

the Postmodern Life Cycle

**Challenges for Church
and Theology**

Friedrich L. Schweitzer



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P R E S S

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Introduction

The postmodern life cycle is a topic that leads into controversies and contradictions. It is connected to deep feelings of worry and fear but also to new beginnings, hopes, and longings. It is a topic that is closely related to the work of ministers, counselors, and educators who want to address the needs of contemporary people and who want to offer support and guidance to them. All of them have to confront the challenges of the changing shape of the life cycle and the experiences of personal discontinuity in a time that has been called “postmodernity” exactly because of its discontinuous character.

Beyond professional interests and needs, any reference to the life cycle and to its religious dimension in the first place rings a bell with individual persons who, at different points of their lives and with different tasks in front of them, are wondering about the meaning of their lives. The image of a cycle is attractive and comforting. It connotes a circular form—a rounded shape that can symbolize wholeness, completion, and fulfillment. But, does this kind of circle still exist? Is it still possible to reach this kind of wholeness?

Some readers may feel challenged by the inner contradiction of the title of this book, *The Postmodern Life Cycle*. They may object to this title by pointing out that postmodernity means that everything that appeared to be stable, closed up, and fixed for good now has become open, flexible, and ready for redefinition or reconstruction. Is the reference to the postmodern life cycle a contradiction in terms? Or, not much better, is it expressive of some kind of nostalgia that is hoping to escape the pressures of postmodernity by focussing on the individual life cycle? Of course, it is also possible to read this title from the opposite point of view—the perspective not of nostalgia but of a plea for postmodern transformation. From this point of view, the reference to the postmodern life cycle could mean that we should adapt ourselves to postmodernity by accepting the biographies it offers to us and by becoming truly postmodern ourselves.

The more I became interested in such puzzling questions about the relationship between postmodernity and the life cycle, the more of a surprise it was to find out that these questions have not been treated to any major degree in the literature. Especially in practical theology and Christian education, the increasingly important concern

about the changing life cycle in the praxis of the church has not received sufficient attention in corresponding research and publications. But, as I want to show in this book, the postmodern life cycle is itself a theological issue in that it rests upon images and expectations that include a religious dimension. What kind of religion is really guiding the postmodern life cycle? What kind of religious images does it incorporate, and how are we to judge these images from the perspective of theology? What is the contribution of theology and the church in a situation of radical change and pluriformity?

The first occasion for putting my thoughts and research results on such questions together in a more comprehensive manner came to me through Princeton Theological Seminary's unexpected invitation and honor to deliver the Stone Lectures in 2000. I gladly accepted this invitation and ventured to call the lecture series "The Postmodern Life Cycle." With this, the idea for the present book was born. Just like the Princeton lectures, this book is based on my work of twenty-five years of studying and researching the human life cycle with a special emphasis on religion in various stages of the life cycle—especially, religion in childhood, in adolescence, but also in adulthood.

The stimulus for writing this book came from the United States, and some of my studying and working on this topic also took place there, first at Harvard Divinity School and later at Princeton's Center of Theological Inquiry. At the same time, this book also clearly includes a European perspective in that I am teaching at the University of Tübingen in Germany. Maybe this kind of background may itself be considered somewhat postmodern. In any case, I take it to be expressive of a new international and dialogical practical theology that no longer limits itself to one particular national context. More and more, we are dealing with challenges that are not limited to one particular country or to one geographical context. Globalization is probably the clearest example for this, but postmodernity is no less an international phenomenon. So, I hope that my attempt to bring North American and European perspectives into dialogue with each other will prove to be helpful in deciphering the challenges of the postmodern life cycle.

Finally, this book has not been written for a strictly professional or narrow academic audience. While my considerations and analyses are based on academic research and not merely on personal impressions, I have tried to make my arguments as accessible as possible for readers outside the university and beyond the pastoral profession. In this sense, I am trying to follow the lead of a public

theology that wants to make theological resources available to a broad audience by addressing issues of public concern. At the same time, I am deeply interested in making church and theology aware of the far-reaching challenges that the postmodern life cycle holds for their future work. This is also the reason for my attempt to develop consequences and practical perspectives for theology and the church throughout this book.

This book is dedicated to Princeton Theological Seminary and to its wonderful staff and students. Their questions and comments have been highly stimulating for my work on this project. In addition to this, I want to give special thanks to three American colleagues whose friendship has been of great value for my studies resulting in this book—Richard Osmer of Princeton Theological Seminary, Don S. Browning of the University of Chicago, and James W. Fowler of Emory University. Their publications have been of indispensable help for me and should be consulted by interested readers far beyond the various citations in my footnotes.¹ Without our joint efforts toward international cooperation in practical theology, this book would certainly not have been written.² Finally, I have to acknowledge that this book could also not have been written without the continuous support and encouragement of my wife, Marianne Martin. Should readers find the book readable or easy to understand, this would certainly be due to the critical questions that she, as the first reader, raised for me.