

Mission und Kontext (MuK) | 5

Ralph Kunz | Henning Wrogemann (Eds.)

Mission in Crisis

The Church's Unfinished
Homework



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Volume 5

Edited by Felix Eiffler, Michael Herbst and Patrick Todjeras

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The Church's Unfinished Homework



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Introduction

Ralph Kunz / Henning Wrogemann

The topic “Mission in Crisis” appears self-evident when considering the state of the church in Central European countries on the one hand, yet it warrants further exploration on the other. The persistent decline in the number of church members in many European countries over the course of decades is undeniable. Nonetheless, we can also witness the emergence of new movements that exemplify the enduring missionary appeal of Christian faith and life. In some countries, churches are experiencing significant disruptions, necessitating painful adjustment processes and at times fostering a rather sombre atmosphere in the congregations. This situation raises fundamental questions about the role of faith, the church, and community in the current context, the place of the Christian church in societies undergoing strong secularisation and pluralisation, and the foundation of Christian hope for the future.

The situation calls for theological reflection on the purpose of Christian faith and life, church community, and social position. This reflection typically falls within the purview of academic theology. Nonetheless, it is noticeable that within theological discussions, the topic and the concept of “mission” or “mission theology” are often sidestepped. This hesitancy may be attributed to historical associations, whether justified or not, and the growing critical dialogue surrounding the church and religion within various societies. Concerning theological fields, the natural place to locate the reflection on missiology would be practical theology on the one hand, and intercultural theology on the other (as a reinterpretation of the older specialist term missiology). It is prudent to explore the issue of mission within the context of local challenges (practical theology) as well as in light of the diversity of missionary expressions and global reflections (in intercultural theology).

The contents of this volume are the result of an international conference that took place at the University of Zurich from November 25–27, 2022, which centred around the theme of “Mission in Crisis”. This event was organised by practical theologian Ralph Kunz (University of Zurich) and the religious scholar and intercultural theologian Henning Wrogemann (Protestant University Wupper-

tal). The twelve contributions predominantly feature practical theologians and intercultural theologians, who share a common goal of promoting mission-theological reflections on the current situation, mission, modes of expression, and the future of communities and churches in increasingly secularised and pluralistic societies.

Ralph Kunz begins with Jürgen Moltmann's observation that European folk churches are in transition. Church leaders are confronted with formidable challenges, yet they often hesitate to take the step towards a mission-shaped church. The fear of devolving into sects and deviating from their task of reaching out to society looms large. In the process of reforming the church, every effort is made to maintain the status quo, and the term "folk church" has become a contentious issue. Some defend it as a symbol of openness, while others seek to discard it because it signifies a missionary powerless church. Kunz, however, does not wish to align with either extreme and instead suggests a redefinition of the concept of the *folk church*. He envisions a church that embraces ordinary people as God's people, fostering humility and freeing itself from the burdens and false promises of Christendom. This liberated church can then explore new avenues for sharing the gospel as a way of life.

Hence, it would be a grave mistake to attribute the mission crisis solely to secularisation. In reality, it is the church itself that obstructs its own mission and has found itself in a stagnant situation. Mission is a theological assignment that remains to be accomplished.

Sabrina Müller's contribution is based on the following thesis: Despite the significance of religious experiences, there is a crisis of discipleship in contemporary practical and academic discourses. As a result, the connection between religious experiences, discipleship, and mission remains largely unexplored. Müller argues for the integration of religious experiences into the discourse on discipleship, as these experiences hold the potential to encourage a positive change in self-perception, a re-evaluation of one's worldview, and a revised understanding of one's relationship with God and others. By adopting a practical theological perspective that acknowledges the significance of human experiences, discipleship can help individuals integrate different forms of knowledge into their everyday lives.

By drawing on various theological currents, including liberation theology and feminist theology, Müller explores different conceptions of discipleship that highlight justice, liberation, and equality. She concludes that *discipleship*, seen as a *hope-giving interpretation of life*, is not primarily related to specific contents and dogmas. Instead, it must be understood as an ordinary and individual hermeneutic process. The crisis that the church is experiencing thus signifies a crisis in its mission, while the challenge to its effectiveness reflects a crisis in discipleship. Conversely, the world needs hope and disciples who embody and exemplify this perspective in their daily lives.

Like Ralph Kunz, *Philipp Bartholomä* also observes a massive decline in church membership. His interest lies in investigating whether historically independent or free churches are in a better position than the large national churches. From a missional perspective, a critical question arises: to what extent do (evangelical) free churches actually prevail in the religious landscape and do they effectively counter the trend of significant decline through sustained membership growth? Bartholomä ponders whether classical free churches are indeed more successful in their mission than the Protestant regional churches. In his chapter, he aims to provide a broader reflection on the current state of mission among free churches in Germany by examining the actual growth statistics of several classical free churches in detail. What ensues is a critical consideration of the classic free church approach to mission and its suitability for a post-Christendom era. Additionally, he sheds light on a frequently overlooked segment of the free church landscape that has exhibited remarkable missional vitality: Russian-German emigrant churches, which constitute the largest free church body in Germany. In conclusion, he highlights several distinctive congregational attributes that have emerged as crucial elements for a viable free church mission in an increasingly secular context.

In reference to Philipp Bartholomä's lecture, *Patrick Todjeras* explores the concept of "post-evangelical" and its implications for mission theology. On the one hand, he identifies a post-evangelical inclination as a conscious move away from traditional forms of faith, piety, and certain ethical questions. This shift is also marked by experiences of disappointment, loss, confrontation, and insecurity. Simultaneously, there is an active engagement among those who consider themselves post-evangelicals, as they embark on a quest to establish a new religious identity. In terms of mission theology, Todjeras sees an opportunity to move beyond viewing the "missionary" as a mere instrumental means (metaphor: tool) and to recognise that the missionary him-/herself acts as a medium of mission (metaphor: branch). They do so through their questions, vulnerabilities, and their close connection with the local community.

In his chapter, *Graham Tomlin* argues that the task of apology in the modern world is primarily a descriptive one. It centres around addressing questions and seeks to explore how Christians can reimagine, redescribe, and also put into practice a renewed vision of economics, relationships, politics, as well as money, sex, and power in the light of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection. Instead of approaching non-Christians with the intention of convincing or compelling them through arguments, or succumbing to such pressures itself, this approach positions the Christian alongside their non-Christian counterpart. It also sidesteps Barth's criticism of relying on a rationality that is disconnected from the gospel, aiming to reframe the world through a Christ-centred metaphysical lens. Apologetics, according to Tomlin, is about nothing less than the profound task of rethinking and describing the whole of reality in the light of the gospel.

Stefan Paas states that in Western societies, not only the churches but many institutions (parties, unions, etc.) are going through the same processes of shrinking, so that grand narratives are missing, and the societies are now made up of many minorities (“tribes”) who represent different values, etc. The question is whether it is then a question of a vital minority. For churches, it seems that even members no longer know from their own experience what the attractiveness of faith feels like. This is the real crisis of the mission.

From a historical perspective, the Protestant mission came from the “revivalism” in the context of a society that was still largely Christian in the nineteenth century, and the mission was “churchified” in the twentieth century. However, both forms are still based on a “Christian background culture”, which, however, is disappearing more and more in the twenty-first century. Increasing secularisation then means that the boundary between “lost” and “saved” is identified with society (lost) and church/congregation (saved), which consequently leads to isolation of Christians and congregations from society. This raises the question of a “comprehensive revised narrative” for Christian mission. As an “intuition” in this direction, Paas sees, among other things, a Christian-missionary orientation that no longer regards other people as a “target group” but as “fellow travellers”. This orientation shifts away from a primary emphasis on “teaching” people and instead seeks to “encounter” them. It centres around perceiving salvation and blessings as distinct aspects of the salvific work of God. Paas regards peace and peacemaking as the biblical root metaphor of God’s salvation history and concludes that “mission is the ministry of reconciliation”. However, he makes it clear that reconciliation can only be spoken of when related to the concepts of peace and justice. He suggests placing the “mission drama” within the “greater narrative” of the “Kingdom of Peace”.

John G. Flett delves into the nature of crisis discourse, examining what characterises it. A crisis is often framed in terms of “need/opportunity” or “responsibility/danger”, involving the identification of key “agents”, reasons for the crisis, and proposed solutions. A “circular logic” is characteristic of the crisis discourse. For example, emphasising “urgency” motivates to unleash new forces, while speaking of “opportunities” means naming “new” opportunities. The crisis discourse thus becomes a cyclically repeated phenomenon. Consequently, as Flett highlights, David Bosch observed that missions tend to undergo one of three outcomes: abandonment, redirection toward secular activities, or continuation without substantial change. This raises the question of whether this situation inhibits a deeper and more genuinely interrogative (mission) theological discourse. According to Flett, it is therefore imperative to decipher the underlying logic of the crisis discourse.

To illustrate this, Flett draws an analogy, likening “mission” to the visible “tip” of an iceberg. His argument centres around the existence of “invisible sub-structures” such as church traditions, organisational structures, or underlying

“theological commitments.” These substructures not only influence the interpretation of “mission” or what is considered “correct” mission by Christians within a given tradition but also shape how crises are perceived. As long as theologies do not perceive or address these “substructures”, their “impact” remains marginal. Flett therefore proposes an approach to analysing mission and mission theology that takes into account the relationship between “visibility” and “substructure”. He suggests that rather than engaging in perpetual crisis discussions that often overlook the truly pertinent questions, we should start with the existing forms of mission. Visibility and the underlying (invisible) theological assumptions must be revealed. Using an example from the Uniting Church of Australia (UCA), Flett shows that only through this analysis the dissonance between claim (“We want to be open to everyone”) and reality (“Who is specifically meant by *everyone*?”) can be seen. It is, *inter alia*, about enabling “unlearning” in view of the unquestioned self-evidence of church practice and “forms of mission” that are taken for granted. But this takes time. It is about “long-term learning” with regard to “continuity and change”.

Benno van den Toren sees an important aspect of the crisis of mission as the significant reluctance among Christians in European countries to testify to the Christian faith in an apologetic way. He seeks to understand the root causes of this phenomenon and suggests that a “cultural contrast experience” can offer valuable insights. As an example, he cites that for many former Muslims who have now accepted the Christian faith, according to their own statements, the question of truth was and is of central importance. The example shows that apologetics in the sense of the rational discussion of various religious truth claims is still important. Referring back to Karl Barth, Lesslie Newbigin, and George A. Lindbeck, van den Toren discusses the question of where the cultural and historical reasons for this lack of appreciation of cross-cultural and cross-religious apologetics are to be found.

Contrary to late modern views, van den Toren contends that Christian apologetics must align with the intrinsic nature of the Christian faith and its message, which means that it also has a countercultural profile. The essence of the Christian faith, centred on God’s self-revelation through Jesus Christ, encompasses a universal relevance for the entire world, a salvation that humans cannot achieve independently, and a concept of freedom in obedience to Christ that transcends human self-realisation. Van den Toren raises the question of whether the countercultural profile of the Christian message should be downplayed in the late modern context of European societies or, conversely, accentuated. He advocates for the latter approach, as it is the only way to steer clear of an interpretation of Christian apologetics that aligns with dominant late modern views. The Christian faith, Christian message, and apologetics are not (as a late modern reading assumes) about a Christian construct of the world, but about a Christian response to God’s self-revelation with its own boundary-crossing truth claim.

Henning Wrogemann initiates his inquiry by addressing the question of how the vitality of Christian communities can be comprehended in the face of numerous challenges. He emphasises the significance of the theological narrative in shaping this vitality and raises questions about the self-image of churches in post-war Germany. Wrogemann distinguishes three distinctive narratives: firstly, the narrative “*Volkskirche*” for the 1950s–60s; secondly, the narrative “*Exodus congregation*” for the 1970s–1990s; and thirdly, with a forward-looking perspective, the “*Exile-congregation*” narrative, following in the footsteps of Stefan Paas. He identifies a spiritual crisis as the primary challenge facing the church and mission in Central Europe. This crisis prompts the question of which theological narrative can empower Christians in congregations to maintain a vibrant expression of faith, despite declining membership, dwindling resources, reduced infrastructure, diminished public visibility, and a decline in social relevance.

With reference to 2 Corinthians in particular, Wrogemann proposes a doxological approach that centres on the idea that the purpose of Christian existence is to praise God as a means of carrying out mission. This perspective underscores the influence of the “counter-factual”, where Christians and congregations bear witness to the transformative power of God in their worship and praise. Through this approach, they can be seen, in their corporeal existence, as the “sound body” of the gospel. Wrogemann further elaborates on the praise of God on the basis of five orientations that can currently be observed in churches in Germany. These orientations relate to what is supposedly factual and lead more to frustration or hubris than to serenity and the joy of faith. Wrogemann contrasts each of these orientations with a specific form of Christian prayer and a specific theological location of prayer in the story of Christ.

In his chapter, originally written as a response to Sabrina Müller, *Henk de Roest* delves into characteristics of ecclesial practices. These insights prove invaluable for gaining a deeper understanding of the potential outcomes when individuals, including young people, engage with a religious community, encounter religious experiences, become actively involved in religious matters, feel a divine calling to follow Jesus Christ, and, potentially, undergo spiritual formation. Foremost, these practices are responsive (or receptive) practices, in which resonance is a possibility. For de Roest, mission encompasses much more than witnessing, convincing, or dialogue. It is not restricted to a specific locale, and can *happen* when people are invited and welcomed to participate in these distinct practices. It may also happen when people experience shared community, something of God’s new world as it is expressed and lived by Jesus Christ and as it is communicated by the Spirit. One way out of the crisis in mission, therefore, is to invite, welcome, introduce, guide, and accompany people in the strange world of Scripture where people are loved, forgiven, healed, and receive a blessing, despite and with their insecurities, fears, and failures. In order to show the

existential dimension of these practices, de Roest analyses two personal stories, and thus adopts Sabrina Müller's methodological approach.

In his chapter, *Stefan Schweyer* raises the question of what a conversion-friendly social form of the church might look like. His analysis of the current challenges of the church leads him to the conclusion that this form should simultaneously integrate the dynamics of the movement, the stabilisation of the organisation, and the serenity of the institution. Schweyer considers the idea of the *church as a relational network* as a more advanced perspective of a hybrid model. Without going into detail, a network would have the advantage that different social forms could be interconnected, that is, mutually complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

In such a network, nodes and branches with different ecclesial and missional characteristics would be interconnected. The inner connection through Jesus Christ and the community of the Holy Spirit could thus find an outer form that breaks down institutional and organisational restrictions, integrates the dynamics of the movement, but also puts any anti-institutional arrogance in its place. Such a network would be characterised by a *conversion-friendly shape* of the local church. All this requires a *missional attitude of self-giving*. It is a firm rejection of any form of mission that is oriented towards the increase of one's own power, towards ecclesiastical self-preservation, and towards the attainment of power in society. Rather than regret the dissolution of a Christendom culture, Schweyer can see the post-Christendom situation as an opportunity to give the gospel a new authentic shape.

In her contribution, *Heike Breitenstein* shows that apologetics has been part of the church's theological culture since its beginnings. In the first centuries, it was the context of persecution that made apologetics important. In modern times, too, attempts were made to prove the plausibility of the Christian faith, but in a culture shaped by the church and Christianity, this was done primarily as an inward task. The more Christianity was in tension and competition with other views of reality, the more apologetic concepts came to the fore, even if they were not necessarily named as such. But even where it was seen as the task of apologetics to work out the essence of Christianity in its positive relationship to ethos, practical reason and culture, apologetics became "disreputable" through the critique of dialectical theology. Breitenstein recalls Karl Barth's prominent dispute with his Swiss colleague Emil Brunner on the question of the "point of contact". Brunner understood his apologetic approach of "eristics" as a further development of the common project. For Barth, however, Brunner's approach represented a clear departure from the common foundations. With his Christocentric understanding of revelation, Barth claimed that any negotiation with unbelievers on their ground was an impossible undertaking. Barth's influence on the second half of the twentieth century can hardly be overestimated.

Breitenstein sees in Brunner's theology an approach for a "new apologetics". In view of central questions of being human, moments of truth could be confirmed, and false illusions exposed. In proclaiming the gospel, Brunner's demand for the relevance of its existential dimension is an important reminder: people need to listen not to correct theological statements but to what the gospel does in their daily lives. Especially in view of the missionary challenge in which the church finds itself, a closer examination of Brunner's thoughts on a "new apologetics" could provide fruitful impulses.

I. Limits and Chances of Church Mission in the German-Speaking World

Chapter 1

Why are Folk Churches Afraid of Mission?

Ralph Kunz

Introduction: Will the Folk Church Survive its Transition?

In transition

On his ninetieth birthday, during an interview with a radio station, Jürgen Moltmann asserted that for the Protestant church to ensure its survival, it must adopt a more free-church-like approach in the future. The basis for his claim rested on the idea that “In a multi-religious society, the churches can no longer be folk churches, but will have to stand on their own feet”.¹ In fact, when observing folk churches in several European countries, a clear trend towards an evangelical-style membership church becomes evident.² The question of what will happen to the larger churches is therefore justified. However, the expectation that the church will undergo a beneficial downsizing due to declining membership, with a “holy remnant” revitalising congregational life and potentially sparking growth here and there, has dissipated.³

¹ Scharnowski, Reinhold, “Die Zukunft der Volkskirche ist freikirchlich.” https://www.livenet.ch/themen/kirche_und_co/christliches_gemeindeleben/evangelisation/263303-die_zukunft_der_volkskirche_ist_freikirchlich.html. Accessed March 31, 2020 [translation RK].

² Henk de Roest, and Sake Stoppels, “Evangelikalisierung in den Kirchen. Zwischenbilanz zur Eröffnung einer Diskussion,” *PTh 101* (2012): 260–79.

³ Hans-Udo Schneider, “Kirchen in Zeiten wachsender Ungleichheit.” In *Jenseits der Gerechtigkeit – Kirche in Zeiten wachsender Ungleichheit. Aufstieg und Niedergang kirchlicher Industrie- und Sozialarbeit*, edited by Wolfgang Belitz, Jürgen Klute, Hans-Udo Schneider, Walter Wendt-Kleinberg (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2017), 93–116, 98: “An interim assessment: 16 years after the EKvW’s reform proposal and 10 years after the EKD’s Impulspapier, it can be said that all the targets set have been missed. The Protestant Church is further away than ever from ‘growing against the trend.’” [translation RK].

A profound *structural and cultural change* within the church seems inevitable. The precise meaning of this shift from an old to a new paradigm remains a subject of debate, both within the Roman Catholic Church and among Protestants. Like Jürgen Moltmann, Paul M. Zulehner also points out:

The time of the folk church is over. For ‘folk church’ meant: ‘All those who belong to the people also belong to the church, or more precisely: to the denomination of the sovereign. Anyone who resists this will be expelled – either abroad or to the hereafter!’ But today people are no longer bound by force to a church. They can choose in or choose out. So it is only natural that the number of those who only belong without having chosen it themselves is now decreasing – through purification, through resignations.⁴

In a later part of the interview, Zulehner strongly advocates for placing a greater emphasis on the *mission of the Jesus movement*. This raises the important question of whether it still makes sense to preserve the culture and structure of folk churches if they represent an ecclesiastical form that has no future. Are we, in fact, faced with the need to bid farewell to an *old form* and actively seek a new one? If this is the case, the most significant challenge of mission lies in the fact that the most robust resistance to change often emanates from within the church itself. A shift in legal, structural, and cultural circumstances frequently results in the church losing certain privileges. Another often-mentioned concern is the apprehension among church leaders that a missionary church will no longer be a folk church. It could potentially be perceived as a religious institution turning into a sect, which may no longer be there for *everyone*. Is this the case?

Discussion of the future shape

The question of whether the church, in the midst of a transitional phase, can preserve its identity as a *folk church* after undergoing structural changes, and whether it actively seeks recognition as such, demands a more nuanced perspective. The concept of the “folk church”, which ignited heated debates during the initial phase of church reform in the 1960s, remained relatively dormant for

⁴ Martin Rothe, “Zulehner: ‘Die Zeit der Volkskirche ist vorbei.’” <https://www.evangelisch.de/inhalte/86871/22-07-2013/zulehner-die-zeit-der-volkskirche-ist-vorbei>. Accessed March 31, 2020 [translation RK]. Cf. also: Zulehner: “Perspective Change.” In *Mitgliederorientierung zwischen Verheißung und Verurteilung? Documentation of the expert discussion on 28.03.2012 in Dortmund*, edited by the EKD Centre for Mission in the Region (ZMiR: doku 2-12) (Dortmund, 2012), 5–8.

some time but has undergone a resurgence in recent years.⁵ An anthology authored by David Plüss, Matthias D. Wüthrich, and Matthias Zeindler, featuring 40 contributions, addresses these questions. In the concluding chapter, the exploration of a prospective framework for the folk church is condensed into a series of comparisons and inclusions. The essence of the folk church comes to light through its emphasis on “humble Christianity over offensive evangelization”, its adoption of “flexibility instead of compartmentalisation”, its commitment to “nurturing tradition rather than self-secularization”, and its aspiration to be a “church of the distant as well as involved”.⁶

In Kristian Fechtner’s captivating book, bearing the attention-grabbing title *Late Season of the Folk Church*, comparable statements can be found.⁷ The book explores the scope of religious and culturally sensitive communication within the intricate and tension-laden structure of the folk church. The use of the term “late” alludes to the ever-evolving nature of the Protestant church, implying its ongoing relevance amid the current upheavals. The justification of continuity is crucial. The practice of late-evangelical Christianity must continue to be seen within the framework of a “folk church in transition”, as only a church actively engaging with the contemporary conditions and challenges of lived religion can maintain its inclusive and pluralistic character.

The announcement of time is revealing in several ways. With the late stage of life of the popular church, an awareness of a sense of time is marked. It appears to connote a certain perceived *age*, which introduces a challenge. It could imply that one must imagine the transition of this folk church as a gradual decline or even “slow death”, aligning with the perspectives quoted at the beginning. Of course, with gerontological finesse, the later stage can also be understood as a subtle shift from the third to the fourth age. After all, the reserves from the plentiful years are enough to keep the business going for a few more years, which is a comforting prospect on the one hand and a bleak one on the other. Eventually, to stick with the metaphor, a time will come when the rollator is needed. As the number of believers becomes increasingly dispersed over larger areas, the foundational pastoral care becomes stretched thin for those who need it and dense for those providing it. The question arises: How motivating is this prospect for the generation of coming theologians who are preparing today for service in the church of tomorrow?

⁵ Wolfgang Huber and Henning Schröer, “Volkskirche I. Systematisch-theologisch II. Praktisch-theologisch,” *TRE* 35 (2003): 249–62.

⁶ David Plüss et al. (eds.), *Ekklesiologie der Volkskirche. Theologische Zugänge in Reformierter Perspektive* (Zurich, 2016), 435–38.

⁷ Kristian Fechtner, *Späte Zeit der Volkskirche. Praktisch-theologische Erkundungen* (PThe 101) (Stuttgart, 2010).

I believe that neither the swansong of the popular church nor the announcement that it is in a late phase is fully convincing. Both modes of presentation cause more confusion than orientation. This also applies to the fashion for “post-isms”. Are we now in the post-secular age or already past the post-Christian age? Perhaps the time has come to stop the post-isms. Let’s stop the nonsense! Aren’t we long past the last “post”? Are we not already in the next transition? If we stop seeing ourselves as descendants of a bygone era and discover that being Christian is always an existence in transition, this can foster a new perception of our own identity.⁸ All this argues for talking about the church growing up rather than growing old.⁹

If one still attributes an orienting function to the term “folk church”, it becomes imperative to re-establish certain connections between the attribute “folk” and the noun “church”. The preservation of the old paradigm is of little interest from this vantage point. What is even more captivating is the prospect of a new church paradigm, one that adapts to the changing needs of the populace while remaining in a state of continual transition, and thus only loosely defined at this juncture. This is precisely where the importance of mission becomes evident. To further the cause of mission, it becomes imperative to engage in discussions about the extent to which we are willing to push this transition and what ecclesiological elements will shape the profile of the popular church in the future.

Which folk?

As this new form of church remains undefined, we often find ourselves speaking about it in terms of a *utopian* vision. However, it is “a utopia that from time to time takes shape and becomes reality in transitions large and small, in which life renews itself”.¹⁰ This prospect is filled with promise, yet it also poses some challenges. Proclaiming the end of a church form and heralding a new beginning

⁸ Karl-Heinrich Bieritz, “Kirche im Übergang. Eine Menschen – und Kirchengeschichte in vier Bildern,” in: Ders.: *Grenzgebiet. Praktische Theologie zwischen Kultur und Kirche* (RThSt 14) (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005): 267–87, 274.

⁹ The keyword “permanent crisis” should remind us that the awareness of transition is not a speciality of church theory but can be perceived as a signature of social discourses in late modernity. What was called the “permanent reflection of the institution” (Schelsky) in the intellectual milieu of critical theory can be seen, among other things, in a permanent critique of democracy. Dante Germino, “Critiques of Democracy,” in: *The Encyclopedia of Democracy*, Vol. 1, edited by Seymour Martin Lipset (London: Routledge, 1995), 319–27.

¹⁰ Cf. A meditation by Bieritz, “Kirche im Übergang,” esp. 284 f.

is always simpler than grappling with the nuanced exegesis of its transition. Ultimately, ecclesiology's role is not solely to depict the decline but to transform the transition into actionable insights.¹¹ Announcements of death and birth have limited applicability in this context. It is more fitting to discuss evolving patterns that gradually blur, aiming to discern emerging contours here and there. To discern what is taking shape, it is essential to have a basic understanding of the existing framework. Thus, we must inquire about the significance of the term "folk church" when it no longer necessarily signifies a regional church structure.¹²

It is to be expected that this question alone will elicit varying opinions. People's responses will be influenced by their socialisation and personal background, leading to different perceptions of the church. For the post-war generation, their image of the church often harks back to the period when it flourished after the war, only to be thrown into turmoil during the second wave of modernisation in the 1960s.¹³

My generation, on the other hand, tends to envision a church that has steadily dwindled in size since then. Perhaps the romantic notion of a national church still lingers among us, especially among those of us who have been brought up with a partially traditional church background. It may persist somewhat discreetly and surreptitiously, but just as steadfastly as it does nostalgically. Some take a more pragmatic view of this development. A national church, they argue, means a specific *religious provision for the population with defined territories*. The parochial structure guarantees the functioning of the people's *religion*.¹⁴ When the money runs out, there are no resources to guarantee such an elaborate

¹¹ To paraphrase in English an ecclesiological bon mot in German. Cf. Erich Garhammer, 'Nicht den Untergang verwalten, sondern den Übergang gestalten'. Zehn Thesen zur Zukunft der Gemeinde, in *Über-Gänge - Forum Zukunft: Die Kirche im 3.*, edited by Udo Zelinka (Jahrtausend: Paderborn, 2000), 203–209. See also Harald Schroeter-Wittke, "Übergang statt Untergang: Victor Turners Bedeutung für eine kulturtheologische Praxis-theorie," *ThLZ* 128, no. 6 (2003): 575–83, and Heinz-Peter Hempelmann, "Why do People Come to Church? Why Do They Stay with It?" [Mitgliederorientierung als theologische und kulturhermeneutische Herausforderung], *ThBeitr* 44 (2013): 125–41, esp. 133 f.

¹² On the entanglement of the popular church with the emergence of the republic after the French Revolution, cf. Ralph Kunz, "Kybernetik," in: *Praktische Theologie. Eine Theorie - und Problemgeschichte* (APrTh 33), edited by Christian Grethlein and Helmut Schwier (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2007), 607–84, 610 f.

¹³ Andreas Leipold, *Volkskirche: Die Funktionalität einer spezifischen Ekklesiologie in Deutschland nach 1945* (APhTh 31) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 53 ff.

¹⁴ Paul M. Zulehner, *Leutereligion. A New Shape of Christianity on its Way Through the 80s?* (Vienna, 1982).