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# **The Christian Calling in the Modern World**

Rolf Hille

## **ON THE WAY TO A POSTMODERN AND POST-CHRISTIAN SOCIETY**

The early church had to find its way within the Roman empire. The Imperium Romanum stood for a worldwide political system with a common cultural heritage. Society was marked by pluralism expressed by various religious cults, philosophical systems and personal ideologies. Within this environment Christians were willing to suffer persecution as well as to express apologetically the evidence of their faith to the outside world with a clear and efficient strategy. This made them convincing and attractive for their pagan environment.

The post-Constantinian era we call from our historical perspective the Middle Ages. This period of world history lasting a thousand years is usually known as the era of the Christian Occident.

The following so-called modern period, starting with the 16th century, was accompanied by an increasingly critical reaction towards the basis of the Christian culture, the church and theology. The idea that the human being is good becomes dominant. Since the Enlightenment, human thought is marked by an optimistic view of world history and high expectations of the rational abilities of humankind. The now autonomous human reason rejected many of the traditions of the Christian past as mere restrictions.

After World War II increasingly a new constellation became visible that today still confines Western culture. This era is called the postmodern period. Obviously, since Auschwitz and Hiroshima moral optimism and the expectation of historical progress have largely disappeared. People no longer believe that modern science is really able by itself to solve the problems it has produced. Here I point for an example to the ecological crisis. The modern period is particularly marked by an unlimited pluralism which we as the church are confronted with today. The modern period was characterized by the illusion that through mere human reason the problems of humanity could not only be understood, but also be resolved. At the end of the 20th century it becomes [p. 344](#) obvious that the once Christian West no longer has spiritual clarity nor a cultural identity that will allow for an efficient response to the opposing ideological challenges.

In view of recent history we are dealing with a twofold change. The world of the Enlightenment originally was a reaction against the Christian tradition. Without its

Christian background the Enlightenment cannot really be understood. On the other hand, the postmodern period resembles a reaction against enlightened modernity, but now without seeing any necessity to deal with the Christian faith at all. The result of this is that the outgrowth of the postmodern world is a post-Christian situation.

## **LIFE IN THE MODERN WORLD**

We have to take into account the background information given above to deal seriously with our topic *The Christian Calling in the Modern World*. Before I unfold the subject in detail, I would like to discuss the importance of the preposition 'in' for the subject, because in our headline it bears quite some theological weight.

As Christian theologians we are talking of the calling of the church in the modern world. This basically means: we live and believe in the midst of this postmodern and post-Christian world. With this in mind we emphasize that we do not intend to withhold our service from this world nor that we can withdraw from this world.

The position which we are assuming as Christians has a special element to it which becomes evident when we compare the Christian faith with the main religions and ideologies. The teaching of redemption of Buddha is religiously and psychologically oriented. It primarily intends to point out how people can leave behind the present world with its problems, desires and its suffering. Different again is the relation between religion and the world in Islam: a Muslim can hardly imagine an environment that is not defined by Islamic law, the Sharia. A close identity between the social and political reality and the religious community of Muslims is desirable. For a Muslim it is difficult to think of living in the diaspora; followers of Islam often have enormous problems with such a situation. There is no call in the Koran for Muslims to be a small minority among a large majority like the leaven in the dough. Finally, Marxism as a secular ideology was also not willing to accept the liberal and pluralistic world as it presented itself. The totalitarian states of the east could endure the present world only through the prospect of a violent and innerworldly realization of their utopian socialist goals.

In contrast, as Christians we are called to stay in this modern post-Christian world and to persevere in this world as disciples of Jesus Christ. The reason for the test of persevering in this world is a Christological one: the eternal Son of God has humbled himself and became human in no other world than our world with all its misery and pain. For this reason we are supposed to follow him on his way. The incarnational humiliation of Christ motivates and enables us to ask for the 'Christian calling in the modern world'. We are not supposed to try as individuals or as a church to flee this modern world, because Christ longs to redeem our secular generation. As the body of Christ we are taken up into the movement of the incarnation—with the goal of salvation for many.

I would like to approach three areas of the Christian calling in the modern world. In doing so I will follow the statement of the apostle Paul: 'And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love' ([1 Cor. 13:13](#)). This means that we are dealing with a contemporary introduction to what traditionally is called theological virtues.

### **1. MODERN AGNOSTICISM AND THE CHRISTIAN ASSURANCE OF FAITH**

For the modern human being it is a source of deep disillusionment to recognize that every effort to bring the mysteries of this world into a simple and systematic formula has failed. In the 18th century the world still seemed to be a kind of a machine that was designed according to mechanical principles and functioned according to mathematical rules. But

the physical and astronomical reality appeared to be increasingly more complicated. The philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn has clearly proved that even the so-called exact natural sciences depend on a process of rapid change. He has shown that views of nature are replaced by others through a revolutionary process. Finally, the 'scientific revolutions' contributed to the fact that modern philosophy ended in a kind of agnosticism. This means that there is no way of understanding the universal truth by means of 'pure reason'. The longer we exclusively apply the method of mathematically designed cognition and longer we allow this method to be the only way of obtaining certain knowledge in every area of research, the more clearly we have to admit that no statements regarding essential metaphysical questions are rationally justifiable. Kant's three famous questions regarding our Problem are: 'Where do I come from? Where am I going? What shall I do?' In his famous *Tractatus logico philosophicus* Ludwig Wittgenstein notes that after all scientific questions have been answered the essential problems of the human being are just beginning. He ends his *Tractatus-philosophy* with the realistic, but depressive insight that we have to be silent about all the things that we cannot speak about. And the things he was thinking about are all the pressing problems of classical metaphysics.

In view of the fact that we are surrounded by agnostic arguments, what does our calling to be evangelical theologians consist of? First, the disillusionment that relates to positivism and analytical linguistic philosophy contains some important aspects. What helped me personally in this context was the exegesis of the Pauline epistles, particularly to the Romans and Corinthians, as well as my studies of the Reformation. Studying Scripture, Luther found that, contrary to late medieval theology, it is impossible for fallen human beings to redeem [p.346](#) themselves through good works. We do not find salvation through moral efforts, but only through God's grace. God justifies the sinner because of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Christ alone brings reconciliation. This is particularly the message of Romans.

Parallel to this, in our agnostic postmodern world, it is important to note the corresponding opening chapters of 1 Corinthians. According to Paul, it is not only impossible to redeem human beings through their moral capabilities, but it is also an illusion to expect to gain certain assurance regarding the ultimate questions of the human personhood by pure reason. It is indeed correct that human beings being made in the image of God are characterized primarily by their ability to will and to think. But since the fall both basic human potentials—human will and reason—are no longer sufficient to reestablish the broken connection between God and the human being. By pure reason alone we cannot find assurance of faith through any worldview.

In spite of this inability the human being as a spiritual being depends on a reliable grounding of his or her life. Thomas Aquinas describes this reality as the tragedy of the *animal rationale*, as he characterizes the human being. According to Aquinas, the intellectual strength of the human being is not able to overcome the problem of the human misery 'beyond Eden'. At the break of the modern period Blaise Pascal also in his *Pensees* talked about the limitation of our rational cognition with great clarity and insight.

This means that it is and remains exclusively by God's grace that a person who by nature is lost in agnosticism finds solid ground for his or her life through the gift of faith. Luther has expressed this with unequalled brevity and precision in his Small Catechism: 'I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in my Lord Jesus Christ or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel ...'

For this reason as evangelical theologians we may not substantiate the illusion that we could lead our agnostic neighbours to faith in Christ through mere rational argumentation. Recognizing this, I would like at the same time to point out that our apologetical task remains and that we have to make use of every one of our intellectual

capabilities. On the other hand, in the context of the discussion about cognition theory we have to mark clearly the limits of pure reason. We have to point out the above insight that human beings cannot exist autonomously. People depend on the grace of God and this applies also in respect to their potential for cognition. Consequently, we should try to remove every intellectual barrier that keeps the academic elite from opening up to the gospel. We are challenged to communicate the biblical gospel in such a way that is relevant for the modern world and intellectually coherent.

Another important reason to take up the challenge of postmodern thought is that Western science will sooner or later permeate every culture, because other nations are trying to share in the welfare of the Northwestern societies. This is also [p. 347](#) why these nations are interested in acquiring the knowhow of modern civilization. In this context we have the special missiological responsibility to help in particular the churches of the Two-thirds World to handle appropriately the intellectual problems of Western philosophy. If we as theologians in the West are not able to handle theologically the challenging questions of our own culture in a spiritual way, how can we expect that our brothers and sisters in Africa, Asia and Latin America will be able to master those problems?

## **2. MODERN HEDONISM AND THE CHRISTIAN DYNAMIC OF HOPE**

When modern society was being formed, based on the ideas of the 18th and 19th century, it was characterized by a strong impulse of hope and high expectations of a great future for humankind. And indeed the progress of modern natural sciences followed by technical industrial production and rising medical standards caused life to become easier and more comfortable. The Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset has shown that today's average citizen enjoys more privileges than the elite of former times—Kings, aristocracy or ecclesial hierarchy. This fact points toward the intentions of Ludwig Feuerbach who requested to make out of 'candidates for the next world students of this world'. Feuerbach combined this perspective with the critical note that people had to be freed from the foolish Christian hopes for a future world in order to approach fully life here on earth.

But in this respect also conditions have fundamentally changed. The postmodern world has lost its optimism and the potential of hope seems quite exhausted. This is true in regard to individual as well as public conditions. When the eschatological goal is lost, all the expectations of a human being have to be pressed into the short span of life here on earth.

At the same time the modern person is still conditioned by the promise of the Enlightenment that the desire for happiness can be claimed as a basic (self evident) human right and that the political community has to fulfil the promise of happiness. Accordingly, the people of our generation have a pretty clear idea of how life on earth has to fulfil their expectations through luxury, lust and pleasures of every kind. Why should anybody renounce a personal advantage while there is such a vast variety of choices by which to enjoy life. The slogan: 'Let us eat and drink since tomorrow we die' widely determines Western civilization.

This attitude of hedonism is presumably the reason for the attractiveness of the Far Eastern idea of reincarnation. (The same idea, though, one finds also in Western philosophy in Plato and other thinkers.) Reincarnation seems to provide a second, third, and even further possibilities for another different and individually shaped plan for life. At the same time Europeans misunderstand and abuse the term rebirth. While Hindus and Buddhists hope to be freed from the burden of individual reincarnations, the Westerner

p. 348 sees in this philosophy a chance for a quantitative and excessive improvement of life.

One can also point out the basic position of modern hedonism in another context. For a long time the topic of sexuality was taboo in public discussion. At the same time, on the background of a Christian *ars moriendi*, i.e. the art of dying with dignity, one could talk openly about the experience of death in one's own family, one's neighbourhood, and so on. One was immediately confronted with the topic of death. Today the topic of sexuality is no long taboo, but instead the problem of death has become taboo. The thought of death is suppressed as far as possible in our modern society, because people have neither the courage nor the capability to face the problem of the end of life.

Since hedonism has become the dominant worldview, we should confront the modern person anew with the historical reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In our world of facts nobody may expect people to believe that they can manage the difficult experience of death on the basis of myths or mere symbols. Facing the problems of human misery, illness and death one cannot proclaim redemption and fulfilment in a mere metaphorical way. Whoever wants to face reality can do so only by confronting the factual character of this world with totally different facts. For this reason the argumentation of the apostle Paul in [1 Corinthians 15, 1-8](#) remains of great significance for our situation. Only the historical fact of the resurrection has the power to lead people to seek an encounter with Christ who is alive today.

Only people who are not influenced by the fear of death can resist the temptations of our hedonistic society. Paul's conviction as seen in [Romans 8:18](#) enables and encourages Christians to sacrifice their lives for their neighbour: 'I consider that the sufferings of this present time (and one probably could add: and the pleasures of this world) are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.' This hope opens people up to sharing earthly goods with the poor. It makes us willing to give away personal energy and time to those who need spiritual advice and practical aid.

The martyrs of the early church challenged the Hellenistic world of their day with its speculation about the immortality of the soul by their definite hope of the resurrection of the dead. I am convinced that as Christians in our modern world we have to rethink how we can proclaim the content of eschatological hope in a practical way. We should take courage to proclaim again the biblical message of the Judgement Day in an unrestricted manner. This applies to the promise of eternal life as well as to that of judgement and punishment. Only in this way can we establish the real historical context in which the coming rule of God can be stated and in which his rule can be proved to be relevant and evident. The horizon of time has to be rediscovered *sub specie aeternitatis* i.e. 'living with eternity in view'.

Another important aspect that should motivate us to focus clearly on the eschatological perspectives p. 349 of the Christian hope is the encounter with modern writers such as, for example, Franz Kafka. In his contributions, *The Castle* and *The Trial*, he describes emphatically what the result is when the modern person attempts to take on the role of Christ on Judgement Day. Where could we as people flee if we all blame and accuse each other and, at the same time, each one is the judge of his or her neighbour? In Germany we are currently painfully suffering from this problem. At first, after the fall of the wall and the reunification of our country, the church in Eastern Germany was highly respected as a kind of resistance movement against the communist regime. But step by step many files are being disclosed proving that the secret service of the former GDR was able to infiltrate the church through many spies. Many people working in the church made themselves available to and became informative collaborators of the secret service.



How shall we deal with all the human failures, the confusion and guilt that is revealed on every level of society, if we are responsible only to the institutions of this world and its courts? Who has the moral right to condemn those who became guilty under the heavy burdens of a dictatorship? In our political context the question of forgiving and reconciliation has become a pressing social problem. For this reason, not too long after the fall of the Berlin wall the German Evangelical Alliance chose the following sentence of the Lord's Prayer as the theme for its 1992 annual conference in Bad Blankenburg: 'And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors'. As Christians it is our particular responsibility to demonstrate the seriousness of human sin as well as to proclaim the wonderful offer of forgiveness through Jesus Christ into the hopeless situation of the guilty.

Finally, to the background of guilt and atonement we can also convincingly approach the theodicy question. We cannot blame God for all the misery in the world, but people have to humble themselves and expose themselves to God's judgment in order to receive justification through grace alone.

### **3. THE FACT OF MORAL DISORIENTATION AND THE CHANGING POWER OF CHRISTIAN LOVE**

If we entrust ourselves to the ideals of modernity, then the highest ambition of a human being is to become an autonomous personality. The highest goal is to become in all decision-making completely independent of moral judgements that are based only on tradition. Kant defined this goal of the Enlightenment in classical manner as the 'exodus of the human being out of an immaturity that was brought about by one's own fault'. This goal exposes the immature world citizen to the slogan: *sapere aude* (dare to make use of your intellect). The opposite position to this modern ethical autonomy, heteronomy, is the dependence on outer conditions, which means, the position that alienates the human being from him or herself simply by imposed traditions and fixed laws.

The fact of the resurrection provides [p. 350](#) a new understanding and a basically new experience beyond the contrasts of absolute self-determination and external determination, which goes far beyond the ethical alternatives of autonomy and heteronomy. The grounding of this tertium is the Easter event. Immediately before his ascension Jesus revealed himself as Lord in the presence of his disciples: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'. With this statement Christ emphasizes the fact that the Great Commission is rooted in the truth of his personal resurrection. By this the truth of the Christian faith is fundamentally distinguished from that of the founders of the religions and the great philosophers of the past. Their personal mandate unquestionably ended with their death. After their death their words were collected as literature and still have to be carefully preserved. The only way in which founders of religions and philosophers could influence intellectual history is in so far as the traditions that they left behind were preserved. Those who follow them are dealing with mere historical events and facts. Such a situation is very distant from the interaction of people who are living today and are communicating with each other.

Evangelical theology again and again has to become aware of the fact that it is dealing not only with the great historical past of Christianity, but with the living God who is present through the risen Christ. Because Christ is given all authority, theologians can express his words not only through literature, but also through continuous reference to Christ as one who is active today. I think this is one of the most important contrasting elements between evangelical and so-called historicalcritical theologians. The latter work with Scripture only on the basis of a historical approach. But there is an essential

difference between the effort to preserve for future generations the teaching of a prophet or a philosopher of the past who is now dead and the activity of the almighty Lord who reveals his word and works his miracles always anew throughout history. Those words that he spoke 2000 years ago prove today to be a living power, because Christ is the same Lord yesterday, today and for ever.

Christ is the only one who truly builds the bridge between transcendence and immanence, between heaven and earth. Through his incarnation he provides for the continuous fellowship between God and humankind. For this reason evangelical theologians can never follow the methodological atheism of secular science that is based on its presuppositions and thinks 'as if there were no God' (*etsi deus non daretur*). In contrast, real Christian theology grows out of the encounter of the learning disciple with the teaching Christ, of the theologian who is thinking about divine revelation with God who is revealing himself. This reality of the encounter of the theologian with Christ that is dominant in every theological reflection consequently requires that the theologian respect the presence of the living Lord. Theological reflection, by its very nature, is, therefore, possible only with the attitude of a humble servant, who hears the voice of his [p. 351](#) or her Lord and who bows down before him. God shows us the way that we are supposed to go through the concrete experience of divine guidance by means of his word and Spirit.

If I am not mistaken, against the background of the intellectual history of modernity, Jesus' word of [John 7, 16f](#) takes on a significant meaning: 'Then Jesus answered them: My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own.'

With these words Jesus also encourages the modern person who is primarily focused on empirical knowledge and its practical verification. Jesus invites people to experience his presence. In the adventure of realized and practised obedience of faith Jesus proves himself to be the Lord who is sent and authorized by God. Such a possibility of practically verifying a claim is important for people of our day who are completely oriented by their experiences. In the realm of faith they are supposed to experience the truth of Jesus by risking practical steps of discipleship and testing how the gospel carries through.

As a church we become attractive for people outside the walls of the church through obedience that is lived. Because if the love is visible, one can hear the message.

This means that Jesus' call for discipleship leads to a deep experience of the Christian calling that is of pressing importance today. The Christian calling cannot be compared with a job that one practises occasionally and as it seems right, but it is a necessity (*anangke*), which means an inescapable necessity. Paul expresses this in [1 Corinthians 9, 16](#) in a very personal way: 'If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!' This means that the apostle and missionary has an inner obligation that is comparable only to the prophetic passion of Jeremiah.

## LEAVEN IN A SECULAR SOCIETY

I have tried primarily to develop the topic that was given to me from the personal aspects of the Christian witness. The reason for this is that I am convinced that my approach is in agreement with the biblical testimony. But the personal dimension points at the same time toward a necessary penetration of modern society, because personal responsibility does not at all exclude the public involvement of the church. Here the political sphere is also included. And it is only through the priesthood of all believers that the task of an active church of Jesus Christ can be publicly fulfilled. Only the church as a whole can fulfil



the Christian calling in respect to its political and social dimension. My ministry with Christian student outreach (SMD, the German branch of IFES) has shown me how important is the cooperation of academically trained people in the various disciplines. For example, the questions of medical ethics need to be solved in cooperation with Christian physicians. What can we as theologians [P. 352](#) say about the extremely difficult problems regarding the beginning and the end of life without listening to physicians who are intentionally following Christ? We can mention in particular the discussion about abortion and euthanasia. Groups of Christian engineers, psychologists, lawyers, scientists, and so on, are needed to demonstrate intellectual as well as practically how Christians can overcome in their work the challenges of the modern world.

This aspect of the priesthood of all believers in some respect justifies theologically and socially Friedrich Gogarten's theory of secularization as a positive liberation of the human being involvement in the world of work. The so-called 'lay person' especially can be a helpful example at work if her or his life is marked by a biblical ethic. Individual theologians' synodal committees and others should, therefore, carefully evaluate how far they are able to make themselves familiar with the complicated interrelations of the modern world. This is essential in order to make competent statements. As a church we should provide a basic biblical orientation to the political scene but we may not become personally involved in matters of political controversy and claim that we are speaking on behalf of God with prophetic authority.

What are our chances as a Christian minority to influence the post-modern and post-Christian society? Sociological investigations show that already one or two percent of the population of a society are sufficient to make a noticeable change in that society. Such an influence on a whole society certainly requires a qualified minority that has clear cut goals. We should note carefully that this fact is a challenge, because it means that as a Christian minority we can deeply influence Western society and, at the same time, avoid the misconception that future awakenings can be planned. The goal of a missionary penetration of the secular world is not success but the fruit that Christ has promised for his word.

## **PERSPECTIVES OF RENEWAL**

In connection with the drastic changes that we have experienced in our world during the last three years, I remember an event that occurred in 1969. At the time of the student uprisings in Western Europe students held a so-called 'go in' during an assembly of 6000 people at the Kirchentag (a church rally) in Stuttgart. They uncovered a huge banner on which everyone could read: 'Jesus is dead. Marx is alive'. This was a typical phenomenon of modern secularism. In view of this provocation, Christians at that time had to ask themselves if there was still a chance for evangelism in a Europe that was marked by socialist utopias. Today, after the breakdown of world communism, the slogan 'Jesus is dead. Marx is alive' presents itself in a totally different light, because Marx is dead and Marxism-Leninism has come to its definite end—politically and ideologically.

For this reason we should consciously study the mystery of the church of Jesus Christ throughout church history. The mystery is that Christ protects his church and that he has continued to renew it [p. 353](#) throughout the centuries. I would like to illustrate this briefly from three extraordinary historical constellations:

Did everything not seem to be lost during the first centuries after Christ if, for example, one looks at the Diocletian persecutions? But Christ did not only strengthen the early church's faith. He also revealed himself as the living one, since the gospel penetrated the provinces of the Roman empire in spite of all the pagan resistance.

How dark and lost seemed the situation of the church during the era of the Renaissance popes. But in this difficult situation Christ initiated the Reformation, a renewal of his church from top to bottom. At the break of the 16th century nobody, from a human point of view, could predict such a deep change in the history of the church.

In the 19th century also the situation was extremely difficult. The crowds followed philosophers like Feuerbach and Marx who were critical of religion. But exactly at that time Christ gave the great awakening in North America and also many renewal movements in Europe. The result was a strong world-wide missionary movement that left behind strong marks of church growth in almost all countries of the Two-thirds World.

For this reason I would like to close with a perspective of hope. As evangelical theologians we are called to help the church of Christ in our day through solid teaching and research to fulfil better its calling in the modern world. The risen Christ alone is and remains the one who can give new motivation and new life for our post-Christian world. He is able to initiate a movement that we in our current conditions cannot even imagine. It is he who reveals himself as sovereign Lord of his church. His power is also active during persecution and in spite of small minorities. The reason for this is that his word has the power to generate renewal. Christ is Lord. Knowing that is sufficient in order to obey his calling in our modern world.

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# **The Crisis of Maturity in Africa**

**Isaac Zokoué**

## **PRELIMINARY REMARKS**

I must start by asking a practical question: what is the function of theology in the church and in society? If theology, in the strict sense, is man's discourse about God, it should function so as to restore men to the revelation of God in history. This revelation is, on the ultimate level, the incarnation of God in the history of mankind. Or to put it another way, theology functions by telling mankind how God can be united with it in its own existence, to change darkness into light, its slavery into liberty, its sadness into joy, its despair into hope, its poverty into wealth, its lostness into salvation. Theology, in the African context, can only hope to be speculative. It must consider the realities of a continent confronted by problems which, if they exist elsewhere as a common experience of mankind, take on the form of a curse in black Africa. It must mark out the road to follow for the African church which, confronted by a society ever more critical of it, is trying to find its own identity and spiritual maturity. It must indicate to African Christians the true role of authentic disciples of Jesus Christ, in a post-colonial society where the gospel needs to be lightened of all its colonial cultural weights.

Evangelical theology for the 21st century in Africa will certainly pass through a crisis of maturity. I use the term 'crisis', thinking of the conflict between conservative theology