

Practical Theology and Postmodern Life. Do We Need a New Paradigm?¹

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1. Open Questions

It seems fair to say that, on the whole, practical theology has not fully dealt with the issue of postmodernity.² In part, especially in Germany and possibly in most of western Europe, this is due to the second thoughts which have been raised with the idea of postmodernity. Does postmodernity really exist? Will the concept of postmodernity help us in diagnosing contemporary culture or is it actually misleading and at best a shaky category? While the idea of postmodernity is considered vague or even depressive and nostalgic, concepts of modernity and modernization still exert a continuing influence on this side of the Atlantic. In the United States, however, the concept of postmodernity seems much more accepted, and a considerable number of theological studies have taken it up, most notably in exegesis and in systematic theology.³ Yet even in the U.S. discussion, at least to my knowledge, no major study on practical theology and postmodernity has been published yet.

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- 1 In a different version, this essay was originally delivered as part of the 1999-2000 Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in February 2000. The title of the lecture series was *The Postmodern Life Cycle. Perspectives for A New Practical Theology*. The other lectures addressed childhood, adolescence, and adulthood in a postmodern situation. The complete lecture series will be published by Chalice Press in 2002. The lecture on adulthood has been published in the *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* (fall 2000).
 - 2 The major exception in Germany is Albrecht Grözinger, *Die Kirche – ist sie noch zu retten? Anstiftungen für das Christentum in postmoderner Gesellschaft*, Gütersloh (Gütersloher Verlagshaus) 1998; for an overview on the German literature see Wolfgang Steck, *Praktische Theologie. Horizonte der Religion, Konturen des neuzeitlichen Christentums, Strukturen der religiösen Lebenswelt*. Vol. I, Stuttgart (Kohlhammer) 2000, 209-216.
 - 3 Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation. The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*, Minneapolis (Fortress) 1993 or the collections David Ray Griffin/William A. Beardslee/Joe Holland, *Varieties of Postmodern Theology*, Albany (State University of New York Press) 1989, Terrence W. Tilley (ed.), *Postmodern Theologies. The Challenge of Religious Diversity*, New York (Maryknoll) 1995. To mention a few examples from Germany: Bernd Beuscher, *Positives Paradox. Entwurf einer neostrukturalistischen Religionspädagogik*, Wien (Passagen) 1993, Hermann Kochanek (ed.), *Religion und Glaube in der Postmoderne*, Nettetal (Steyler) 1996.

The hesitancy to be observed with practical theology vis-à-vis postmodernity may also be due to the empirical aspects connected to this concept. In this respect, the situation appears quite unclear. Philosophical analyses like, for example, the accounts offered by David Harvey⁴ or Wolfgang Welsch⁵ have been widely accepted as standard views on postmodernity. But are these views also valid empirically in respect to contemporary forms of everyday life? May we presuppose, for example, that the stages of the life cycle have actually changed according to the expectations formulated in philosophy? In general, practical theologians tend to be hesitant to base their understandings and their models of praxis on theoretical and philosophical concepts which have not been established on empirical grounds. And given the fact that some social scientists⁶ still consider it unlikely that a postmodern self has actually replaced the modern self, there are good reasons for practical theology to take a more guarded position on the issue of postmodernity. In any case, a more empirical and inductive approach is needed if practical theology is to address the demands of postmodern life.

Yet at the same time, the issue of postmodernity holds a special challenge to practical theology which, if taken seriously, actually makes postmodernity a most pressing issue for practical theology. If it is true, as it is often stated in textbooks, that practical theology as an academic discipline is a child of modernity, then one must wonder if the advent of postmodernity implies that there is no more need for this kind of endeavor. Does the advent of postmodernity, if it exists, mark the end of practical theology? Or, if not, does it call for a new paradigm for practical theology? And if so, how can this child of modernity come of age in postmodern times?

In my own approach which, in the present article, can only be demonstrated in an abbreviated manner,⁷ I attempt to combine both questions mentioned above by asking about the changes to be observed empirically with the contemporary life cycle and by asking what these changes imply for practical theology. In respect to practical theology, the focus on the life

4 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford (Basil Blackwell) 1989.

5 Wolfgang Welsch, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, Weinheim (VCH) 1988.

6 Werner Helsper, *Das "postmoderne Selbst" – ein neuer Subjekt- und Jugend-Mythos? Reflexionen anhand religiöser jugendlicher Orientierungen*. In: Heiner Keupp/Renate Höfer (eds.), *Identitätsarbeit heute. Klassische und aktuelle Perspektiven der Identitätsforschung*, Frankfurt am Main (Suhrkamp) 1997, 174-206.

7 For a fuller picture see the forthcoming book mentioned in note 1 and my earlier books Friedrich Schweitzer, *Lebensgeschichte und Religion. Religiöse Entwicklung und Erziehung im Kindes- und Jugendalter*, München (Kaiser) 1987, *Die Suche nach eigenem Glauben. Einführung in die Religionspädagogik des Jugendalters*, Gütersloh (Gütersloher Verlagshaus) 1996, *Das Recht des Kindes auf Religion*, Gütersloh (Gütersloher Verlagshaus) 2000.

cycle is of special interest. To make the life cycle a central topic of practical theology or to develop a practical theology along the stages of the life cycle may be considered a typically modern approach. In this view, the life of the autonomous individual determines the horizon which modern practical theology must presuppose.⁸ Consequently, considering the relationship between the changes of the life cycle and practical theology may help us in gaining a better understanding of the current situation of practical theology.

In addition to this, to start with the changes of the life cycle is to work with an inductive approach to the question of postmodernity. It is of course impossible to approach phenomena like postmodernity in an exclusively empirical manner. Without concepts and categories we will not be able to make sense of what we observe in respect to contemporary experiences. In this sense, my approach clearly remains informed by the philosophical discussion. Yet by asking about postmodern life and about the postmodern life cycle rather than exclusively remaining at the level of philosophical analysis, we may at least get closer to the actual experiences and concerns of contemporary people.

In the following, I will focus on three questions: First, I will address the question of postmodern life by looking at the changing shape of the contemporary life cycle. Second, I want to consider the role of practical theology in the transition between modernity and postmodernity. In a final section, I will set forth the demand for a theology of the life cycle which I consider one of the central needs of a practical theology confronting postmodernity. My argument represents a circular movement. It starts with the impact and the challenges which the postmodern life cycle poses for church and theology. Here, the emphasis is on *demands on theology*. In the last section of this article, I want to turn this perspective around in order to make theology the starting point. Therefore the focus will be on *theological demands on postmodern life*. We must ask what challenges postmodernity holds for theology and the church but we must also be clear about the demands and challenges which theology holds for postmodern life. The experience of postmodern life is ambivalent. It holds promises and perils alike. Therefore, critical practical discernment is needed.

2. Understanding the Postmodern Life Cycle

As mentioned above, for at least some social scientists it is an open question if there is enough grounds for speaking of a postmodern life cycle. According to those analysts, it is not enough just to look at the

8 For a discussion see Wilhelm Gräß, *Lebensgeschichten, Lebensentwürfe, Sinndeutungen. Eine Praktische Theologie gelebter Religion*, Gütersloh (Gütersloher Verlagshaus) 1998.

philosophical notions of postmodernity and to then assume that people's lives or life cycles will have changed more or less in accordance with the theoretical assumptions on postmodernity. Theory and praxis do not coincide. Even in postmodernity, life is more complex and more varied than even the most pluralist theory may assume.

Taking the caveats against premature assumptions of a postmodern life cycle seriously it seems appropriate to approach the topic inductively, by contrasting the ideal type description of the *modern life cycle* (which, from a postmodern perspective, has to be considered the *traditional* life cycle) with the changes and challenges of the *contemporary* – possibly *post-modern* – *situation*. This kind of comparison will at least give us an idea of the empirical aspects of postmodern life.

It is of course quite impossible to describe the changes related to the contemporary life cycle here in any detail. So I will limit myself to a general picture of the situation. In my understanding, this situation is characterized by far-reaching changes in the meaning of all parts or stages of the life cycle. While we may still speak of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, these terms have clearly assumed a new meaning. At the same time, it is obvious that new and additional periods of the life cycle have emerged, demanding to be acknowledged in their own right: postadolescence, midlife crises, and the various sub-phases of old age only to mention some of the more well-known examples. Whether in the new meaning of the traditional terms or in the emergence of new stages, it can hardly be doubted that we are in fact observing changes of the life cycle which may not easily be captured with the traditional understanding of the modern life cycle. The idea of the modern life cycle, for example, in the sense of Erik H. Erikson still is a backdrop for helpful comparisons but it may not be used anymore as an accurate description or as a norm for today's experience.

In order to make this more concrete, let us have a closer look at childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.⁹ All these stages of the life cycle are not simply changing by degree. Rather they have lost some of the key characteristics by which they used to be defined:

- *Childhood* no longer is the relatively quiet time of stability to be experienced and enjoyed in a stable family. Rather, the changes of the family have made childhood a time with many transitions and with ever new pressures arising from early on. Literally as well as metaphorically speaking, being a child no longer means living in the safe haven of a home to which one will always look back as the true anchor of one's personal identity.

⁹ The literature pertaining to the changes mentioned in the following, is way too extensive in order to be footnoted here. My books (mentioned n. 7) include many references which cannot be repeated here.

- Similarly, *adolescence* has ceased to be the time for a life-long commitment to a clear-cut identity and to a worldview which would provide a deep sense of direction in life. In many cases, the experience of being a plural self and of living with plural identities has come to replace such traditional commitments. Plurality has become the inescapable condition for today's adolescent.
- And even *adulthood* which once, even in modern psychology, appeared as the longest and most continuous period within the life cycle, has come into question. None of the modern criteria of being "adult" may be taken for granted any more. Neither autonomy nor rationality or progressive achievement are accepted as true descriptions of adulthood any more. And at the same time, global economic developments including the media even threaten the status of adulthood itself by not allowing for financial independence or by redefining the value of traditional knowledge which used to be one of the defining privileges of adulthood.

Given such changes which have been established by numerous detailed studies, the question of the postmodern life cycle may receive at least a somewhat clearer answer. It is true that there are far-reaching changes in the human life cycle. And since these are changes which are clearly different from the modern idea of the life cycle, there are indeed good reasons for speaking of a *postmodern* life cycle. But in making this statement, the objections against some understandings of postmodernity may also not be overlooked. One of the main objections concerns the identification of postmodernity by what is lost in the transition from modernity. Often, especially in theology and the church, the loss of a unifying center of norms and values is deplored, and the breakdown of all "master stories" (Lyotard) is seen as a threat to the proclamation of the Gospel. Yet there is no reason to think of the contemporary situation only as a time of loss, whether in terms of the individual person or in respect to church and theology. In many ways, church and theology are facing new challenges, and the postmodern life cycle certainly is not simply better than its earlier precursors. Yet postmodernity also entails new chances and new potentials for human life which may be liberated from the narrow visions of rational autonomy and of progressive achievement.

So in some sense, it may be helpful to consider the different terminology which analysts like Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck¹⁰ have suggested in place of the concept of postmodernity. According to them, we should speak of *second modernity* – a modernity which may also be called *reflexive modernity* in that it includes, even in calling itself modernity, the critical awareness of the shortcomings and of the dark sides of modernity.

10 Ulrich Beck/Anthony Giddens/Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernisierung. Eine Kontroverse*, Frankfurt am Main (Suhrkamp) 1996.

As opposed to some of the postmodern worldviews, the critical awareness of reflexive modernity is to prevent any kind of depressive nostalgia for the allegedly better times of modernity or even premodernity. Rather, the concept of “reflexive modernization” is to serve as a basis for the continued attempt of counteracting and overcoming the flaws of modernity while still holding on to what is worth preserving of modernity. To speak of the *life cycle* in the sense of *reflexive modernity* would then imply to consciously hold on the idea of a good life which is the normative vision built into the modern idea of the life cycle. It would mean to preserve this idea even while realizing, at the same time, that the traditional (i.e., “modern”) notions of identity and autonomy are highly ambivalent and are much too narrow to be the guiding norms for the life cycle in second modernity.

The reflexive and critical perspective on the life cycle is of immediate interest for practical theology. Many or most of the changes to be observed with the contemporary life cycle also refer to religion or at least have religious implications. Starting in early childhood through adolescence and into adulthood, the substructures of religious nurture, development and education are being rearranged. So it is easy to see why, for example, many who work with today’s children, adolescents, or adults in the church or in related fields of education, feel threatened by the far-reaching changes of life structures and orientations. And it is also clear that as the life cycle is changing, the forms of addressing the people who are moving through this life cycle will also have to change. The postmodern life cycle calls for postmodern approaches in the praxis of the church.

What the perspective of a second – *reflexive* – modernity adds to this picture is a critical and constructive perspective with which this situation may be approached. Rather than deploring the losses of postmodernity and rather than becoming desperate with its pluriformities, this perspective may encourage us to ask about the *potentials* of the postmodern life cycle. In my understanding, it must be the task of a contemporary practical theology to become a *practical theology of reflexive modernity* and to serve as a *mediator* and *midwife* to those potentials.

In order to illustrate this understanding, I conclude this section with some remarks concerning the *potentials* connected to the changing shape of *adulthood*.¹¹ Modernity has been especially productive in terms of images of adulthood. In some ways, we may say that modernity itself was closely connected with the proud hope of the Enlightenment, that humanity had finally reached adulthood and maturity. Modern adulthood is often identified with autonomy, independence, and rationality. This understanding also affects religion, which is limited to the role of supporting rational autonomy especially in the realm of ethics. Even more, religion

11 See my article in the Princeton Seminary Bulletin (n.1) for a more extensive statement on adulthood and practical theology.

does not have a proper place in modern adulthood. In the meantime, however, the modern idea of adulthood has itself been challenged as an ideology. It never included those who were prevented from becoming fully autonomous, independent, and rational. In addition to this, the modern understanding of adulthood cannot cover the varieties of postmodern life, whether in terms of the new life styles to be observed today or with the new interest in religion and spirituality connected to postmodernity. Here, with the idea of modern adulthood, the postmodern challenges are by no means only detrimental. Rather, they include potentials which are healthy, and they may provide a new openness at exactly those points where the modern life cycle tended to become suffocating.

3. Practical Theology Between Modernity and Postmodernity

The traditional or more accurately, the original understanding of practical theology as an academic discipline is closely tied to the emergence of modernity in the 18th century. When Friedrich Schleiermacher and his contemporaries designed the project of practical theology as a separate branch or subdiscipline of theology, they worked against the background of the challenges posed by modernity and the Enlightenment. One of the main challenges was to show that religion and the church were not simply remnants of the dark ages of premodernity but that they have a meaningful future role to play.¹² This is why Schleiermacher attempted to show that human existence is incomplete and impoverished if religion is not given its proper place in human life. Moreover he argues that the church may be conceived as an institution for the religious communication needed to enable individual persons to express their religious feelings and, in turn, to be stimulated by the preaching and teaching of the church. In all of this, the main challenge consisted in the sharp tension between the *Christian tradition* on the one hand and *modern culture* on the other. This is why practical theology was designed as a *mediator* – a mediator between tradition and modernity, between religion and rationality, and between the church and the life worlds of modernity.¹³

Given the close relationship between modernity and the emergence of practical theology as a new theological discipline, it is obvious why

12 Schleiermacher's clearest statement on this may be found in his *Speeches on Religion* (1799).

13 Cf. Volker Drehsen, *Neuzeitliche Konstitutionsbedingungen der Praktischen Theologie. Aspekte der theologischen Wende zur sozialkulturellen Lebenswelt christlicher Religion*, 2 Vols., Gütersloh (Gütersloher Verlagshaus) 1988; for the contemporary discussion see Karl Ernst Nipkow/Dietrich Rössler/Friedrich Schweitzer (eds.), *Praktische Theologie und Kultur der Gegenwart. Ein internationaler Dialog*, Gütersloh (Gütersloher Verlagshaus) 1991, Friedrich Schweitzer/Johannes A. van der Ven (eds.), *Practical Theology. International Perspectives*, Frankfurt am Main (Peter Lang) 1999.

postmodernity includes a fundamental challenge for practical theology. If we have actually moved beyond the scope of modernity – and the changes of the modern life cycle may be taken as an empirical indication of this move – the task of mediating between the Christian tradition and modernity inevitably is also affected. This is why the issue of postmodernity is actually so pressing for practical theology. It confronts this discipline with the fundamental question of its future existence and also with the need to reconsider its mediating task.

Is there still a need for mediation between the Christian tradition and contemporary experience? In my understanding, the answer must clearly be ‘yes’. The characteristics of postmodernity which are described in the literature – pluralization, individualization, the end of all “master stories,” etc. – indicate that the move beyond modernity or, to again use this terminology, the arrival of a “second modernity”, does not mean that contemporary culture and society would have returned to the premodern unity of Christianity, culture, and society. Even if our contemporary situation includes a certain return to religion it is not institutionalized religion in the sense of the Christian church. Consequently, the future task of practical theology may still be described as mediation. What is changing is the polarity that makes theological mediation necessary. In my understanding, the task of mediation now refers to the tensions arising in the transition between modernity and postmodernity or between first modernity and second modernity. In this understanding, practical theology as mediator is related to a *temporal* and *cultural* transition from first to second modernity. We are talking about the conflictual sequence of two different epochs or of two different cultures, and the task of practical theology as mediator is to support the church in this transition as well as to offer guidance to a wider public. This task necessarily includes a *social* dimension of practical theology. Given the impact of pluralization, individualization, distance from institutions, etc., practical theology can only do its job by facilitating productive connections between church, individual religion, and the public.

If we consider again, for the sake of being more specific, the changing stages of the life cycle mentioned above it seems obvious to me that practical theology as mediator must tap into what we have called the potentials of postmodernity vis-à-vis the procrustean bed of the modern life cycle. But it has also become clear that we cannot accept, let alone uncritically praise, whatever calls itself postmodern. Rather, we need a careful and critical examination of the diverse changes between modernity and postmodernity in order to identify what may really be called a potential and what rather should be seen as detrimental. To put it into one sentence: *Support for helpful postmodern developments* but also *critical resistance* to what cannot be accepted of postmodernity – this is the substantial work of practical theology as mediator between first and second modernity.

In a further step, this general statement must be related to *religion* – especially to the relationship between church, individual religion, and the public.¹⁴ Again, we encounter an ambivalent situation. Modernity has worked towards separating the different fields of religion. The public was conceived of as secular or, if not so, as undergirded by civil religion. The religion of the individual person was restrained to the private realm (religious privatization). Consequently, the distance between church, the public, and individual life was not only increased empirically but it was turned, at least in part, into a permanent situation guarded by legal as well as political principles. In this view, the public must be secular, the individual persons must keep their religious “preferences” to themselves as long as they are in public, and the church is not to interfere with this situation.

From social scientific as well as from theological analyses of postmodernity it may be seen that the interplay between church, individual religion, and the public does not stay the same with postmodernity. There are new chances for religion to claim a stronger role in public life, for example, through the various political movements that are motivated by religion.¹⁵ Yet, at the same time, it is difficult to see how religion may actually play this role if most religion is more and more individualized and privatized. Also, the position of the church clearly becomes weaker if more and more people see no connection between their personal faith and the teachings of the church. This is why the work of practical theology as mediator must include a social dimension. In being a midwife for the religious potentials of second modernity, it must mediate between church, individual religion, and the public.

In this case, mediation means building connections and making voices heard. As theologians concern themselves with the postmodern life cycle, they are showing a new willingness to listen to the people and to become open for their actual life experiences. This clearly is a first step towards strengthening the relationship between the church and the individual person. The next step will be to devise additional strategies – be it in preaching or teaching, in liturgy or in pastoral care – strategies which address the needs of those who have to find their way through the postmodern life cycle.

In some ways, mediating between the church and the individual person has always been the task of practical theology. The other tension, however – the tension between church and public life or between individual religion and the public – has received far less attention. Yet the task is clear in this respect as well. If the church is to claim a stronger role in public life, it

14 For a more detailed discussion of these different forms of religion see Dietrich Rössler, *Grundriß der Praktischen Theologie*, Berlin/New York (De Gruyter) 1986.

15 Cf. Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago/London (Univ. of Chicago Press) 1994.

must itself become what may be called a *public community* – a community which brings together, in a convincing manner, the strength of forming communal bonds as they arise from a particular faith and from a particular ethos, and the universal responsibility for the common good of all citizens and of all human beings.

To put it into a nutshell: The task of practical theology in its social dimension includes the threefold focus on church, individual religion, and the public as well as on the dynamic interrelationships between all three of them. So practical theology, as I understand it, must be a theological discipline with a theoretical horizon much wider than the traditional definitions of this discipline insinuate by relating it only to pastoral work and the church. I clearly affirm the ecclesial focus of practical theology because religious institutions are necessary. But we must also extend practical theology to refer to individual life and to the role of religion in the public sphere.

If practical theology is to fulfill this task, it is in need of clear theological criteria. These criteria must enable it to critically assess the transitional process from first to second modernity, and they must also offer guidance for the mediating work of practical theology in the dynamic interrelationship of church, individual religion, and the public. In order to show what this means I will again refer to the life cycle by asking how a theological perspective on the life cycle may be articulated.

4. Towards a Theology of the Life Cycle

The step that I want to take in this last section confronts us with a somewhat paradoxical task. On the one hand, in the interest of the criteria mentioned above, theology is to be our starting point – or, more exactly, a theological perspective on the life cycle. Yet on the other hand, such a theological perspective is not readily available. To my knowledge, there is no publication available from systematic theology or from theological ethics which would offer a ‘theology of the life cycle,’ at least not from recent times. Of course, there are accounts from pastoral theology and from Christian education which are dealing with parts or aspects of the life cycle for purposes of counseling and education. But with very few exceptions such as, most notably, James Loder’s book on “Human Development in Theological Perspective,”¹⁶ they do not offer a comprehensive theological perspective on the life cycle as a whole. And even Loder’s approach does not focus on the *postmodern* life cycle, but rather is meant as a critical dialogue with the psychology of human development.

16 James E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit. Human Development in Theological Perspective*, San Francisco (Jossey-Bass) 1998.

Given the enormous attention that the modern life cycle has received in the second half of the 20th century, and given the challenges which postmodernity is setting before us, it is probably not unfair to say that theology has not done its homework in this respect. It is clearly not enough to simply rely on theological doctrines and principles which have not entered the dialogue with the experiences connected to the postmodern life cycle. If theology is to offer guidance and support in the transition from first to second modernity, a theology of the life cycle is an indispensable presupposition for the critical discernment and mediation of practical theology.

So what are we to do in this situation? It is clear what we need but what we need is not available. It will certainly not be possible to fill this gap in the last section of this article, and I will not even try to pretend that I am in the position to offer such a comprehensive model. What is possible, however, is to set forth a number of key points which, in my understanding, identify the decisive issues to be included in a theology of the life cycle. This may give readers at least an idea of what exactly we are looking for and what future tasks may be waiting for theology.

In my understanding, theology brings three comprehensive questions into the discussions on the postmodern life cycle: the question of *faith*, the question of *responsibility*, and the question of *religious communication*. All three questions stand for perspectives or demands that theology raises over and against the postmodern life cycle. At the same time, they may indicate where theological work must go beyond its traditional understanding if it is to be in touch with postmodern life.

Let me start with the question of *faith*. How is this question related to the postmodern life cycle? It has been one the central achievements of practical theology in the second half of the 20th century to identify the images and stories that correlate most exactly with the specific experiences of different stages of the life cycle. From this perspective, we may draw up a correlational chart which looks something like this (the chart on the next page):¹⁷

Now, the task of a theology of the *postmodern* life cycle consists of recasting such correlations in the light of the contemporary changes of the life cycle. How, for example, can we include the experience of a plural self and what are the theological themes that become important in addressing this experience?

Yet as important as this task will be for the future of practical theology, we still must to go one step further. The idea of correlating the Christian tradition with contemporary experiences of the life cycle actually includes

17 The chart is taken from my book "Lebensgeschichte und Religion" (n.7, 188). It synthesizes earlier correlational efforts by authors like John Gleason, Joachim Scharfenberg, Donald Capps, Hans-Jürgen Fraas, J. Eugene Wright, and Peter Biehl. The backdrop for most of these efforts is the life cycle described by Erik H. Erikson whose stages are quoted in the left column of the chart.

<i>Crises of the Life Cycle</i>	<i>Religious/Christian Symbols</i>
basic trust vs. mistrust	the numinous (God, mother, Goddesses), the (lost) paradise and the hope for the kingdom of God
autonomy vs. shame and doubt	good and evil, grace, obedience and exodus, symbols of eating and drinking
initiative vs. guilt	loving and punishing father God, sin and redemption, repentance
industry vs. inferiority	vocation/calling, God's creation and human responsibility, works
identity vs. identity confusion	faith, shared convictions, Gods solidarity (in suffering), alienation and redemption
intimacy vs. isolation	community, themes of Christology
generativity vs. stagnation	creation, vocation/calling care for the future
integrity vs. despair	the holy, the last things

a presupposition which, in postmodernity, no longer may be taken for granted. This presupposition refers to the fundamental question *why* we should even think of such correlations. If postmodernity means the end of all master stories, it could also mean that a theological perspective on the life cycle is simply not needed anymore.

At this point, a theology of the life cycle must go beyond individual correlations and establish itself on the level of fundamental anthropology. In other words, a theology of the life cycle should show that the question of faith is actually built into the human life cycle as such and therefore is not dependent on the experience of modernity. Birth and death, trust and anxiety, autonomy and dependence, identity and the denial of selfhood – all of these experiences are potentially religious experiences. They carry with them a deep demand for ultimate answers – a demand which obviously is not just stated by theologians but which is experienced by many people. Postmodernity may be the end of all master stories but it clearly does not put an end to the questions of faith as they arise from the life cycle.

Summarizing the first task of a theology of the life cycle we may distinguish between two different aspects – on the one hand, to bring into conversation the Christian tradition and the experiences of the postmodern life cycle in the sense of correlation, and, on the other, to show, on the level of fundamental anthropology, how faith and the life cycle belong together even beyond modernity.

The second task of a theology of the life cycle refers to the question of *responsibility* or Christian ethics. Again, we may distinguish between two different aspects or levels at which this question arises. First, there is the level of individual life with the question of how the individual person should live and act. Where Christian ethics and practical theology have addressed this question, they have done so in terms of moral guidelines for finding one's way through the life cycle and also in terms of the virtues that might be helpful and important in individual life. There certainly is a need for such guidelines and for such virtues, even in postmodernity. Yet the ethical challenge runs deeper, and this is why a Christian ethics of the life cycle has to address a second level – responsibility not only *within* the life cycle but responsibility *for* the life cycle itself.

The starting point for assuming responsibility for the life cycle is the insight that the life cycle – actually any life cycle, postmodern or not – is not just a natural given. As has been pointed out above, the shape of the life cycle is thoroughly dependent on influences from culture and society. If this is true, the life cycle itself can, and from my point of view also must, be seen as a field of ethical responsibility. Since the life cycle is not an anthropological given which never changes, we ourselves become responsible for how the life cycle is shaped and what structures are given to it.

At first glance, it may not sound very plausible to identify this kind of responsibility as a key task of Christian ethics. In modernity, the main concern between theology and a psychology of the life cycle seemed to be how theology could become more aware of the different ages and stages of the human life cycle that it wants to address. And like many other modern topics this question has not lost its importance. It is still quite essential, for example, that Christian educators learn to really understand children in their own ways of approaching the world. Yet at the same time, the postmodern life cycle makes us painfully aware of how flexible and how contingent all ages and stages of the life cycle really are. Childhood today and the childhood of our grandparents have little in common, and the lives of our children will probably be very different from ours. This is why the postmodern life cycle poses a different and additional challenge to theology – the responsibility for shaping the life cycle itself. What does this mean?

To state it once more: The process through which the life cycle is changing is not a natural given. There are decisions involved – decisions which are made at various levels and which then lead to certain changes – decisions of an individual who makes his or her choices for a certain life-

style or career; decisions of a church which makes policies, for example, in respect to supporting or not supporting families; and decisions in politics which affect the social and economic parameters of the life cycle in all of society.

All these decisions play into what finally appears as the given (“natural”) shape and structure of the life cycle. The challenge that theological ethics puts before us today is how we make use of the potential flexibility of the life cycle which postmodernity has opened. A theology of the life cycle will have to account for the ways in which this flexibility is to be used responsibly and reflectively.

The third question to be treated by a theology of the life cycle – the question of *religious communication* – is of a somewhat different nature. It may be understood as a question of Christian ethics but it also refers to ecclesiology as well as to anthropology. Why does the question of religious communication arise in this context?

Religious communication becomes extremely difficult and diffuse in postmodernity. This is due to the two interrelated processes of the pluralization and the individualization of religion which, in extreme cases, may mean that not even a language has been acquired that would be suited to serve for purposes of religious communication. Even where this is not the case, religious discourse in public becomes difficult because, once religion is treated as a purely private matter, there is no longer any public language that could be used for dialogue on religious issues. Of course, religion may still be addressed in legal or political terms or from the perspective of the social sciences. But in all these cases, the public dialogue is *on* religion but certainly is not a *religious* dialogue expressive of different faiths.

In my understanding, this situation is detrimental in several respects. First, it is detrimental anthropologically in that a whole dimension of human life is not given full access to human communication. Second, it is detrimental to society in that there is no meaningful public exchange on matters of ultimate meaning. And third, it is detrimental for the church in that any public communication on faith and religion becomes more difficult, even in the limited public of a particular church. Consequently, the third task of a theology of the life cycle must be to design models for religious communication – models that work within the church but that are also viable in a wider public.

5. Conclusion

This essay is only a beginning. The relationship between practical theology and postmodern life is in need of more detailed discussion. Postmodernity does not imply the end of practical theology as mediation but it makes it mandatory to reassess and to redesign the ways in which this mediation is to be carried out.

The reference to a “new paradigm” is always ambivalent if it refers to one’s own present. Actually, if taken seriously, the concept of paradigm implies that those who are working within a certain paradigm are not aware of it. So my point is not about the term paradigm, and my plea is not for an intentional change of paradigms. My plea is for a practical theology facing up to the challenges of contemporary life which, in important respects, is no longer “modern” in the traditional sense.

Zusammenfassung

Die Praktische Theologie hat sich noch verhältnismäßig wenig auf die Herausforderungen der Postmoderne eingelassen, was sich u.a. auf den unklaren theoretischen und empirischen Status von Postmodernebegriffen und -theorien zurückführen läßt. Als „Kind der Moderne“ steht die Praktische Theologie jedoch zugleich vor besonderen Herausforderungen, wenn die Moderne an ihr Ende zu kommen scheint. Der vorliegende Beitrag geht aus vom Beispiel des modernen und postmodernen Lebenszyklus und erörtert dessen Implikationen für die Arbeit der Praktischen Theologie auf der Gegenstandsebene ebenso wie im Blick auf Konstitutionsprobleme dieser Disziplin. Am Ende steht das Plädoyer für eine „Theologie des Lebenszyklus“, die es der Praktischen Theologie ermöglichen soll, ihre Vermittlungsaufgabe im Übergang zwischen Erster und Zweiter Moderne zu bearbeiten.