
EPILOGUE

Still a Life Cycle?

At the end of this book, I want to return to a question that first came up in the introduction and that readers may feel deserves a still more explicit and definitive answer than I have given so far. This book carries the title, *The Postmodern Life Cycle*. Its focus is on the many changes of the various stages of the modern life cycle, in childhood and adolescence, but also in adulthood. We have observed far-reaching transformations that clearly affect the traditional understanding of such ages or stages. And we have also seen that new stages have emerged, such as postadolescence between adolescence and adulthood, and the Third Age between modern adulthood and old age. Does all of this lead to the conclusion that we should drop the whole idea or image of a life cycle in order to replace it with a symbol of discontinuity and pluriformity?

Considering the empirical evidence compiled in the chapters above, one could probably justify this conclusion. Yet before accepting this point of view and before calling postmodernity the end of the outdated model of the life cycle, we have to consider another question in order to avoid premature consequences that are based on mistaken assumptions about earlier times. Is it really true that modernity did, or at least could, offer the experience of a life as a continuous and meaningful pattern? Did modernity, in fact, give people the opportunity for wholeness and completion? Posing such questions almost means answering them. It has become commonplace and all too well-known that modernity was anything but an ideal time for experiences of meaningful wholeness and completion. Rather, from the beginning, many people living in modernity were never given a chance to really aspire, let alone achieve, for example, the ideals of

adulthood described above. Autonomy, rationality, financial independence, careers, and professional success were never an option for many people because they were lacking personal abilities or the appropriate social and financial resources to proceed in this direction. And in addition to this, we can learn, for example, from much of twentieth-century literature how far away people's real experiences were from the ideals of wholeness, completion, and a meaningful life. Just think of the characters literally beset with the threat of absurdity that are so vividly described in the novels of many twentieth-century authors—from Franz Kafka to Jean-Paul Sartre or from Hermann Hesse to Douglas Coupland. Most often, the lives of their characters end up in shambles. If anything, it is the image of fragments that fits their life but never that of a rounded figure ("cycle") or gestalt. On the whole, it seems fair to say that wholeness and completion were no less rare exceptions in modernity than they obviously are in postmodernity. Postmodern interpreters have, perhaps, become more outspoken about this experience, but this does not mean that things have really changed with respect to the experience of failing to live up to the expectations of wholeness and completion.

But what are we to conclude from this observation? What does it mean for the idea or image of the life cycle if it was no less removed from reality in modernity than it is in postmodernity? In this situation, two rather contradictory conclusions appear to be plausible.

(1) According to the first of them, we could say that postmodernity has finally made us aware of what always has been true, that is, of the highly ideological and distortive nature of ideals and images that society or religion imposes on life. In chapter 1, we had occasion to consider different images of the family, which can be interpreted in this sense of society valuing or even prescribing certain models of family life and making people adapt to such expectations. Additional examples examined in chapter 5 concern the modern image of the adult as an autonomous, rational, and independent individual or, in chapter 6, the image of senile person in old age. In such cases, the postmodern critique of ideology does indeed apply. Ideological images contained in the model of the life cycle must be exposed and changed. And this kind of critical analysis has to be accepted as an important step toward more humane forms of life. To the degree that distortive ideals can be challenged, the realities of life receive a better chance of being accepted rather than having to be disguised for the sake of social acceptability. This has to be appreciated as one of the liberating experiences connected to postmodernity. And to the degree that the idea of a life cycle draws upon such mistaken ideals, we have to

challenge and to criticize this idea. A critical view of the model of the life cycle should therefore remain with us in the future as well.

(2) Yet what comes after having become critical of the existing models of the life cycle? Can we really live without having some image of wholeness and completion? Would this not amount to giving ourselves up completely to the unpredictable vicissitudes of postmodern flexibility and discontinuity? As we have also come to see in the chapters of the present study, this kind of life is not in line with the visions of Christian theology. This is the point at which the second possible reaction to the realization of the unreal character of the life cycle comes into play, that is, the possibility of viewing the life cycle as a vision or longing, which cannot be judged by only comparing it to what life really looks like at a given time. The vision or idea of the life cycle is as far away from the modern experience as it is from the postmodern one. In either case, the reality of people's lives was and still is quite different from what this vision entails for it. But to the degree that this vision is expressive of people's longings for a meaningful life that arrives, at least to some degree, at something like wholeness and completion, it cannot be criticized for not being in line with reality. Such criticism would only be legitimate to the degree that the idea of the life cycle becomes itself one-sided and oppressive, for example, by burdening people with the expectation of having to meet the expectations of financial success. But in themselves, ideals or visions can never be criticized for their distance from reality. Otherwise, they could never fulfill their role of challenging reality and of keeping alive the hope for a better life or for a different reality.

Viewing the life cycle as such a vision, which keeps alive our hopes for a better reality, again makes clear how important it is to consider it from the perspective of a theology of the life cycle. If it is true that the life cycle mainly confronts us with ideal images, longings, and normative visions, a theology is nothing foreign to this idea. Rather than being a theological intrusion into the field of the social sciences or of psychology, such a theology operates exactly at the same level as these nontheological disciplines.

Finally, calling the life cycle a vision does not mean that the differences between modernity and postmodernity do not matter anymore. While it is true that the model of the life cycle has never described a reality in the strict empirical sense, and while it is also true that, by their very nature, visions always transcend reality, modernity and postmodernity still produce their own kinds of specific contradictions to the ideal model of the life cycle. This is why we do

not need only a theology of the life cycle but also a theology of the *postmodern life cycle*. And only by looking into the realities of people's contemporary experiences can church and theology become able to face up to the challenges of postmodern life.