

POSTMODERNITY AND THE THEOLOGIES OF LIBERATION
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF
A FIRST-WORLD PASTORAL THEOLOGY

I. THE PARADOXICAL CHARACTER OF MODERNITY

Modernity has been a paradoxical phenomenon¹. On the one hand, it means the following: (a) the globalization of information, production, and markets, (b) a uniformity of products and life-styles, and (c) a sophisticated form of suppression. This suppression is legitimized through any or a combination of the following: an ideology of rationality and the unity of the spirit, a utopia of universal progress and development, and a political or philosophical grand narrative about the reason of history and its definite fulfillment in modernity. On the other hand, modernity offers a great variety of products and information sources, makes it possible to live very different lifestyles and biographic concepts, and gives various religions, sects, world views, and value systems the chance to find their representatives.

Thus, if modernity is seen as suppressive unification, postmodernity has to be deconstructive. The latter must break open the one-dimensional rationalities, and bring forth multiple rationalities and trans-rationalities. If modernity is still seen as bewildering diversification, postmodernity has to be holistic. It must offer ways to exercise responsibility, to enable decision-making, and to pursue life-giving options.

II. POSTMODERNITY

1. *Postmodernity: The Challenge of Plurality*

In any case, postmodernity means the protest against and the sought-after end of a specific form of modernity. It would be too simple to banalize postmodernity as a merely bewildering and amazing plurality. Postmodernity has become a well-defined description for developments in quite different sectors such as architecture, art, literature, science, and philosophy. An excellent survey of the developments in these sectors

1. See VAN DER LOO & W. VAN REIJEN, *Paradoxen van modernisering. Een sociaal-wetenschap-pelijke benadering*, Muiderberg, Coutinho, 1990.

can be found in the book of Wolfgang Iser². His point is that “post-modernity” marks the current phase of modernity which is its period of self-reflexivity and consciousness of plurality. So modernity becomes postmodern when it no longer tries to regard plurality as essential unity plus its merely contingent variations, or when it no longer complains about losing the sense of unifying rationality. Postmodernity seeks the challenges and chances of the heterogeneous aspects of the pulsating life.

Postmodernity is not irrational, but is interested in the different rationalities. To cite some examples: aesthetic rationality is different from the rationality of science, economic rationality from that of pedagogy, and bureaucratic rationality from that of personal relationships. And none is better than the others. So the aims of the Enlightenment will be fulfilled better by postmodernity, where modernity becomes self-reflexive about the failures of its rationality, which was linear and one-dimensional and thus unsound and dangerous.

The danger of a rationality with a universal truth-claim is the major concern of Jean-François Lyotard³. According to him, Auschwitz – the great catastrophe of our century – was not the consequence of a mad ideology but the logical consequence of the modern ideology. Within every form of thinking that claims universality, anything that is different, or whatever does not fit in the universal scheme, has no right to exist. And it is not even possible to present good arguments in favour of the misfit because there is no idiom to formulate them. In dealing with the misfit, every solution creates injustice as long as the solution is formed only within the prevailing universal scheme. Thus, a way of making justice must be found which does not look for a compromise or a consensus; it is crucial to develop a sense of the “differend” and to avoid a suppressive dominance of one rationality over the others.

A central philosopher and theologian in that line of thinking is Emmanuel Lévinas⁴, who is cited by Lyotard and by some liberation theologians as well. For Levinas, the modern paradigm of thinking sees one subject at the centre of the world who turns all others into objects of his thinking and making of reality. In Descartes’ “*cogito ergo sum*” the rational “I” is the measure of every experience, and what he does not expect to experience he will not even realize. This way of treating the world is consequently suppressive because it is only capable and willing to think

2. W. WELSCH, *Unsere Postmoderne Moderne*, Berlin, vch Weinheim, 1993.

3. J.-F. LYOTARD, *Le Différend*, Paris, Ed. de Minuit, 1983.

4. E. LÉVINAS & N. KREWANI (eds.), *Totalität und Unendlichkeit. Versuch über die Exteriorität.* (übersetzt v. W.N. Krewani), Freiburg, Alber, 1987.

the Same. It is necessary to undergo a paradigm shift. It is the Other who forces the I to an encounter; as long as the Other can be regarded as something, even as an enemy, he can be rejected. But if the I meets the Other face to face, the I is challenged to be responsible: the bare and weaponless face provokes a crisis in the I. The face of the Other cannot even be avoided because it is the track of the Infinite, which appears on it. To undertake responsibility for the Other means to praise the Infinite.

A more secular solution to plurality is shown by Wolfgang Welsch. He pleads for a “transversal reason”⁵. He sees Lyotard’s problem as regards making the heterogeneous rationalities the basis of his concept. Welsch distinguishes two phases: in the first phase of differentiation, the heterogeneous rationalities were formed. In the second, which is occurring in our times, we are confronted with heterogeneous paradigms. Although every paradigm is incommensurably different, every one is built out of and in conflict with several others, all the paradigms use the same words but in different meanings, and all deal with the same reality but understand it within different concepts. This pluralization of paradigms asks for a transversal reason, the capacity to understand different paradigms as different and to build bridges between them wherever bridges are actually necessary. Those bridges can never be fixed for a long time because there is no super- or meta- paradigm that can guarantee them.

In this conception, both solutions of postmodernity – plurality and holism – fit together. To accept plurality, to respect the Other, and to refuse any attempt to establish meta-theories constitute one side of the coin. It can easily lead to an attitude of tolerance which strengthens the status quo, is very profitable for the rich and powerful, and is disastrous for the poor. Yet this seems to be the only way to render that sort of justice Lyotard is concerned about. The other side of the coin is equally important. Each paradigm represents a holistic vision of a good life for all, but with specific presuppositions and under certain conditions. They all take their options and have to deal with conflicts. Within a transversal reason, they can help one another form good solutions for a concrete situation. But a suppressive dominance over the others must be avoided. As they respectively have their special profiles, their advantages and disadvantages, and their strengths and blind spots, they can enrich one other only by remaining different, not by looking for a mixture or fusion. But then, they may form a network.

5. W.W. VERNUNFT, *Die zeitgenössische Vernunftkritik und das Konzept der transversalen Vernunft*, Frankfurt/M, Suhrkamp, 1996.

2. *Four Aspects from a Practical Point of View*

As presented above, postmodernity is marked by four aspects: self-reflexivity, complexity, alterity, and transversality. It is neither a theoretical construction nor a philosophical idea but an everyday reality. Beginning with the oil shock and the first report to the Club of Rome, then with the discussions about acid rain, the death of the forests, and the growing ozone hole, western people became more and more aware that the “glorious” and steady progress of modernity might come to a desperate end. The catastrophes of Chernobyl and Bophal brought about a profound crisis of confidence as regards technological perfection, and the latest conflicts about gene manipulation and the scandal over BSE-beef show the dangerous sides of industrial food production. Finally, the connection of Shell with the murder of the Ogoni showed that western profit is not morally innocent at all.

The fatal connections between modern industry and economy, the globalization of markets and money speculations, the increasing social and ecological problems, and the shocking misery in the southern half of the earth – the consciousness that all these factors are interlinked and are due to modernity is no longer the privilege of a marxist or christian avant-garde, but is in the minds of school pupils, homemakers, and average middle-class people. Modernity after the second world war has brought some common peace and welfare, but by the same means, it is now risking to lose all that. We cannot continue like that. This is the practical side of postmodern self-reflexivity.

A consequence of these experiences of dangerous modernity is that people lose confidence in technical, industrial, and scientific solutions. They are no longer sure that experts know what is good for them. In many instances of personal experience, they find out what they are really longing for, and they discover that expert systems, in most cases, solve only the problems that these systems have defined or even created themselves. The day-to-day problems are much more complex than the professional solutions. If for example somebody feels very tired, he finally ends up seeing the doctor, who will prescribe some drugs until the patient is able to efficiently do his job again. In fact, he will need something much more: to find out how to refuse too many demands from various social systems and groups, to resolve the conflicts within the family and the workplace, to define the sense of his personal life and then take the appropriate options, and so on. There are no modern experts for a good life.

One way to live with postmodern complexity is to deny it. This fundamentalistic temptation is found in every sector: in the simple scapegoat-mentality of the new right-wing political parties, in the traditionalistic

escapism of religious groups and sects, in some holistic or romantic utopias within the new ecological and religious movements⁶, and in the tiny worlds of the numerous soap operas that fill the living rooms of the tv-watching masses every day. The better consequence of complexity is the longing for orientative systems. In this field, many self-named wise guides come up everywhere, and there is a new interest in spiritual traditions. The churches and theology can benefit from this development only if they integrate the complexity of modern experience with the relevant christian traditions.

Experiencing complexity also entails the feeling that one's own wishes and expectations are different from those of many others. This is the modern chance to develop one's distinctive personality as a woman or a man. This concern is central to feminism and its critique of the patriarchal structures of our societies. Evidently, it is much easier to realize one's own demands to be different from others than to accept the Other in his or her otherness with respect to one's own presumptions and convictions. And it is even more difficult not only to be tolerant towards the Other but also to be in solidarity with the Other. This solidarity is especially demanding as regards those marginalized by the social norms such as those people who are unable or unwilling to work for ever-greater profit. This sense of alterity is perhaps the central practical challenge of postmodernity.

To practise solidarity towards the Other can even proceed from the presumption that I am rather sure of my own point of view. Thereafter, I shall evolve it more and more in confrontation with the others. In modernity, this confrontation eventually would either separate the subjects or destroy one of them. The complexity of postmodern situations and expectations, however, requires co-operative work not inspite of the differences but with the full involvement of these different qualifications and different perspectives. Thus, as the capacity to integrate incommensurable perspectives in favour of a specifically necessary solution, transversality determines the quality of life in postmodernity at all levels: personally, in community and society, and in the face of problems of injustice between the continents and the generations.

Under these circumstances, the unity of a community or an institution can no longer be guaranteed by hanging on to the same ideology or life-style. Unity will be found in the steady realization of communication, conflict, and actual participatory decision-making. Revolution and

6. See M. WIDL, *Christentum und Esoterik. Darstellung, Auseinandersetzung, Abgrenzung*, Graz, Wien-Köln 1995.

violence are no longer necessary and useful to transform the structures. Now, what is imperative is to make use of the dynamism of a constant paradoxical change that is going on all the time with or without our engagement. The consequence of postmodern transversality is a new balance between powerful options and humorous calmness.

III. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH

1. *The Basis of a Postmodern Catholicism: The Second Vatican Council*

If one looks at the actual parts of the catholic church, one sees pre-modern, modern, and postmodern features. As regards the church's solemn, traditional, and monarchical style and content, it is premodern; as regards its legalistic, centralistic and bureaucratic structures and decisions, it is modern; as regards its great variety of religious customs, theologically reflective sectors, and autonomously deciding communities, it is postmodern. The common basis for this non-isomorphic situation is the Second Vatican Council. As Elmar Klinger has shown with much knowledge of the details⁷, the prominent merit of Vatican II was three-fold: first, it represented a "jump forward" or – one could say – a "paradigm shift"; second, it did not intend to formulate new dogmas but to say the old ones in a new way, or to develop the dogmatics within the pastoral questions and to develop the pastoral as a starting-point and guide for developing the dogmatics; third, it formulated a new cardinal point for all theological reasoning – the new dogma of the vocation of the human being in Jesus Christ.

Klinger also shows that latin american liberation theology is a new theology that is in continuity with Vatican II. It is a theology that is formulated from the experiences of the poor as they are addressed by the gospel and called to live in the emergent realm of God. The pastoral and the dogmatic are two sides of the same coin of evangelizing praxis and theological reflection in the midst of the communities. The liberation theologies⁸, thus, produce a paradigm shift in continuity with the intentions of the council. They share in the non-uniformism of the whole church in their specific ways. The paradigm shift in the post-idealistic theologies in the first world, however, is generally not determined by this interpenetration of the pastoral and the dogmatic but by fundamental

7. E. KLINGER, *Armut – Eine Herausforderung Gottes. Der Glaube des Konzils und die Befreiung des Menschen*, Zürich, Echter, 1990.

8. See A. HENNELLY, *Liberation Theologies. The Global Pursuit of Justice*, Mystic, Con., Twenty-Third Publications, 1995.

theological reasoning⁹. Pastoral conclusions from the liberative praxis of latin american base communities are appropriated by first world theologians as “socio-pastoral” notions¹⁰.

Norbert Mette and Hermann Steinkamp propose a new paradigm of christian praxis that is orientated no longer towards membership-maintenance and pastoral paternalism but towards active participation and emancipative consciousness. With personal concern about the miseries that result from the capitalistic systems, and in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, a christian praxis has to take place which opts for the oppressed and the exploited in our society as well as worldwide. This struggle can only be fruitful within care-giving and socially active base communities. This sort of political diakonia is the deciding factor for a new evangelization that begins with the church’s conversion to the poor.

2. Postmodernity: Still a Challenge to Church and Theology

Postmodernity is not only a fact of analysis but, more so, of prescription. It is the challenge, the chance, and the tribunal of our times. As Franz-Xavier Kaufmann points out, the modern order of differentiation made the church that particular and specialized part of society which is responsible for, and occupied with, the religious desires of people, the moral basics of their attitudes, and some symbolic expressions of the state¹¹. Wolfgang Welsch has shown that, in postmodernity, paradigms are no longer segregated but interlinked while continuing to be heterogeneous. They are always perspectival, but in their perspectival characteristics, they can be universal. Paradigms become the concepts of thinking not of parts of society and their differentiated functions but of groups of people who reflexively opt for the same way. Thus, paradigms become voluntary and obligatory at the same time.

For church communities and theology, this is a great chance to imagine and produce new christian paradigms in praxis and theory. In praxis, this implies the challenge to become a model

9. H. KÜNG & D. TRACY (eds.), *Das neue Paradigma von Theologie. Strukturen und Dimensionen*, Zürich, Echter, 1986.

10. H. STEINKAMP, *Solidarität und Parteilichkeit. Für eine neue Praxis in Kirche und Gemeinde*, Mainz, 1994; N. METTE & H. STEINKAMP (Kreative), *Rezeption der Befreiungstheologie in der praktischen Theologie*, In R. FORNET-BETANCOURT (ed.), *Befreiungstheologie: Kritischer Rückblick und Perspektiven für die Zukunft*. Vol. 3; *Die Rezeption im deutschsprachigen Raum*, Mainz, 1997, pp. 9-25; N. METTE & H. STEINKAMP (eds.), *Anstiftung zur Solidarität. Praktische Beispiele der Sozialpastoral*, Mainz, 1997.

11. F. KAUFMANN, *Religion und Modernität. Sozialwissenschaftliche Perspektiven*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1989.

- of solidarity within the inequalities and changes of globalization and localization, and this means a new praxis of sharing and respect and new networks of communication;
- for humanizing cultures to opt for justice, peace, and a good life for all in the name of the realm of God;
- of social integration that is voluntary and liberating and which promotes the development of different personal charisms for oneself, for the community, and for God;
- of the sustainable use of natural, cultural, social, and personal resources, and this implies opposition to the following: on the one hand, the exploitation of nature, labour-power, family ties, and cultural and religious symbols, and on the other hand, the disregard and neglect of the young, the old, women, the poor, the ignorant, marginal geographical regions, and the Third-World masses in general.

In their method, the postmodern christian paradigms will be global not only in their view of interlinked developments with their risks, challenges, and chances, but also in the communication networks and solidarity structures they create between different paradigms. They will be perspectival in their experiences, local in their rootings, and optional in their responsibilities. They will be theological in their arguments in continuity with christian tradition, spiritual in their experience and expression of God's salvation and liberation in the middle of everyday life, and ecclesial in the basic functions of diakonia, koinonia, liturgia, and martyria.

3. A Postmodern "Pastoral World Theology"

In the face of Third-World liberation theologies, a paradigm of a postmodern First-World theology should not be proselytizing but complementary. On the basis of Vatican II, such a theology would be a postmodern "pastoral world theology". "World" here comprises four dimensions: the world of lay people and their vocation to reproduce and innovate day-to-day life in a reflexively christian way; the global world and its challenges for today and the future; the many perspectival worlds of living and reflecting with their contextual and pluriform praxes; the world of God's creation in which the realm of God brings forth liberation. In this conception, the basic ecclesial functions will not primarily be specializations of praxis but its dimensions based on experience and theological reflection:

The *diakonia* dimension is a response to the postmodern challenge to accept contingency without relinquishing responsibility: as struggle for

physical, psychic, and social survival; as quest for consolation, support, and orientation in the context of God; as the overcoming of the modern madness of being godlike; in the efforts to enhance cultures towards legitimizing the practice of greater justice and peace in the global context. This *diakonia* dimension is developing in conformity with justice.

The *koinonia* dimension in postmodernity would be a network of binding communications with the explicit recognition that the different contexts and perspectives have equal rights for attention and participation. It builds solidarity in changing problematic situations, and aims for a unity that has to grow between different and thus complementary perspectives. It becomes possible through reconciliation.

The *liturgical* dimension arises in the postmodern longing for the event that can break up the everyday surface, which can transcend the small ego toward something incommensurably great, wonderful, and mysterious, and which can end up in prayer and rituals as commemoration, complaint, cry, thanksgiving, and praise of God. It is based on trust.

The *martyrial* dimension arises in postmodern wishes to have cause for hope despite all miseries. It shows the christian gospel as a promise that gives importance both to life and the future. It gains a footing where the gospel is confessed credibly, lived in practice, and explained reasonably. It is rooted in vocation.

Such a pastoral world theology would overcome the tensions between diakonia and community, between service of salvation and service of the earth, between ethics and pastoral needs, and between doctrine and praxis. In its method, it is perspective-transversal, and so it searches in actual situations – out of explicitly concrete perspectives and options – not only for common ways but also for incommensurably different perspectives. It would have a narrative aspect, and so it would express the concrete concerns of people and take them into account. It would be analytic in critically admitting other scientific disciplines and their points of view. It would be complementarian in seeing its own universal view as a perspectival-optional part of the whole. It would be evangelizing in making the explicit christian understanding of life dimensionally relevant in the midst of everyday praxis. It finds its scale in the realm of God, its brotherly and sisterly correction within the church, and its vocation in serving in the midst of the people.