

4. "A test of rupture" -- Will it hold ?

European Christianity in the tension of the social process of modernisation (thesis paper)*

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1. In any cultural/social attempt to determine the social position of European Christianity one has to be prepared to come up against contradicting tendencies and developments full of contrasts. The dialectics of enlightenment implies that one can be enlightened about modernity only by means of dialectics. This is also true for the determination of the present relationship between Christianity and modern society.

2. The present form of European Christianity and its future are questioned by processes of modernisation which overlap and contradict each other. This concerns (a) the secularisation of culture and the cultural permanence of religion, (b) the individualisation and socialisation of human existence, (c) the social-cultural differentiation and economics of modern society, and (d) the problems of plausibility of the contents of Christian faith in a secular culture which, on its way to secularisation, releases at the same time forces that produce religion.

1. The dialectics of secularisation: Marginalisation of Christianity – renaissance of religion ?

3. In many Western-European societies religion is in the process of marginalisation and "ex-culturation". This process does not only include a loss of functions and of relevance of the contents of religious dogmatics. Large portions of church-bound religiosity are "liquidated", i.e., they become fluid and they are evaporating.

On the other hand, an almost equal portion condenses again in society – often, however, in the non-religious segments of culture. Here they are again very much dispersed. We experience a de-institutionalisation and

* Translated from German by Hermann Janssen.

pluralisation of religious systems of meaning. The spectrum stretches from syncretistic mythologies, through esoteric life-style scenarios, to small fundamentalistic brokers of Christianity and Islam and the contents of a diffuse "civil religion".

4. European modernity began with the formation of a culture and a society which gives itself normative foundations without grounding them in religious-metaphysic certainties or unquestionable traditions.

The aims of this time, in which the autonomous mind wants to resume power, are: a coming of age and a sovereignty of the subject, mobilisation of all the forces of progress, speeding up the process of gaining knowledge, and the practical use of knowledge with the aim of rational formation of the world.

5. In the meantime, modernity entered into a phase in which the dark sides of progress determined the social debate. The industrial production of wealth is intertwined with evils which are related to the industrial growth paradigm. In retrospect, the social history of modernity seems to be a race between technical-scientific efforts to diffuse the natural endangering of human life and the more and more expanding risks that are produced by technology and science. These, however, cannot anymore master them by their own means.

6. Apparently, modernity has to rely on different powers for the completion of its projects (emancipation and autonomy, freedom and justice, progress and wealth), powers which are not offered by technology and science. Modernity lives on preconditions which it cannot guarantee and from contents which it cannot produce. Apparently there are technically non-deducible realities or accountabilities which are not economically attainable and powers which are not politically available. If these are not respected, then modern society will have no future. There is need therefore for alternative forms of experience of what has been overlooked, suppressed or mishandled, of the non-technical side of technology, of the non-economic aspects of economy, and of the non-political dimension of politics.

7. Religion keeps its place at the borders of modernity. In Western societies, borders of modernity mark especially those places where it becomes

evident that today's process of secularisation and modernisation are emptying themselves. They therefore make place for something instead of making promises of progress which cannot be kept. There are dimensions of Christianity which are resistant to enlightenment, secularisation and progress. These can function as a counter-balance to the impulses coming from modernisation in science and technology.

8. The simultaneous loss and gain of religion at the borders of modernity, the de-institutionalisation and pluralisation of religious systems of meaning, have to be seen against the background of a socio-structurally-based individualisation. Traditions and religious-metaphysical world views are closely related to the functional preconditions and demands for mobility. These have to be fulfilled to guarantee the existence of societies which have a high division of labour and which are functionally differentiated.

2. The dialectics of individualisation: Privatisation and socialisation of the conduct of life.

9. The theme of "individualisation" of modern societies puts together a number of social changes which appear as late consequences and side-effects of the ethical-political project of modernity ("emancipation and autonomy") and of its economic project ("progress and wealth"). Among others, there are the erosion and the decreasing effect of the traditional social network (e.g., class, level, milieu, religion, confession), the separation of the life cycle and life style from traditional standards (role, sex, specific norms, world view), as well as the diversification of the life forms and of the systems of morals and meaning. These developments are the conditions for the increasing possibilities of decision making and subjectively eligible options of the individual person as well as the loss of a collectively valid and plausible matrix for meaning and identity in the social field.

10. The expansion of the possibilities of choice and the options for action in daily life concur with the increase of the dependency on rules which are rooted in the general social level. The life of individuals is today much less than before bound to a communal complex of tradition, institution and authorities. However, this does not mean that it is dismissed from society,

but that it is now determined by abstract and anonymous social relations for the individual. These cannot be influenced by the individual. At the same time, the mobility and flexibility, the independence and freedom of the subject are the functional demands of a society with a high division of labour.

11. The guarantee of individual freedom made it possible to establish a net of official social institutions during a time of a prospering economy and this became an essential factor for social integration. In this context it is very significant that the stability and acceptability of a common social order was achieved by the structural possibility of a high plurality of options in the individual life sphere. Therefore we have the apparently paradoxical situation of an integration through differentiation respectively individualisation. The acceptance of a social order grows with the structural growth of the possibility for the individual person to live her or his "own life".

12. The modern person should as far as possible be a "homo optionis" who becomes what she or he chooses and who grow out of that which she or he selects. It seems that towards the end of modernity the pluralism of world views and the rise of individualism have made the individual person finally also the sovereign regarding the questions of religion. Vocation and conversion no longer mark any more the road towards religious identity, but decision and selection.

13. While formerly the "Christians of confession" achieved and accepted through their membership the whole dogmatic, ritual and juridical disposition of their confession, today the "Christians of selection" have under the conditions of an also religiously "multi-cultural" society the possibility to relate less and less exclusively to a distinct confession, church or religion.

14. The challenge for ecclesially-organised Christianity which is related to this development entails the question whether it can produce possible plural social forms of faith, and whether it proves to be able to relate to religious styles of existence on this side and on that side of the "official" expectations of behaviour.

3. The dialectics of differentiation: Socio-cultural pluralisation and economic domination of modern society.

15. The social dynamics of modernity are characterised by the process of differentiation to such an extent that they can be regarded as defining the lines of the social and ideological history of this time. In retrospect, "modernisation" appears to be mainly a structural reorganisation of the modern social systems which become societies with particular roles. The functional diversification of the total social entity leads to the growth of largely independent spheres of action, which follow their own inner rationalities. Each sub-system (economy, technology, education, arts, religion, etc.) forms a closed network of functions with its own logic. Law, morals, religion, and politics do not form any more the same pattern of amalgamation.

16. More and more, the economy has to be regarded as a leading system. The dominant entities are "money" and "market". The universality of money shapes again the functional differentiation of modern society by the money-orientation of all processes. It dominates all social inter-actions. This unification appears as the modern way of the integration of complex societies.

17. The money orientation of modern life deeply shapes cultural values and normative priorities. It influences the way how modern people see, value and present themselves. The extension and depth of this money orientation can be made sociologically evident by the observation of the semantics and pragmatics of the category of "money".

18. Money took the leading socio-cultural function of rationality and it took on "theological" connotations: "To be able to afford anything" is the new definition of "omnipotence". Those who deposit their money in a freely exchangeable currency can enter any country of the world. "To be able to go anywhere" is the monetary definition of "omnipresence".

19. The realities of market and marketing more and more permeate, like money, all aspects of life (the market of capital, work, marriage, drugs, drinks, donations, opinion, etc.), and guide them with the imperatives of "buying" and "selling". The fact that something can be bought and sold

makes it "marketable" so that it can be valued with the criteria of the market economy. It is not enough for the human subject to be "good" only, i.e., to fulfil the demands of a value system, but it also has to "sell itself well".

20. A secular ethos knows, of course, that human dignity cannot be divided and that it belongs to everybody individually. However, this ethos could not succeed socially as a regulative idea in the same way as the concept of the market values of an economic subject. The idea of human dignity extends somehow to unemployment aid and social welfare as a societal cushion for those who were marginalised by the market society as such.

21. Without any doubt, the market is in many ways a useful instrument for the co-ordination of production and the consumption of needs and interests. The principle of the market is, however, "economistically" enlarged if it is extended to all the aspects of social life without any limitations. Only those who have something to offer can profit from the market. Only those who have money or an economic potential have access to the market and can determine the marketing process. The logic of the market leads to the fact that advantages are offered only to marketable subjects.

22. It belongs to the achievements of European modernity that there is a tying together of political, social and economic fundamental rights, i.e., a connection between capitalism, social society and democracy. Behind the agenda of the economic project of modernity – wealth and growth – stands a political agenda: emancipation and self-determination. Both projects belong historically and functionally together. Money-earning-work always established not only the personal but also the political existence of the subject. Without political participation there is no democracy, and without democracy there is no assurance of social rights.

23. For some time there have been more and more attempts to understand the project of modernity only as an economic one. Growth and increased productivity do not initiate any more political integration nor the interaction of the employed. Rather, in order to increase productivity, a decrease in jobs is required. Less and less people produce more and more goods and service. When the costs of labour decrease, the profit increases. However,

a capitalism which only aims at the increase of profits minimises its own legitimacy, especially its political-ethical acceptance.

24. The increasing tendencies of social "secessionism" signal the attempt of "better" circles to buy themselves out of the social costs of democracy and the social state by organising their own infrastructure (e.g., private kindergardens, elitist universities and private clinics) and thus beginning to leave the "ordinary" standards of the social services of the solidarity-community. This means a test of rupture for a society which understands its infrastructure and the common production of collective goods as a task of the community in the interest of all its members. In the long run, it cannot succeed to enjoy the privileges of the bondedness of capitalism, social state and democracy without wanting to invest something into the social state and into democracy.

25. The political-ethical achievements of modernity to which a socially balanced market economy contributed considerably can only be maintained when all the people concerned do not insist on socially upholding their own individual, not generally agreeable demands. The interests of any individual can only be met in as far as the social bond which ties everybody together does not break. This insight is basic to Christian social ethics. It is paradoxical in this situation that the more modern modernity became, the more actual became the Christian ethos of solidarity, an ethos which lives on religious-metaphysical preconditions that are more and more abandoned by modernity.

26. European Christianity faces the necessity to search for new plausibilities of a transcendentially-oriented understanding of reality under the conditions of "post-metaphysical" thinking. The future survival of a Christian-religious consciousness as such depends essentially on the positive results of this endeavour.

4. The dialectics of crises: The crisis of handing on Christianity as a crisis of innovation.

27. The further existence of Christianity and of modernity is characterised by the dialectics of ending and beginning. It is common to religion and modernity that there is no continuous, linear, unbroken further existence

for any of them. For the abandoning of modernity and of religion as well as for their reappearance, there is the same relationship of synchrony.

28. Seen against this background, Christian faith is not so much in a crisis of tradition, but rather in a crisis of innovation. This means that up to now those social changes were not recognised enough which are open to religious hermeneutics. Under this respect, the crisis of the ecclesially-structured Christianity is not so much the result of external threats but rather an expression of the self-inflicted impotence to react accordingly on the external pressures of change.

29. Much would be achieved if those places and times would be observed in which largely unexpectedly the question of religion appears. This should be done with the same intensity with which the strengthening of traditional ways of handing on the faith is practised. In the search for those who are searching, it is advisable for theology and church to learn the "new" ultimate questions of the ecological risk-society and to spell out together possible answers rather than to repeat the answers to questions of earlier generations.

30. On the way towards a "post-traditional" age, traditions can produce less and less as a medium for preserving and handing on of religious and ethical values. The church's way of talking about a "crisis of tradition" of the faith is an expression of the very problem whose analysis it states. Neglected is the questioning of the plausibility of the content of faith and of the innovative power of Christian proclamations. This is to be regarded as the central cause for the evaporation of its forms of tradition. The loss of plausibility goes far beyond those forming elements which belong to the traditional confessional identity, like a sacred priesthood, celibacy, ritualisation of ordinary life, and the traditional teaching on sexuality. It has already reached those contents which make up the Christian creed: the image of God, creation, salvation, eternal life ...

31. The explanation and praxis of faith have disconnected themselves from the symbolic mediation of modern ways of experiencing reality. Seldom does one find in the proclamation of the church technical or scientific data symbolically translated, dramatised, illustrated, or coded. The technical-industrial civilisation remains to a large extent theologically not under-

stood and invisible in everyday religious praxis. In the long run, this will of course make the faith culturally invisible.

32. The socialisation of all aspects and conditions of life is defining modernity. The symbolic language of Christianity should be able to link up with this context if it truly wants to reveal "the other" in technology and economy. Today the language of proclamation, religious customs and church feasts during the year lose their social response and their historical "Sitz im Leben" because their language, imagery and action forms belong more and more to counter symbols to everyday life. The typical signs of modernity did not to the same extent find a religious interpretation and "use".

33. If theology has the task to recognise the signs of the time and to interpret them in the light of the present (GS 4), then it has to take seriously that our time stands under the signs of money and that it explains itself in the light of the market. To do theology today means to let oneself be pulled into the controversy about the questions under what signs the existence of the human person de facto stands and under what signs it ought to stand. A theological hermeneutics of modernity is in the end hardly possible but through the political and social hermeneutics of Christianity. A theological hermeneutics, i.e., the reconstruction and critique of the "economisation" of existence, is here a case to be tested.

34. The hermeneutics of modernity, which theology has to conceive today, has to be developed "from below", i.e., from the perspective of those who lose out in the process of modernisation. This is necessary if the thinking about transcendence is to avoid becoming uprooted. Since in Christian understanding it is a "transcendence to below", theology would be well advised to insert itself fully into the secular reality. It uncovers especially in that context "the otherness". The otherness of secularity is the counter-fact, i.e., it is that which stands up against the realities of the world. It is that which is economically not accountable and technically not deducible which wants to be discovered and made relevant in the fields of economy and technology. A culture which is closed against such opposing phenomena will be determined only by the needs of compensation. A Christianity which fails to recognise the "religious dimension" of society in those

moments of unaccountability and undisposability will loose its power to translate, to be culturally present.

35. The future of European Christianity depends on its ability to inculturate itself into the technical-industrial culture and into the coming information society. This inculturation is still largely missing. As far as dramatics is concerned, this new inculturation does not fall behind the "first" inculturation of the Gospel in the Hellenistic cultural realm.

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