The Challenge of Religion in the '80s

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JÜRGEN MOLTMANN

✦ HISTORY doesn't depend on dates. Nor does it parcel itself out in decades, each with a neat label for easy identification. Talk about "the '60s," "the '70s" or "the '80s" doesn't even come close to an understanding of the actual experience of history. Nevertheless, people depend on dates — to order history and to organize events. And we stop at the end of a decade to take stock, to ask: How did we get here? Where do we go from here?

Our evaluation of the events of the past ten years is irrevocably influenced by which side of the fence we were on in the '60s. But no matter which side people were on, they describe that decade in ways that are remarkably similar. After the outbreak of hope, after the awakening of new life styles in almost every area of life in the years following 1960, after the decade of promise and possibility, we met in the oil crisis of 1973 an impossibility which we could not ignore.

A World with Limits

With that shock it became suddenly and sharply clear — if only for a moment — that we live no longer in a "world of unlimited possibilities," but rather in a situation in which we are cornered by increasing shortages and scarcity on all sides. The revolutionary '60s were followed by the reactionary '70s. The outbreak of hope ran head-on into opposition, resistance and doubt. Worldwide protest was replaced by common retreat into self-pity. The cult of the individual and the individual's rights ruled the '70s. Not Prometheus but Narcissus was the idol of this era.

In 1978 the news analysts of *Time* magazine announced as the chief characteristic of the Germans not their acclaimed workaholism, nor their economic miracle, but their anxiety. That anxiety should be the controlling mood of people in an economically successful country is not only remarkable — it is dangerous. Anxiety breeds aggression. It extorts and distorts. It shrouds the future in shadow. Will we learn to live with this anxiety? How will we overcome it so that we can accomplish undaunted what we have to do before it is too late? This, it seems to me, is the question of the '80s.

If we look at the religious landscape of the '70s, then we must acknowledge — whether we want to or not — that the challenge of secularization to Christianity has disappeared. Christianity is now challenged by a revitalization of religion. Those critics of the church who had reckoned with a "death of religion" (Marx, Lenin) miscalculated. Those who had hoped for a "religionless Christianity" (Bonhoeffer) were disappointed. Those who proclaimed that "God is dead" now learn to fear the god of Ayatollah Khomeini.

The Search for Religious Experience

There is a strong tendency in the secular world view to demand the sacrifice of all other religious drives to its own belief in progress. But the more the secular belief in progress — be it capitalistic, socialistic or positivistic — thrives on the crises it creates for itself, the more strongly do religious passions surface in public life. Politically, the modern underestimation of religion has led to mistaken judgments that have critical consequences — for example, Washington's inability to understand the recent events in Iran.

When we ask which discussions have disappeared from theological debate, we are confronted with a similar series of events. The secularization debate, the remythologization discussion, the "God is dead" theology, and the questions of religion's critics — Feuerbach, Marx, Freud and Nietzsche — are obsolete. They have been replaced by so-called religious topics, from meditation to the myths and stories of people to the organization of religion.

The new search for religious experience is deeply ambiguous. Religious experience is as much a challenge to the Christian faith as is secularization. If the religious phenomena we experience today witness to anything, it is to the profound truth of Berdyaev: "Man is incurably religious." Religion is thus as much a threat as a hope. "Religious" people can become the most dangerous on earth. The Christian faith cannot choose to distance itself from religion. But neither can it identify itself with religion. The Christian faith must bring its healing and liberating power to these various religious phenomena. In my book *The Crucified God* (Harper & Row, 1974) I tried to argue that faith in the crucified Christ is the faith that heals and frees us. In Christendom everything must be tested by the cross, secularity as well as religion.

Today the challenge of religion meets us *in* the churches and, even more, *through* the churches.

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Here it pulls us in two opposite directions at the same time. We hear it in the call for security, authority and belonging. But we hear it also in the cry for more freedom, spontaneity and community. Consequently, we find a powerful polarization. On one hand, the Christian church moves toward the bureaucracy of an organized religion; on the other, it moves toward the spirit of a voluntary community.

The Church in Tension

After the fall of the state church in 1919, the Protestant church in Germany saw itself as a people's church (*Volkskirche*). The church was for everyone; it was open to everyone – but only for their religious needs. The *Volkskirche* is a church *for* the people, not *of* and *by* the people. By definition, the people's church stands above political parties and social conflicts. The church presents itself as the third party in mediation and reconciliation. It takes no political stance. One-sided partisan and critical statements violate the church's social constitution.

The contemporary critic of religion has protested vehemently against this posture. But the '70s answer to the church critics of the '60s was the attempt totally to assimilate church and society in the name of organized religion. The church should satisfy the religious needs of people in the society; it should trust, advise and lead the people; it should protect the society with a religious network of spiritual security. The church should release people from deciding for themselves about moral and religious principles; it should organize the meaning of life for them, and assure them of the higher values of their society.

Prerequisite for all of this, of course, is that everybody "belong" to the church. Active participation is not required, or even wished.

This is the explanation for the curious situation in Germany, where 95 per cent of the people "belong" to a church, only 10-15 per cent participate actively, and the church is nonetheless considered to be fairly "stable." If Christians give in to this tendency, they will one day discover that their religion is only circumstantially related to Christianity. The Christian faith would then become unnecessary and dispensable.

On the other side, there is the movement toward spontaneity and the growth of autonomous communities. During the recent annual celebration in West Germany of Protestant and Roman Catholic church days (*Kirchentage*), the full-blown impact of this movement became more and more apparent. The hall with the "Market of Alternatives" in the Nuremberg festival displayed not 100 but 1,000 different varieties of community and styles of spontaneity. There were core communities and diakonia communities, therapeutic, social, political, academic, proletariat, charismatic, ecumenical, missionary and feminist communities scattered throughout. Each offered its own alternative to established religion: voluntary commitment, comprehensive community, liberating self-realization.

We can believe only what we ourselves have experienced and understood. We can be held responsible only for what we have decided according to our own consciences. We can experience the church only when we experience the community in which all people are free because they accept one another and throw all cultural prejudices to the wind. Here we can be spontaneous. Here we can live concretely. Here we can do something practical. "Established norms and values" and "unquestioned recognition of authority" have nothing to do with real life.

If one asks these Christians how their faith and their inner lives are nurtured, they answer: first, through the voluntary character of the community, and second, in the concrete experience of the community. The institutional church has been left lying in the dust. In my book *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (Harper & Row, 1977), I suggested theologically responsible and practical steps toward a conversion of the "people's church" into a community church. I see myself as a "free-church person" in the midst of a *Volkskirche*.

The 'Youth Religions'

The churches in West Germany are losing their monopoly on religion in these decades. This development is a second religious challenge. The pluralism of voluntary, autonomous communities is also

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Near the Hospital Landing Pad

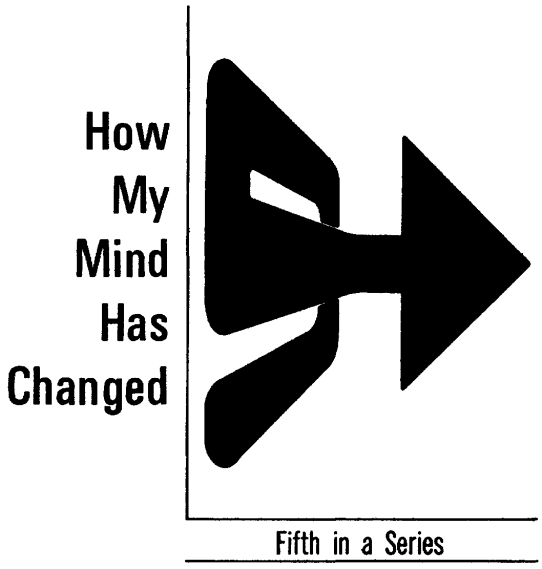
✦ A HOSPITAL chopper overhead
Rattling our windows day and night
Ferries the dying, or the dead,
To medicine's supremest rite.

Top surgeons may install a pump
To bolster up a reluctant heart,
Or do a postmortem on the chump
Who quit before the pump could start.

Some passenger may lie in state
For months, attended by a machine,
While apprehensive relatives wait
For science to strip their bankrolls clean.

One does not know exactly what
Moves overhead, or to what end.
One only hopes that it is not
The death by bankruptcy of a friend.

HAROLD MCCURDY.



ambiguous. More and more frequently missionaries and religious agitators surface who speak of the "church" in terms of churches. The most notorious of these groups is the Unification Church of the Korean Sun Myung Moon — the Moonies. Their doctrine is a simplistic messianism; their organization, tactics and strategy, however, are highly sophisticated. We are accustomed to lumping this and other meditative and occult practices together under the label "new religions." Many people call them "youth religions" (*Jugendreligionen*).

But in fact the Christian churches in Europe stand powerless before these new phenomena. They feel threatened by Hare Krishna, Mun Bagwan and others, and they react to them as the privileged churches, the churches of kings and popes, have always reacted against heretics. The sweet seduction of the youth religions — with their escape into an ersatz family structure, their spiritual retreat to a security that demands no responsibility, their blind obedience to authority — is life-threatening.

On one hand, these new religions are temptations for young people and old to step out of a life which they fear they cannot deal with. On the other hand, such groups offer healing for people suffering in the technocratic society. Whoever has experienced the "inner light" knows that he or she is not a nobody. One steps out of anonymity and powerlessness. Whoever comes before the bureaucratic tangle of society, like Kafka's defendant in *The Trial*, finds in these religious communities a "family": one knows that one "belongs."

These new religions succeed precisely because of the deficiencies and contradictions which the church and the society have created and cannot seem to overcome. They point to what is wrong and sick in the relationship between church and society. Finally, the new religious underground reveals the guilty conscience of church and society. So long as these two stay as they are, these new underground religions will continue to expand. A single, uniform and controlled religious world can never be reinstated through sanction and censure.

'Strangers in Their Own Country'

If the church loses its monopoly on religion in society, it also loses its claim to be the single representative of Christianity. For this reason, many of the above-mentioned voluntary groups and basic communities offer a variety of options and alternatives for believers. The more immobile and conservative the church superstructure becomes, the more seriously the Christian action and movement of these groups must be taken. These groups can move freely and decisively.

Implicitly, a "people's church" will always represent the ruling interests of its own people; a civil religion openly represents the interests of the groups in power. Only voluntary and determined groups, made up of people who are prepared to become "strangers in their own country," can operate against the prevailing interests and the pressure of self-interested parties. This was the experience of the Confessing Church in the struggle during the Nazi regime (*Kirchenkampf*). It is also the experience of the church in South Africa, South Korea, Latin America.

The more Christians in West Germany come into ecumenical solidarity with the peoples of the Third World, the more they come into conflict with the established loyalties of their own people. And they are often left in the lurch by church leaders who have to move cautiously in order not to offend anyone. This was the bitter experience not only of the student congregations but also of the Protestant churchwomen who organized to boycott fruit from South Africa. If our churches surrender to the values and interests of the Bundesrepublik, they will be alienated from ecumenical community with the churches in the Third World. In the case of black liberation movements in southern Africa and Latin American liberation theology, a new "Babylonian captivity" of the church appears. This is no accusation; it is rather a statement of fact.

From this it follows that necessary Christian actions and movements must be taken over more and more by groups and movements within the church, rather than by the church itself. To what extent can the church integrate these various groups? When must separations be taken into account? Over what issues? To be able to make such determinations presupposes an understanding of what is distinctively Christian. But without such an understanding, and without faith, the church cannot answer the religious challenge.

Foresight and wish are mingled together in every projection for the '8os. This projection is no exception: it is unabashedly personal. After the outbreak of hope in the '6os in which I participated, and after

the experience of anxiety and the retreat into the self, which I suffered rather unwillingly during the '70s, I see in the future neither a new euphoria of hope nor widespread panic. I see rather the beginnings of a sober heroism.

By that I mean courage in the midst of legitimate anxiety, caution in the midst of mobilized hope. I mean the courage to do what we have to do decisively before it is too late. We need hope which is made wise by experience but is undaunted by disappointment. We need an anxiety about the future that teaches us new self-consciousness but does not unnerve us. Many people full of hope wrecked themselves on the problems of the world, because they couldn't handle themselves. Others left the world in an attempt to find themselves. Both roads lead to dead ends. In the future we must approach the real problems of the world without self-contempt, and we must find self-assurance without pessimism. □

Shadow Boxing with Death

Most of us have attitudes toward death that have been shaped by outmoded scientific views.

PARKER ROSSMAN

✦ ACTORS often withdraw from the cast of a play for one reason or another: perhaps, for example, they are not willing to mouth obscene lines, or to appear naked on stage. But one director faced an unusual problem in October 1979 with the cast of *Shadow Box*, William Christopher's Pulitzer Prize–winning play about terminally ill people waiting to die in a hospice (an environment — created by medical professionals, clergy and others — in which patients, aware of their impending death, can live out their last days free of pain, in pleasant surroundings, usually close to family members).

During rehearsals of the play at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre, near New London, Connecticut, one professional actor withdrew from the cast and two others were threatening to do so because they could not come to terms with death. Many actors seek to become for a time the person they are portraying, attempting to put themselves totally into the experience of the character in order to act the part well. One actor said: "I must die in this play, and I am not ready to die."

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The director of the play asked me, as a theologian and the author of a book about the hospice movement, to attend a rehearsal and lead a discussion with the cast about the meaning and overtones of the play. The cast member who withdrew had been assigned the role of Felicity, a strong old farm woman now crippled, in a wheelchair and living on borrowed time in a hospice cottage on the grounds of a large cancer hospital. Her body seems to be all mends and patches, but she clings to life with a terrible determination to see once more her favorite daughter — though that child died years ago in an accident. Because it makes her mother happy, another daughter — trapped away from real life to care for the invalid — has for years written letters signed by the dead daughter.

The audience longs for Felicity to admit to herself that her daughter is dead so that she can let go and die. She needs release from terrible pain, and her daughter needs release from bondage and guilt. One participant in the discussion said: "It would be nice to have something in life that would last. Someone comes along to say to you that it is finished, and you ask yourself what you have. Nothing but today, this morning, this moment is all you have. What do you do then when you know that you are going to die soon?"

Felicity's daughter tries to comfort herself by singing a hymn, but her mother turns it into an obscene song and teases her daughter about being so isolated from life as not to have a man. The playwright is perhaps hinting that life itself becomes obscene under such circumstances.

At a second hospice cottage a working man, Joe, waits for his wife and son to come from across the continent, hoping for some conversation and happiness with them during his last weeks. A factory worker, he has never had much in life except a house which he built himself and a dream of a farm. Now the house is sold and he feels that his whole life has disappeared. His wife arrives without having told their 16-year-old son that the father is dying, because she refuses to admit it herself. She wants to talk about Joe coming home and getting a farm. In the words of another character, she has a bad case of the "hopes."

"I've developed a great fear," said actress Gayle Bruno. "I could handle death in some ways, but this is not one of them. A beretta I could handle, but not a hospice." She portrayed the part of Beverly, a woman who had years ago left her husband, Brian, for a life of carousing and who arrives drunk to find that Brian is being tended by Mark, a young homosexual — faithful and caring as she has not been. Mark hates the stench and pain, the pus, blood and urine in the bed, the continual reminders that Brian is "rotting inside." He longs to escape from death and dying and has been sustained by his hope that Brian might still get well.

Members of the cast mentioned that for the most part they had not been very religious. A number of them were Catholic — but "not very good practicing Catholics." Yet some were troubled that the author of the play had dealt so little with the religious dimensions of the struggle with death. The actors were having trouble with their interpretation of the play's climax where, in the spirit of the hospice movement, the author poetically affirms life to the "last moment," and the meaning and richness of even that last moment. The three dying people in the play are more reconciled to the inevitability of their deaths, are more

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