

# Functional Secularization and Conversion: On the Changed Demands Made on Ministerial Action in the Catholic Church

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## 1. Basic Theory: Modernity – Religion

As a first step, a basic theoretical aspect that underlies the following remarks needs to be clarified: the very basic relationship between religion and modernity, which to the present day – at least in European societies – is discussed controversially.<sup>1</sup> The controversy unfolds – formulated simply – in two positions. The first position sees religion and modernity as two conflicting dimensions of social life.<sup>2</sup> All relationships and developments that make the society *modern* – for example, individualization and pluralization, rationalization and mechanization – stand, according to this position, more or less in opposition to religion and even compete with it. This is the classic model of the European Enlightenment, according to which religion gradually degenerates in modernity, because the metaphysical conceptual worlds of the Middle Ages are not compatible with the natural scientific rationality of modernity. In the words of Max Weber (1864–1920), the “spheres of the Irrational”<sup>3</sup> lose more and more ground under the cognitive circumstances of a modernity oriented on the natural sciences, and exist exclusively as a more or less romantic illusion for those

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1 Cf. Manuel Franzmann et al., eds., *Religiosität in der säkularisierten Welt: Theoretische und empirische Beiträge zur Säkularisierungsdebatte in der Religionssoziologie* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2006); Hans Joas et al., eds., *Säkularisierung und die Weltreligionen*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2007).

2 On these arguments, see: Detlef Pollack, *Säkularisierung – ein moderner Mythos? Studien zum religiösen Wandel in Deutschland* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 1–18.

3 Max Weber, “Wissenschaft als Beruf,” in *Politik und Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt/Main: Zweitausendeins, 2006), 1016–1040, here 1028.

contemporary human beings who are willing to pay for them with the “sacrifice of the intellect”.<sup>4</sup>

This model, as far as religion is concerned, is a model of degeneration. We basically find it today, too – at least as prerequisite in methodological thought – in strictly presented secularization theories, insofar as secularization is understood as a broadly constructed process that causes a loss of significance not only of religion, but also of values and earlier social orders. These theories continue to be advocated in academic discourse, but just as well in many parts of the more or less “right-conservative” or ultra-orthodox” milieus in the Christian denominations and in Judaism, as well as in parts of an Islam critical of modernity.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, when we speak about the demands made on ministerial action in late modernity in the context of this model, then the office and modern society stand oddly untouched over against each other, as if all that makes modernity what it is would not occur, or would not be allowed to occur, in the church and in the ecclesiastical office. Ministerial action then even stands under the particular permanent challenge of resisting the secularizing tendencies of the modern society. This model was conveyed by the reception of the, in its time, very well-known book *Die unsichtbare Religion*<sup>6</sup> by Thomas Luckmann. Luckmann distinguishes an “official model”<sup>7</sup> of religion in modern societies, as deposited in the institutions, for example, of the major churches, from a broad area of “individual religiosity”<sup>8</sup>. On the basis of an anthropologically oriented understanding of religion, Luckmann in this work identifies diverse modernization movements in the area of the religious, but sees these exclusively outside the traditional religious (ecclesiastical) institutions. This model suggests the conclusion that the established religious denominations and churches could avoid

4 Ibid., 1039.

5 Cf. Sybille Wentker, “Fundamentalismus und Islamismus – Definition und Abgrenzung,” in Sybille Wentker et al., eds., *Islam, Islamismus und islamischer Extremismus: Eine Einführung* (Wien – Köln – Weimar: Böhlau, 2008), 33–44, here 33–37; Alois Schifferle, *Die Piusbruderschaft: Informationen – Positionen – Perspektiven* (Kvelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 2009), 67–75; Jakob J. Petuchowski and Peter Klaiber, “Orthodoxes Judentum,” in Jakob J. Petuchowski et al., eds., *Lexikon der Begegnung: Judentum – Christentum – Islam* (Freiburg – Basel – Wien: Herder, 2009), 333–337, here 335–337.

6 Thomas Luckmann, *Die unsichtbare Religion in der sichtbaren Religion* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1991).

7 Ibid., 124.

8 Ibid.

the modernization process, insofar as pluralization and individualization take place exclusively outside their institutional limits.

The other position understands religion more as a part of modernity, not so much as a contrast to it. Staf Hellemans speaks of the "paradigm of religious modernization"<sup>9</sup> and means by this that "the thought and conduct of people always must be seen in interplay with social interactions, the social environment, and the society"<sup>10</sup>, also in the area of religious phenomena. According to this model, religion enters into a complex structure of relationships with modernity, insofar as all those relationships and developments that constitute the society as modern also occur in the area of the religious and of the churches and there assume specific forms.<sup>11</sup> The rationality of modernity, according to this model, also does not stop short of the area of religion and church, but rather runs through it and takes on specific forms there. When one speaks of the demands made on ministerial action in the context of this model, then the ecclesiastical office, or religion, and modernity do not remain untouched in confronting each other. On the contrary, both overlap each other. The question here is what demands are made upon ministerial action in the structure of the modern society, a ministerial action that itself is thoroughly modern. A short, incomplete example of modern ministerial action by the church can now be given:

9 Staf Hellemans, *Das Zeitalter der Weltreligionen: Religion in agrarischen Zivilisationen und in modernen Gesellschaften* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2010), 33.

10 *Ibid.*, 37.

11 This model is advocated similarly in Christoph Bochinger et al., eds., *Die unsichtbare Religion in der sichtbaren Religion – Formen spiritueller Orientierung in der religiösen Gegenwartskultur* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2009); Jürgen Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen: Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), 9–31; Charles Taylor, *Ein säkulares Zeitalter*, trans. Joachim Schulte (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2009). Habermas as well as Taylor, however, pursue the idea that religion exists more or less imbedded in modernity. If one so desires, then one can say that religion, or tradition, is imbedded in the *modern age*, for which reason a constant translation of religious commonplaces is necessary in the secular worlds of understanding (cf. Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen*, 20–25), while I advocate a consistently interactive model. This means that a tradition in its pure traditional form does not exist, but rather exclusively in the reconstructed cloak of modernity. This close connection between tradition and modernity begins already in the "resort" to the tradition, a resort which does not ensue as a matter of course, as socially automated, for example, but rather as mediated through modernity's compulsion to decide (cf. Peter Berger, *Der Zwang zur Häresie: Religion in der pluralistischen Gesellschaft*, trans. Willi Köhler [Frankfurt/Main: S. Fischer, 1980]).

How should one characterize, for example, the re-orientation of ecclesiastical practice in the aftermath of the Council of Trent (1545–1563) other than as *modern* – modern insofar as, in reaction to the crisis of the Reformation, something like a comprehensive “process of organizational development” was initiated using more or less “secular” and practical – occasionally almost strategic – reason? The training of priests was improved through investment in education, the standardization of the missal was furthered, the faith of the church was more or less “didacticized” through the *Catechismus Romanus*, and church life was re-organized thoroughly with the introduction of the territorial principle of the parish – all of this, of course, also at the price of strengthening European confessionalization.<sup>12</sup> The present-day restructuring processes in many German-speaking dioceses, which are worked out, as a rule, by professional consulting firms, are not so dissimilar to the processes in the aftermath of Trent.

However this process may be interpreted in detail, important is the basic theoretical insight that religion, and therewith also the church, is not exempt from the modernization processes of the society and do not stand aloof from them, so that one could more or less look upon them from the outside. On the contrary, religion can be understood as part of modernity, as a part that, in its Protestant variant since the Reformation at the latest, and in the Catholic variant since the Counter-Reformation at the latest, has taken the stage as an actor in modernity and entered into the contest to determine modernity’s shape. With the background of this basic theoretical insight, it is now possible to ask about the power of attraction of the late modern transformations that place the modern ministerial action of the church before constantly changing challenges.

## 2. Challenges for Ministerial Action

In the following, two aspects are presented that result for the ecclesiastical office in the context of the overlapping of religion and modern society mentioned above. The first is directed at hermeneutical demands; the second is directed at the shaping of the relationship between the office and the individual in modern society.

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12 Bernd Möller, *Geschichte des Christentums in Grundzügen*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed., UTB 905 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 265–271.

## 2.1 Functional Secularization and Secular Theological Hermeneutics

If we take this relationship between religion and modernity (see above) as the basis for the analysis of the present, then the circumstances of the church's ministerial action consequently are not to be determined without an analysis of (late) modern society. And exactly this is to be undertaken here in a particular way by asking about the communicative "locality" of religion and the church in the modern society. In this way, a central notion of secularization in modernity, which is articulated above all in the internal sphere of religion and the church, also is to be explained.

No development changed the face of religion certainly as much as the re-organization of society from a hierarchical one to one that is functionally differentiated. If the church in the so-called "pre-modern"<sup>13</sup> societies was part of the elite in the social hierarchy, and if the Christian religion was part of a higher, epistemic, comprehensive structure, then the church loses this position in the transition to modernity. Speaking along the lines of Niklas Luhmann<sup>14</sup>, one can say that modernity developed different social subsystems, each of which developed – and to the present day still develop – their own communications and carry out their own specific social functions. In the course of modernization, there arose those specializations in knowledge and action typical of modernity. Every participant in a subsystem becomes, on the basis of a specific internal communication, an expert in his or her own (subject) area. Mutual understanding is hardly possible in this multi-disciplinary arrangement. Interaction between the subsystems occurs primarily through the performance of various services.

This development, of course, did not stop short of the area of religion and the church. The church, or religion in general, became a social subsystem alongside others. In this way, an ambivalent situation arose, inso-

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13 The terms *pre-modernity* and *modernity* are, to be sure, definitely customary, but it must not be overlooked that a gross inaccuracy goes hand in hand with them. For example, so-called "pre-modernity" also spoke about a conduct of life aimed at rationality. Of course, the *forms* of rationality, however, are subject to historical as well as social change, for which reason modernity also has developed its own forms of the use of reason. Cf. Romano Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit. Ein Versuch zur Orientierung*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1986), 25–29.

14 Cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme: Grundriss einer allgemeinen Theorie*, 14<sup>th</sup> ed. (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1987).

far as religious institutions and their representatives attained the status of experts more or less in the course of the processes of functional specialization, but, on the other hand, the religious communication conducted by them, in contrast to the “pre-modern” society, lost its power of communicating with the entire society. Expressed briefly, one can say that religious communication is understandable in modern, functionally differentiated societies exclusively in the internal sphere of specific religious *functional* contexts.

In this way, Niklas Luhmann, who has described this functional reorganization of society in detail<sup>15</sup>, explains a notion of secularization central to modernity that occurs especially in the internal sphere of religious functional contexts – for example, in the internal space of the church. From the point of view of the subsystem “religion”, according to Luhmann, all other areas of society appear as without religion, or secularized, because it can be observed that all these functional contexts do without religious communication. From the perspective of other social subsystems, religion very definitely exists in the modern society. It is even a natural component of society. For, according to Luhmann, it is a completely normal development for modern societies that they arrange themselves according to specific tasks.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, what we presently experience is a secularization in terms of function, and not, for example, in terms of substance. Religion does not simply degenerate, but rather undergoes a specialization into particular functional contexts on the one hand and, at the same time, however, loses its communicative comprehensibility for the entire society. This distinction is important because, on the one hand, it clearly states that, in many social functional contexts, religion or religious communication does not occur (in political, legal, and economic contexts, for example). But, this does not mean that religion – for example, in the sense of the nurture of an existential relationship on the part of human beings with God – might have disappeared from modernity. To equate modernity automatically with “loss of faith” or even perhaps with “forgetfulness in regard to God” is highly problematic and is a methodological mistake, because it does not take into consideration the concrete social circumstances of religion and the church.

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15 Cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Funktion der Religion*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1999).

16 Niklas Luhmann, *Die Religion der Gesellschaft*, ed. André Kieserling (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), 289.

Therewith, a first challenge for ministerial action in the church is identified: The traditional religious communication in ministerial action is, under the circumstances of a functional secularization, confronted with a problem of understanding. Meant here is not primarily a rhetorical problem, but rather a problem as far-reaching as the basis of modern human beings' understanding. For, the traditional metaphysical configuration of religious concepts and philosophy is not understood (any longer) in a (late) modern society that constantly re-composes itself from out of a multitude of specific functional communications. *Metaphysical* here means, following Jürgen Habermas<sup>17</sup> and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (here, the two letters from April 30 and May 5, 1944)<sup>18</sup>, a form of thought that is theoretical-abstract, objective, and aimed at general comprehensibility, a form of thought that refers to a (meta-) world "behind" the experienced world. In the context of a functionally differentiated modernity, there thus resulted considerable hindrances in communication: It is hardly possible for contemporaries to determine the realistic relevance of religious content configured metaphysically in the sense indicated above. Thereby, they find it not only difficult to experience the ministerial action of the church as relevant to their life, because that *saving power of God* (cf. Rom 1:16), which the office communicates, can be experienced only with difficulty as a power that has an effect in the concrete contexts of life. Questions like these are not a rarity today: What purpose does the ecclesiastical office fulfill in my concrete life? What does an experience of reality communicated in the intellectual and linguistic worlds of religion contribute to my life? Does the ministerial action in the church help me further in my life? Does the use of a religious "service" help me to be able to master life better?

The demand made upon ministerial action resulting from this, thus, is not a rhetorical one, but rather a hermeneutical demand. What is important is to communicate the tradition intellectually and practically so that it becomes understandable under the intellectual circumstances of a functionally secularized society and can retain concrete significance within modern human beings' systems of relevance. For this, the individual and social relevance of religious tradition must be reconstructed. This is

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17 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken: Politische Aufsätze*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 35–42.

18 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, 16<sup>th</sup> ed. (Gütersloh: Christian Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1997), 140–144.



a demanding theological-hermeneutical task. It is already prefigured by biblical as well as ecclesiastical traditions, because the human being is believed there to be the "addressee" of the self-revealing God (cf. Deut 26:5–9; Exod 3:6–17; Luke 11:20). Thereby, all speech about God has an anthropological and social, in short, a historical, applicability. Precisely through the connection of God with the secular history of the addressee, revelation, so to speak, reaches its goal. Seen in this way, it is not a contradiction to speak of a secular theological hermeneutic that is needed in our time.

## 2.2 Individual Conversion and the Office

Insofar as the church, too, is always a protagonist in modernity, many phenomena that constitute the modern society also appear in it. Thus, one of these is individualization, which is a challenge for the ministerial action of the religious denominations in a quite particular way. At issue is the relationship between *individualization* and the *ministerial office* as it presents itself in the internal sphere of the religious denominations. I understand individualization as a characteristic feature of modernity, according to which human beings first interpret reality according to individual criteria and so outline their own reality without asking *primarily* about traditional or socially necessary models. This macro-sociological trend of individualization, of course, also appears in the church.

I would not like to be misunderstood here: The trend toward individualization is, in principle, not a theological problem – even if this perhaps in many places is lamented as such. The major world religions as well as the (national mainline) churches always were and are complex structures with a great internal heterogeneity in regard, for example, to spiritual expression, cultural forms, and, of course, the individual practice of piety. Without esteem for the individual, this more or less "popular religious" or "popular church" internal plurality would not even be conceivable. The counter-model to a church with such a complex composition would be the "small sect" that pursues conformity among its members.

Thus, the challenge today does not exist principally in individualization, but rather in the question how, under the circumstances of a functionally differentiated society and of a functional secularization, *individual spirituality* and the office – that is, individual interpretation and what is general, public, what concerns all – merge. Put in biblical terms, leadership – an essential dimension of the ecclesiastical office – means



service to the general public. The charisma, so writes Paul, for example, in 1 Corinthians, has to serve the entire body of Christ, the whole church, without for this reason abolishing the individuality of the charisma (1 Cor 12:1–30). In terms of modern intellectual assumptions, the issue here is a classic dialectical configuration. And exactly in this dialectical tension do I see the challenges for ministerial action in late, individualized modernity.

It is becoming increasingly more difficult to ensure this unity of tension between the individual charisma and the concerns of the entire, the general church. Meant here is not the lack of priests, which in the meantime has become notorious for the Catholic Church. Rather, what is at issue is a development according to which the circle of those interested in the vocational practice of an ecclesiastical office increasingly is composed of persons for whom individual conversion is the central motive for their choice of vocation. Conversion here does not inevitably mean the quasi-official, formal change of confessional or religious affiliation, but rather, first of all, the comprehensive change of “religious, ideological, or political orientation”<sup>19</sup> that is consummated on the basis of dramatic individual experiences. Hubert Knoblauch sees a central element of modern, popular spirituality in the conversion type. In the center of conversion, in most cases, stands the overwhelming, individual, biographical experience of change and the intention henceforth to lead a quite different life.<sup>20</sup> Peter Sloterdijk analyzes the situation similarly when he says that the modern type of the radical convert seeks a “complete turnaround – a turn away from what superficially is a given”<sup>21</sup>. Conversion in modernity means not only the “turning” (Sloterdijk’s word) of the person, but also the movement of withdrawal out of a false and suboptimal world toward an “incorruptible spiritual world”<sup>22</sup>.

In the charismatic and evangelical movements, for example, *conversion* is a thoroughly well-known type of spirituality, and this combines there with a structural plurality and independence of spiritual movements. For Catholicism, however, this phenomenon is relatively new. It poses a completely new challenge for the Catholic Church, which tradi-

19 Karl-Heinz Hillmann, “Konversion,” in idem, ed., *Wörterbuch der Soziologie*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Stuttgart: Kröner, 2007), 457.

20 Cf. Hubert Knoblauch, *Populäre Religion: Auf dem Weg in eine spirituelle Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 2009), 149.

21 Peter Sloterdijk, *Du musst dein Leben ändern: Über Anthropotechnik* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), 468.

22 Ibid., 469.

tionally attaches particular importance to the structural unity of the social forms.<sup>23</sup> It is a concomitant since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century at the latest of the continuing decay of confessional macro-structures in the society. It was also an achievement of the Catholic confessional milieu to diminish an overemphasis upon individual spiritual interests through socialization and rooting in a confessional social space, in spite of all the problems that these ties to a milieu can have for the individual. The fact that, after the break-up of the confessional milieus, the convert gradually becomes the determinative type of the applicant for an ecclesiastical office is thus seen in this way not as a coincidence, but rather as a phenomenon of late modern religious contemporary culture in the sphere of the church.

To put it in slightly exaggerated terms: If individual conversion guides ministerial action, then this action is in danger of losing sight of the general, of what concerns all. The challenge of late modernity, thus, consists in so designing ministerial action that it is able to see beyond the individual spiritual needs of the officeholder and to further the building up of the congregation, without, for this reason, declaring individual concerns obsolete. The Second Vatican Council formulates the assignment indicated here by stating, "... [I]t is a matter of saving the person of the human being and of renewing human society" (*Gaudium et spes*, 3).

An example: In his study of priests, Paul Michael Zulehner diagnoses a trend among younger priests that is strongly skeptical of modernity.<sup>24</sup> He comes to the conclusion that "the younger priests are more reserved toward all modernizing changes than are the older ones. They really would prefer that everything might remain as it were, or that the church – after the, in their eyes, unsuccessful conciliar reforms – would return to the old ways".<sup>25</sup>

Under the intellectual assumptions of that model mentioned above, according to which religion and modernity stand over against each other as competitors, this phenomenon described by Zulehner would be interpreted more or less as a "return" to the "old church" before Vatican II. Ideas about a return to earlier times, however, are historically-herme-

23 The long-term conflict around the structural integration of the Pius Brotherhood, which demands intensive ideological and structural autonomy, in the whole of the Catholic Church proves this thesis. See further: Wolfgang Beinert, ed., *Vatikan und Pius-Brüder: Anatomie einer Krise* (Freiburg: Herder, 2009).

24 Paul M. Zulehner, *Wie geht's Herr Pfarrer? Ergebnis einer kreuzundquer-Umfrage: Priester wollen Reformen* (Wien – Graz – Klagenfurt: Styria, 2010), 115–116.

25 *Ibid.*, 118.

neutically difficult. But, under the intellectual assumptions according to which religion and modernity overlap, this phenomenon means a conversion phenomenon and is thereby the expression of an individualistically conceived idea of the office. For, the desire of young people to extract themselves from a public reality (which is designated as modernity or modern) and to enter into the individual, cognitive construction of reality becomes visible here.<sup>26</sup> Zulehner suggests this with a view to the age at which the young priests are consecrated.<sup>27</sup> At issue in his study is, thus, not a return to the "old church" nor the stereotypes of "conservative" and "progressive", but rather the individual spiritual needs of certain young men who have to carry out a change from an ideologically and, in regard to the ways of life, highly pluralistic society to a religious concept designed by them in accordance with their needs, and attempt to realize this concept in a career context. This view is supported by the empirical study of priests by Karsten Lenz.<sup>28</sup> He comes to the conclusion that, with the conversion to the office of priest, the vocational choice has a "stabilizing and ordering function within the biography of the person concerned"<sup>29</sup>. The conversion, in coming to terms with a possibly dramatic biographical experience, is intended to help in being able henceforth to lead a completely different life. The phenomenon of supposedly conservative young officeholders in the church would be – as paradoxical as this, at first, might sound – a central element of *modern* religious culture.

The challenge for the future shape and practice of the ecclesiastical office exists, thus, in reconciling the specific spiritual motives of the candidates for office and of the younger officeholders, motives that precipitate in a biographical conversion experience and flow into a concept of ecclesiastical vocation, with the concerns and charismata of the entire church and the entire people of God. For, the ecclesiastical office as understood by the church does not serve primarily the individual spiritual development of the officeholder, but rather "it represents and organizes the unity of the congregation in the diversity of the charismata. The cha-

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26 See further: Hubert Knoblauch et al., eds., *Religiöse Konversion: Systematische und fallorientierte Studien in soziologischer Perspektive* (Konstanz: UVK, 1998); Christian Henning and Erich Nestler, eds., *Konversion: Zur Aktualität eines Jahrhundertthemas* (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 2003).

27 Zulehner, *Wie geht's Herr Pfarrer?*, 115–116.

28 Karsten Lenz, *Katholische Priester in der individualisierten Gesellschaft* (Konstanz: UVK, 2009).

29 *Ibid.*, 197.

risma of the sacramental office consists in the leadership of the congregation: it fosters and develops the various tasks and services".<sup>30</sup>

### 3. Perspectives in Conclusion

The church, as said at the outset, is part of the modern society, is exposed to all macro-sociological developments, and is a specific actor. In the sense of an inculturation of the Gospel in society (cf. John 1:14; Luke 2:6–7), this religious-sociological insight is not threatening to the church. It describes much more the central task of ecclesiastical practice: to give shape to the Gospel under concrete historical and cultural circumstances.<sup>31</sup> The Gospel, however, is not automatically congruent with all cultural forms. Pope Paul VI speaks, on the one hand, of a "break between the Gospel and culture"<sup>32</sup>, as was the case in all periods (thus, not only in modernity), and, on the other hand, of "evangelizing the culture in a bold way"<sup>33</sup>. For this reason, a creative element in church practice in the spirit of the Gospel is necessary, a creative element that makes clear the cultural indentifiability of the Gospel along with the always existing difference between the Gospel and culture. The fundamental necessity for the inculturation of the Gospel is thereby not affected, for the break between the Gospel and culture (Paul VI) is not a hindrance to the faith, but rather its prerequisite.<sup>34</sup>

#### 3.1 Theological Hermeneutics of Existential Drama

The analysis of the place of the church in a functionally differentiated society and the remarks about a functional secularization are, first of all, to be perceived realistically. Over and above this, one cannot be satisfied in

30 Gerhard L. Müller, *Katholische Dogmatik: Für Studium und Praxis der Theologie*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Freiburg/Breisgau: Herder, 2010), 754–755.

31 Cf. Johannes Först, "Theologisch legitime Säkularität," *Lebendige Seelsorge* 62/1 (2011): 36–40, here 38.

32 Paul VI, Apostolic Instruction *Evangelii nuntiandi*, in *AAS* 68 (1976), 9–26, Abs. 20.

33 *Ibid.*

34 See, in more detail: Johannes Först, "Ein Bruch zwischen Evangelium und Kultur? Überlegungen zum Phänomen der 'Kirchenferne' und zur Zukunft der 'Volkskirche'," *Bibel und Liturgie* 81/1 (2008): 3–19, here 9–11.

pastoral-theological terms with the fact that the public communication of the church takes place exclusively in functional religious contexts, even if this undoubtedly is necessary in the sense of a practice of inculturation. For, the Gospel, in theological understanding, has a communicative reach beyond the functional religious context – into the midst of the basic existential questions asked by *all* human beings. Seen so, the ecclesiastical office has to bring forth a renewed effort to find what is common to all, that is, what concerns everyone in a modern society, and to place this in the center of action. This task, in view of the extreme diversity of modern life, is, of course, quite complex. However, a possibility exists in a renewed involvement with the existential drama of modern life and its corresponding social as well as cultural complexity. The goal is not to employ a purely rhetorical art of translation, but rather really to provide a genuine translation, a reconstruction of the tradition in the midst of the concrete existential concerns of modern human beings. The important thing is to translate the drama of human life into the drama of the saving God-human relationship (cf. GS 1).

Of course, no undifferentiated uniform anthropology can be supported in this way. Yet, the current existential challenges of modern life appear as a suitable structure for making the Gospel accessible. This is true not only because this aspect can be substantiated very well biblically (cf. Ex 6:6–7; Matt 5:1–16), but also because, insofar as it takes human beings as its theme, it occurs in all the subsystems of modern society and thus can break through the lack of communication between the systems. The young Joseph Ratzinger once formulated this in the following way: The action of the church, he wrote, is of such a kind “that the theologian must enter into the fundamental experience of the passion of human existence, in order from its perspective again to re-live and re-suffer the theological question on its own ground, and thus to make theology able once again to make a testimony to this *passio humana*.”<sup>35</sup>

Thus, the answer to functional secularization would be found on the level of existential humanity. Thereby, ministerial action gains a sacramental character.

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35 Joseph Ratzinger, *Das neue Volk Gottes. Entwürfe zur Ekklesiologie* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1969), 289.

### 3.2 Theological Hermeneutics of the Secular and the "General Public"

To make theology able to make a testimony to the, as Ratzinger formulated it, *passio humana* is not possible without the corresponding theological-hermeneutical competence. Needed is a theological epistemology that is able to discern those "signs" (cf. GS 4) in the purely secular and human existential contexts that make it possible to speak of God in the sense of analogy and to act accordingly. Needed is, thus, an opening of theology, already in university studies and in vocational training and continuing education, to the disciplines that have the human being, society, and culture as their subjects. Formulated differently, what is needed in this connection is a *semantic turn* in theology similar to the one articulated by Pope John XXIII in the address opening the Second Vatican Council. The Pope says, in essence, that it cannot be the task of the church only to preserve the treasures of tradition. They require an exegesis that our day requires.<sup>36</sup> This follows closely the line of the entire Second Vatican Council when it says in *Gaudium et spes*, for example, that the action of the church has to decipher the world in its symbolic character and to interpret it in light of the Gospel (GS 4). For this, the corresponding hermeneutical competence for opening theology and the pastorals to the corresponding disciplines having the human being as their subjects (above all sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies, among others) is needed. Therewith, the ministerial action of the church stands before the challenge of making the secular world the object of theological interpretation and not, for example, of pursuing a reversal of secularization. This opening to the secular also means looking beyond the individual spiritual needs of those active in ministry and being able to take into consideration the concerns of the general public (see above).

### 3.3 Differentiated Ministerial Action of the Whole Church

In conclusion, it may be said that the ministerial action of the church is to be differentiated along the lines of the variformity of modern social areas. There is this one theological-hermeneutical method, of which the Second

<sup>36</sup> Johannes XXIII, "Ansprache anlässlich der feierlichen Eröffnung des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils am 11. Oktober 1962," in Peter Hünemann and Bernd Jochen Hilberath, eds., *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, vol. 5 (Freiburg: Herder, 2006), 482–490, here 486–487.

Vatican Council speaks, but there is not the one concrete "answer" of the pastorals. The church stands before the challenge of portraying this differentiated theological-hermeneutical task also through its personnel. Irrespective of the distinction made between a special and a general office, the same hermeneutical challenge exists for both. What the church needs to provide are appointed and authorized men and women who are furnished with a certain authority to act committedly on behalf of the church as a whole. For this, correspondingly differentiated and well-educated personnel are necessary. Necessary are human beings who can move generally within the different subsystems and milieus of the modern society, who can understand what is at all existentially important there in each case. Without this secular understanding, there is no theology. It is the necessary prerequisite for being able to speak theologically of the world and for committed ministerial action in the world in the spirit of the Gospel.



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# Rabbi – Pastor – Priest

Their Roles and Profiles Through the Ages

Edited by  
Walter Homolka  
and  
Heinz-Günther Schöttler

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