changes not only concern the levels of daily routine but they also affect the structures of meaning that are connected to the life cycle—the images of wholeness and completion. At this point, I want to mention a few questions in order to illustrate how a theological perspective can enter the process of interpreting different experiences of the life cycle: How, for example, do the images of wholeness and completion that are operative in society relate to a theological understanding of wholeness and completion? Do these images allow the human beings to be truly human, or do they lead us into the temptations of self-deification and paralysis? Which images or ideals are helpful and healthy; which ones are not? How can we avoid being lured by empty promises and into directions that turn out to be dead ends?

Such questions indicate that theology may have a public role to play in dealing with the postmodern life cycle, a role that, in any case, is important to culture and society in general. Yet whoever wants to make reference to Christian theology in a postmodern situation must also face the challenges of the postmodern religious situation. Many analysts assume that postmodernity affects religion no less than it affects individual life. Therefore, we must now turn to the situation of religion in postmodernity.

Some Features of Contemporary Religious Life

It has often been noted that contemporary religious life, first of all, has turned out to be different than the prophets of modernity had expected. Not too long ago, many observers, be they social scientists or theologians, saw religion as being on the wane, giving way more and more to a powerful and comprehensive process of secularization.

It was expected that religious worldviews would increasingly be replaced by scientific and rational views of the world and that personal religious convictions would be allowed to exert only a minimal influence on one's life.

In the United States, two books by the Harvard theologian Harvey Cox can stand symbolically for the changing expectations. In 1965, Cox published his best-selling book on the *Secular City*, in which he describes the impact of secular urban life and foresees a future without religion.⁷ Roughly twenty years later, in 1984, he published his sequel, *Religion in the Secular City*, in which he observes the unexpected return of religion to what he formerly called the secular city.⁸ In this latter book, Cox points to vital new forms of religion that have entered the picture after the 1960s, like fundamentalism on the one hand and liberation theology on the other. From this perspective, religion is as alive as ever, even if it looks different from the past. At the same time, his book gives evidence to the shaky nature of all earlier prophecies of the end of religion, which turned out to be less empirical than speculative and without real basis. And finally, he raises the question of what a postmodern theology could look like, thus pioneering, in his field, the question that I am posing in respect to the life cycle.

The expected decline of religion has not become a reality, not in the United States and also not in many other parts of the world, even though parts of Europe and especially the former East Block countries in Europe and Asia definitively are a special case.⁹ Yet, although the end of religion seems to be much further away than secularization theory had expected, things clearly have changed. For the most part, the traditional churches in the Western world have lost many of their members, and, possibly even more important, they have lost what sociologists call their monopoly on religion in society.¹⁰ If, thirty or forty years ago, to be religious meant, at least for the majority, to be a member of a mainline church, the situation has changed markedly in this respect. On the one hand, there is a growing number of so-called unchurched people who do not claim any affiliation with a religious denomination or group. On the other hand, there is the increasing influence of smaller Christian denominations and groups as well as of non-Christian religions that have acquired an increasing presence in many Western countries.¹¹

This situation is aptly described by a number of terms that refer to different aspects of the contemporary religious situation. Since these terms will come up again and again in the following chapters, it seems helpful to state briefly my understanding of them here.

- *Pluralization* refers to the process through which religious orientations and attitudes have taken on a multiple shape. This includes the inner pluralism of Christianity, of different groups and denominations and subgroups within the denominations, as well as the religious plurality of a multireligious society comprising a number of different religions beyond Christianity.
- Religious *individualization* is the flip side of religious pluralization. It means that religious orientations are less and less determined by churches or religious institutions and by the traditions for which these institutions stand. Rather, religion becomes a matter of individual choice—an inescapable consequence of a situation in which the presence of different religious possibilities is experienced from childhood on. In a well-known book, the sociologist Peter Berger speaks of the “heretical imperative” in order to characterize the situation of forced religious choice for each and everyone in society.¹² Similarly, the now current term *spirituality* conveys a personal religious interest that is not connected to religious institutions, formal membership, traditional authorities, and so forth. Spirituality, in this context, often means a type of religion that can be Christian in the sense of an individualized Christianity that is not related to any congregation.
- Often a third term is used to describe our contemporary religious situation: the *privatization* of religion. In this context, privatization means that religion has become a private affair.¹³ This understanding includes several aspects. In part, privatization refers to the emergence of a private sphere in modernity—a sphere that is separate from work, economy, and politics. And it may also refer to the legal separation between state and church or between state and religion. In either case, so the argument runs, religion is relegated and confined to the private realm. According to this view, modern and postmodern religion is a matter only of personal life—a matter of intimate character that rarely is talked about in public and sometimes is not even a topic of conversation in the family.

Observations concerning the increasingly intimate character of religion should definitely be taken seriously. Yet at the same time, contemporary social analysts like José Casanova and, in part, Peter Beyer have pointed out the public role that religion has played, and continues to play, in many countries at the beginning of the twenty-first century.¹⁴ Not only is there a Religious Right in the United States,

and not only are there religiously motivated political movements for peace, justice, and the integrity of the creation in many countries of the Western world, there is also the Muslim influence on politics in many Arab and Asian countries. So the contemporary situation has turned religion into a private matter, but it also includes countermovements of religion reclaiming a public role for itself—a process that is not without its specific conflicts, as becomes clear when we take up a fourth term: *globalization*.

- In the context of religion, *globalization* has come into the picture only recently. For some people it may still be surprising that globalization is even mentioned in the context of our religious situation. All around the world, globalization is understood as an economic process with implications for finances and technology. But does globalization also have religious implications? One of the most well-known statements on globalization and religion comes from Samuel Huntington.¹⁵ For Huntington, globalization includes the danger of a “clash of civilizations,” which really is a clash of the different cultures and religions of the world in that culture and religion are an integral part of the different civilizations. With globalization bringing these religions closer together geographically, there also is a growing potential for conflict and religious hostility. Other observers like Roland Robertson, Peter Beyer, and Anthony Giddens also speak of religious implications of globalization.¹⁶ According to them, many of the tendencies mentioned above, most of all pluralization and individualization, receive additional strength and backing from globalization. In this view, the emergence of a new consciousness of the world as a single place adds a whole new background to our religious outlooks, possibly relativizing them and, in any case, challenging them with the awareness of the many religious possibilities available in this world. This is why there is a close relationship between postmodernity and globalization.

Of course, this reference to the concepts of religious pluralization, individualization, privatization, and of the emergent process of globalization is not much more than offering readers a panoramic picture with a few very broad strokes. Yet the main task in this introductory chapter is not to produce a detailed picture of postmodern religion as it has been described by sociologists of religion.¹⁷ Rather, my focus is on the postmodern *life cycle* and on the religious dimensions that this life cycle entails. Therefore, the question

must be how the contemporary religious situation affects the life cycle. To put it differently: What are the religious demands of postmodern life regarding the life cycle?

In looking at the different scenes of family life, we hit upon the problematic effects of ideal images of wholeness and completion that are offered as descriptions of the successful life cycle. And we have also come to realize that such ideals often are religious ideals bestowing the life cycle with ultimate meaning and value or, conversely, denying such meaning and value to a particular life. Having at least briefly taken account of the situation of postmodern religion, we are now in a position to attempt a first summary of what may be considered the specific demands and challenges of the postmodern life cycle. Three interrelated demands are of special importance.

- The first of these demands obviously arises from *changes in the life cycle itself*. As we have seen, the life cycle is losing its traditional shape and structure. The trajectories of individual life are becoming more and more pluriform. Life itself has become a project for which everyone is responsible by himself or herself. In a wide sense, this project may be called religious in that it always hinges upon the ultimate meaning and value by which the life cycle is guided or judged, in the eyes of the individual person as well as in those of others. This is the *challenge of the life cycle under reconstruction*.

- Second, the *religious meaning and values* available for guiding and supporting the project of the postmodern life cycle have also taken on a *pluriform* shape. No longer is there a clear and unanimous source from which the individual person can gain religious insight and faith. Rather, there is religious plurality, in the church as well as beyond the church. To find and to personally adopt a religious faith has also become a project in the sense that the individual person has to choose from many different options that are present from childhood on and that claim to be equally valid. So if the postmodern life cycle contains the potential of a new and intensified search for ultimate meaning, it is a postmodern religion that is encountered by this search. If the human life cycle has come into flux, so also has postmodern religion. This is the *challenge of finding and adopting a faith* in a religiously plural situation.

- Third, finding a faith of one's own as the foundation on which to build a life cycle is not only a task for childhood or adolescence. Having been nurtured and raised in a certain faith

or religion will not necessarily solve the issue in postmodern adulthood. Rather, finding a faith becomes a *lifelong project*. The demands of the postmodern life cycle remain present, challenging us ever anew: What does it mean to live a Christian life in a society that constantly conveys that such a life is only one of many different possible options? And how do I make sense of my faith when I am aware of all the different options? This is the *challenge of maintaining a faith vis-à-vis* many options.

Putting it all together in one phrase, the challenge is how to come to terms with a life cycle that presents itself like a permanent construction site, with an overabundance of competing construction plans and with no clear criteria for choosing among them.

In concluding this section, let me also point out that these challenges and demands of the postmodern life cycle have far-reaching implications not only for the individual person but also for church and society. In connection with religious pluralization, individualization, and globalization, we hit upon the growing fear of a "clash of civilizations" as Huntington has called it. An increasingly multireligious situation can easily breed intolerance, religious conflict, and even extreme violence. To this, we should add the danger of society's losing its normative basis. The less there is a common religion that may hold society together, the more difficult it becomes to conceive of a common culture and of common values. No doubt, religious diversity came into the picture long ago. It was a hallmark of modern Western society, long before postmodernity had come about. Yet religious pluralization and individualization may still be more than the familiar religious diversity that in a Western context was often really some kind of Christian diversity in that the different churches, denominations, and groups still wanted to be Christian, even if in different ways. This is no longer the case. Today's religious diversity goes far beyond Christianity. It includes non-Christian religions as well as nonreligious worldviews. Consequently, finding a shared basis for common values has become increasingly difficult.

Finally, turning to the church, the postmodern life cycle also holds important challenges. The traditional churches especially seem to be faced with enormous difficulties of staying in touch with the lives of those living in postmodernity. Maybe it would be even more accurate to say that the real difficulty lies in how postmodern individuals may become convinced that staying affiliated with a religious institution is still worthwhile. What exactly is the meaning of the gospel vis-à-vis

the many other religious and nonreligious convictions that have become available? Is there any reason to prefer the Christian tradition over others? And what does this tradition mean for the life cycle—the postmodern life cycle as it is experienced and shaped today? Unless the church is able to find viable and convincing answers to such questions, its future is quite uncertain.

Obviously, the postmodern life cycle holds many challenges—challenges for the church, for society, and for the individual person. How are we to deal with these challenges? Let me conclude this introductory chapter with some comments on the procedure that I want to pursue in the following chapters and on what the reader may expect from the analyses in this book.

Two Ways of Approaching Postmodernity

There are many different ways in which the topic of postmodernity can be approached. Philosophers and social analysts speak of postmodernity, and so do journalists, politicians, economists, and many others.¹⁸ My own perspective is theological; or, to be more precise, it is focused on practical theology. And since this perspective is in need of explanation, it seems helpful to introduce readers in this introduction not only to the kind of questions that I will take up in the following chapters, but to also include some initial remarks on how I want to address these questions. In other words, I will be using a specific approach or methodology, which must be introduced to the readers.

Without making this explicit so far, I have already made use of this approach or methodology. Especially in the section on changes of family life, I was trying to begin with the actual experience of contemporary people, including their memories and their impressions, for example, from family albums and from the photographs collected in them. Sometimes this kind of procedure—taking today's experiences and situations as a starting point—is considered the methodology of practical theology. It may be called a *methodology from below*.

Such a methodology from below does not approach postmodernity in terms of philosophical concepts and definitions. It does not take a conceptual comparison between premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity as its starting point in order to then apply such concepts deductively to the praxis of social and Christian life. According to a widespread assumption, a deductive approach or *methodology from above* would be closer to philosophical or systematic theology.¹⁹ The strength of the deductive approach is conceptual clarity; its weakness is its relatively abstract character, which can imply

distance to contemporary experience and to the praxis of the church. For the inductive approach of practical theology, the opposite can be said. It is close to today's world and to the praxis of the church, but it may be lacking conceptual clarity. Contemporary experiences and situations are often opaque, multifaceted, and, in any case, ambivalent.

So there are potential dangers and shortcomings in either approach. Therefore, practical theology should not be identified with a methodology from below, at least not in a naïve sense of only looking at experiences and situations without making use of theoretical frameworks or concepts. Rather, in my understanding, practical theology must indeed take the experience of today's people as seriously as possible. At the same time, this experience may not even be understood if we do not have eyes to see and ears to hear—or, speaking less metaphorically, if we do not have theories, concepts, and categories that enable us to make sense of what contemporary people tell us. To make sense of something always implies becoming aware of differences and making distinctions. Otherwise, everything will just look the same. This is why practical theology is in need of concepts and categories as much as any other theoretical approach.

Take the scenes of family life rendered above as an example: In order to make sense of what these scenes and situations contain, I soon had to apply concepts of different historical times, and I had to become clear about what is real in them rather than ideal or even religious. So working from experience also requires conceptual tools and theoretical clarity. The approach of practical theology cannot be based on making do without conceptual distinctions. What makes it different from most approaches in systematic theology or philosophy, however, is its continuous and intentional attempt to stay close to people's experiences. Addressing the life cycle is a good example of this procedure. An analysis of the postmodern life cycle that does justice to the criteria of practical theology can only be developed in close contact and dialogue with contemporary experiences, which is not always the case with corresponding analyses from systematic theology.²⁰ But such an analysis also includes the tasks of working with different models of the life cycle and of evaluating these models.

However, this is still a very general statement. Beyond such reflections on methodology and practical theology in general, we have to be aware of the special nature of our topic—the postmodern life cycle. Clearly, the choice of a certain methodology must be in accordance with the subject we want to address. In a preliminary way, we may say that it is characteristic of the postmodern situation that, by its very nature, this situation escapes all clear-cut conceptual

frameworks. As it is repeated over and over again in the literature, there is no consensual definition of postmodernity,²¹ at least not so far, and possibly there will never be one since the character of postmodernity contradicts the intention of such definitions. If this is true, the way in which the postmodern life cycle is addressed must be reflective of this situation. It must take the fluid character of postmodernity seriously, not only as a specific topic or content but also in terms of the methods used in approaching this topic. What does this mean for the analysis in the chapters to follow?

Since we cannot presuppose what is meant by the postmodern life cycle, we have to make sure that we will at least be able to find out what it is. And since we have a special interest in the experience of contemporary people as well as in the praxis of the church, we must have a constant eye on including these perspectives as much as possible. In the light of these needs, I have arranged the five chapters that make up the body of this book as probes of five stages or sections of the life cycle: childhood, youth, postadolescence, adulthood, and old age.

When I lecture on these topics, people sometimes raise the question of whether these different ages even still exist in postmodernity and if these traditional designations still make sense. I think this question is very much to the point. If we want to become clear about the postmodern life cycle, we will be better off not presupposing any of the traditional understandings. And this is exactly what I mean by calling the chapters below my "probes." I will not presuppose that these ages still exist or that they have only changed in content. Instead, I want to use them as test cases in order to find out how the traditional understandings and views of these ages have been affected by postmodernity.

It is for this reason that I have chosen a certain format to use in these chapters. In each case, I will start by asking, with respect to one particular segment of the life cycle, (1) about its once *modern understanding*, which now has become the traditional understanding. In a further step, I will ask (2) about the *changes* that may be observed when we compare this "modern" life cycle with today's experience in childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. Readers may have noticed that I have just left out postadolescence, which I mention above as one of my test cases. The reason for not mentioning postadolescence here has to do with the special nature of this age. This period of the life cycle does not exist in the modern understanding. The classic view sees people moving from adolescence into adulthood, with nothing else between these two ages than a short

and more or less successful transition. So postadolescence needs a different approach that is in line with the special nature of this age. Throughout all chapters, and with respect to the modern life cycle as well as with today's situation, my emphasis will be (3) on the challenges for religion in general and, more specifically, for the Christian faith. Based on these chapters, we will also be in the position to ask, in a third step within each chapter, how *theology* and the *church* may respond critically and constructively to the challenges posed by the postmodern situation. In all of this, I will try to avoid all nostalgia for the past but also the naïve optimism that confuses postmodernism with paradise. The hermeneutics of suspicion will be applied to both, to modernity as well as to postmodernity.

My three-step procedure obviously depends on a comparison between the modern and the postmodern life cycle. For this comparison, I will draw upon one of the most influential models of the life cycle—the model of Erik H. Erikson. Erikson developed his model in various publications beginning in the 1950s.²² It became influential in many fields within the social sciences but also in practical theology. Comparing Erikson's model with today's experiences is therefore of special interest, not only in terms of testing out the contemporary usefulness of this model but also for examining its meaning and use in practical theology.

I will draw upon Erikson's model mostly as a backdrop for comparisons between the modern (now traditional) life cycle on the one hand and the postmodern life cycle on the other. So this is not a book on Erikson.²³ But the following chapters can be read as a commentary on some of his ideas from today's perspective.

According to the plan of this book, chapters 2 and 3 as well as chapters 5 and 6 will roughly follow the same procedure of looking at one segment of the life cycle by sequentially using three different lenses: *modernity*, *postmodernity*, *responses of church and theology*. This implies that there will be a strong emphasis on the empirical description of today's experiences, and this will include constant reference to the social sciences. Chapter 4 deals with postadolescence as a new stage of the life cycle. The last chapter (chapter 7), however, will be different. It will bring into focus another question that I consider decisive in our grappling with postmodernity—the question of a theology of the life cycle.

Asking about a theology of the life cycle implies that, in the last chapter, we change our perspective. If the bulk of this book takes our contemporary situation as the starting point and views theology and the church in a responding role (although never only by adaptation,

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but always critically and constructively), the last chapter will try out an alternative approach. Here, theological perspectives will be used as challenges for the contemporary situation, thus making explicit what is true implicitly for all of my considerations. I am not advocating an adaptive theology that sees its main task to be current, fashionable, or attractive to those living in postmodernity. Rather, even in making the contemporary situation the starting point, I am inviting readers to be involved in a critical evaluation of this situation including its religious and theological implications and also including the critical potential that is inherent to the Christian tradition.

This brings us to a last point that must be mentioned in this introductory chapter. The study of the postmodern life cycle and of its religious implications is necessarily an interdisciplinary endeavor. It must bring into dialogue different academic disciplines: psychology, philosophy, sociology, and theology, to only mention the most important ones. This kind of dialogue is another characteristic of practical theology as I understand it. And it is also a task that is especially important today because so many students of the human life cycle show no interest in religion. One example of this neglect is the otherwise brilliant study *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* by Robert Kegan, which does not include religion among the demands studied.²⁴ When I called this introductory chapter *Religious Demands of Postmodern Life*, I actually had in mind the need to start a critical and constructive dialogue with such authors and to complete their accounts of modern and postmodern life. My whole book can be read as an attempt to open this dialogue.

CHAPTER 2

Born into a Plural World

Growing Up between Multicultural Richness and Religious Homelessness

Numerous accounts of childhood and of childhood religion have been published over the last decades.¹ The changing shape of childhood is of special concern for parents and educators as well as for all those who are worried about the future of Western culture and societies. Philosophers of education have pointed out the special value of childhood for education and learning of all kinds. Psychologists have offered their insights on how childhood becomes, for better or worse, the destiny for many or most people in adulthood. Theologians and pastoral counselors have had to learn how to listen for the hidden impact of childhood experiences on the religious life of adults. Currently, media researchers are cautioning the public that what used to be known as “childhood” is actually under siege by the still growing influence of an increasing number of media that are making their way into the child’s home. It is no surprise that Neil Postman’s book on *The Disappearance of Childhood* has become an international bestseller.² Parents, educators, and theologians alike are highly concerned about the future of childhood.

There are many reasons to be interested in what being a child means today and how the contemporary experience of childhood influences the religious life of children. The present chapter, however, is not just another consideration of such general observations or worries. Rather, it follows the specific interest in the postmodern life

Notes

Introduction

¹To mention only a few of their publications: Richard R. Osmer, *A Teachable Spirit: Recovering the Teaching Office in the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990); Don S. Browning, *Generative Men: Psychoanalytic Perspectives* (New York: Delta, 1975); idem, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); James W. Fowler, *Maturing the New Creation: Stages of Faith and the Public Church* (San Francisco: Harper/San Francisco, 1991); idem, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

²Three of the chapters of the book have been published in a preliminary form elsewhere. See Friedrich Schweitzer, "Religious Affiliation and Disaffiliation in Late Adolescence and Early Adulthood: The Impact of a Neglected Period of Life," in *Joining and Leaving Religion: Research Perspectives*, ed. Leslie J. Francis and Yaacov J. Katz (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000), 87–101; idem, "Church, Individual Religion, Public Responsibility: Images of Faith between Modern and Postmodern Adulthood," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 21 (2000): 287–300; idem, "Practical Theology and Postmodern Life: Do We Need a New Paradigm?" *International Journal of Practical Theology* 5 (2001): 169–83.

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¹See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984).

²Deutsches Jugendinstitut, ed., *Was für Kinder. Aufwachen in Deutschland. Ein Handbuch* (Munich: Kösel, 1993), 62–72.

³This notion has been introduced in this sense by modern systems theory; see Niklas Luhmann and Karl-Eberhard Schorr, *Reflexionsprobleme im Erziehungssystem* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1979), 277ff., especially in regard to modern education.

⁴See Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992).

⁵See, for example, Werner Helsper, "Das postmoderne Selbst – ein neuer Subjekt- und Jugend-Mythos? Reflexionen anhand religiöser jugendlicher Orientierungen," in *Identitätstheorie heute. Klassische und aktuelle Perspektiven der Identitätsforschung*, ed. Heiner Kupp and Renate Höfer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 174–206.

⁶Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Was kommt nach der Familie? Einblicke in neue Lebensformen* (Munich: Beck, 1998), 17.

⁷Harvey Cox, *Secular City: Urbanization and Secularization in Theological Perspective*, (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

⁸Harvey Cox, *Religion in the Secular City: Toward a Postmodern Theology* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984).

⁹For a discussion, see Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

¹⁰For the development of church membership in the United States, see Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987); Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); for Germany, see Klaus Engelhardt et al., eds., *Fremde Heimat Kirche. Die dritte EKD – Erhebung über Kirchenmitgliedschaft* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1997).

¹¹See, for example, Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: Harper/San Francisco, 2001). For an earlier

and more popular account, see Malise Ruthven, *The Divine Supermarket: Shopping for God in America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1989).

¹²Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, New York: Anchor, 1979).

¹³For a helpful introduction, see Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage, 1974), 65ff.

¹⁴José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994); Peter Berger, *Religion and Globalization* (London: Sage, 1994); see also Berger, *Desecularization*.

¹⁵Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

¹⁶Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992); Beyer, *Religion and Globalization*; Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

¹⁷For a good collection, see Kieran Flanagan and Peter C. Jupp, eds., *Postmodernity, Sociology and Religion* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996).

¹⁸Helpful summaries may be found in David Harvey, *The Postmodern Condition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Wolfgang Iser, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne* (Weinheim: VCH, 1988).

¹⁹For a discussion on methodology, see David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, new ed. 1996); Don S. Browning, ed., *Practical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983); idem, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); Friedrich Schweitzer and Johannes A. van der Ven, eds., *Practical Theology – International Perspectives* (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1999).

²⁰To mention just one example, see Anthony C. Tiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). He is interested in questions similar to mine. His approach, however, is fairly different. As a systematic theologian, he focuses his study on the philosophical and theological tradition without special reference to contemporary life or the life cycle as the background of the "postmodern self."

²¹See Harvey, *Postmodern Condition*, and Welsch, *Moderne*.

²²For a detailed account, see Lawrence Jacob Friedmann, *Identity's Architect: A Biography of Erik H. Erikson* (New York: Scribner, 1999).

²³For the best accounts on Erikson and religion, see J. Eugene Wright, *Erikson: Identity and Religion* (New York: Seabury, 1982); Heity Zock, *A Psychology of Ultimate Concern: Erik H. Erikson's Contribution to the Psychology of Religion* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1990).

²⁴Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994). Kegan mentions religion only in passing (pp. 266ff.).

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¹For the following see, for example, the impressive bibliography compiled in the volume by Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 490–97 on "History of Childhood and Contemporary Issues Regarding Children."

²Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Delacorte, 1982).

³For a detailed description and for references to the sources, see Friedrich Schweitzer, *Die Religion des Kindes. Zur Problemgeschichte einer religionspädagogischen Grundfrage* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1992); see also the various historical chapters in Bunge, *The Child*.

⁴Schweitzer, *Die Religion des Kindes*, with detailed references.

⁵Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, *Wie Gertrud ihre Kinder lehrte, ein Versuch, den Müttern Anleitung zu geben, die Kinder selbst zu unterrichten in Briefen von Heinrich Pestalozzi* (1801), *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 13 (Berlin/Leipzig: 1927), 353.