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## Modern Life Course as 'Choice Biography'

A Theme in Practical Theological Ethics

Frits de Lange

In our highly modern society the human life course increasingly seems to become a matter of individual construction. Traditional institutional frameworks of education, marriage and family, work and retirement, self-evident until far into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more and more are losing their regulating normative function. In the organization of the life course a process of de-institutionalization is occurring. How people organize their lives over time is no longer embedded in a compelling network of social expectations, but seems to be the object of personal choice. Sexual identity, marriage, getting and raising children, work and career, care, education – they seem to have become life style options. Shall I become hetero or homosexual, shall I live together in a LAT relationship or marry, or shall I stay single? Do I opt for an ambitious career for which I'm prepared to set everything aside, or do I want to live more broadly, with lots of free time, filled with voluntary work or social responsibilities? Do I 'take' children, and if so, with whom shall I raise them? Important choices, often experienced as dilemma's, for which no traditional blueprints are available anymore.

In his *Modernity and Self Identity* (1991) Anthony Giddens draws a penetrating sketch of what modernization means for personal identity. He paints a picture of the modern life course - which we would shortly circumscribe as 'liberal' – in which individual choices and strategic planning are central. In this article I want to take his analysis as a starting point for a critical evaluation of the liberal life course model that seems to be becoming dominant in our society. With the assistance of a hermeneutical methodology developed by the practical theologian Don Browning, I will try to examine this model critically, by asking whether the Western and Christian tradition has ideological sources available, which meet the shortcomings of the liberal 'choice biography'.

Giddens opens his book with a divorce story. After ending a marriage one has to rebuild a life, with new relationships, or renewed connections to old relationships (for example children). In the well-known traditional life course framework, divorce was regarded as a personal failure, a social disaster, a moral fault, and a societal abnormality. Giddens however, presents the phenomenon as a distinctive enlargement of high modern life as such. Being modern in the 21<sup>st</sup> century means, so to say: to divorce.

Giddens describes the identity of the modern self as a self-reflexive project. In our post-traditional risk society, self-identity no longer is socially given, but represents an individual task. Reflexivity – as the regularized use of knowledge – is a constitutive characteristic of modern institutions and practices. They should be constantly open for revision, in the light of new ideas and developments (Giddens 1991, 20). Future no longer means waiting for new things to happen. ‘Futures’ are getting organized reflexively, as ‘possible worlds’ in plural.

The individual also has become one of those modern institutions, for the individual life course is getting to be an internally referring system on its own. The self has to be organized into an independent structure of meaning, abstracted from its embedment in historical and social contexts. (Giddens 1991, 145 ff.) Who you are, no longer depends on who your father or mother was, in what kind of social environment you were raised, but it depends on what you make out of your self. By that, modern life course becomes a precarious, risky business.

‘Self-identity for us forms a trajectory across the different institutional setting of modernity over the durée of what used to be called the “life cycle”, a term which applies much more accurately to non-modern contexts than to modern ones. Each of us not only “has”, but lives a biography reflexively organized in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life. Modernity is a post-traditional order, in which the question, “How should I live?” has to be answered in day-to-day decisions about how to behave, what to wear and what to eat - and many other things – as well as interpreted within the temporal unfolding of self-identity.’ (Giddens 1991, 14)

Everything depends on making the right choices at the right moment. Modern life course, according to the German sociologist Ulrich Beck is getting to be more and more ‘a choice biography.’ Your life is made out of the choices you make. Modern society confronts individuals with a huge amount of complex choices, but at the same time offers them little help in making them confidently. In matters of good and bad, modern

culture does not share comprehensive visions on the good life, and less and less generally accepted traditions, conventions, and established patterns of behavior. The only way of giving meaning to our lives is to shape our life story autonomously and to organize our own life course with the help of self-chosen practices. Strategic life planning becomes an important value: colonizing the future, by pulling the future, as it were, into the present.

One does not always succeed at that. At 'fateful moments' (Giddens) it becomes obvious, how fragile and problematic a life course interpreted as an individual reflexive project can be. Fateful, for example, are the very moments at which people have to take important decisions, crucial for their careers and future. Marry or divorce, study or work, change jobs or stay, continue a friendship or end it? Fateful also are the moments of crisis in which no longer choices can be made, because experiences or events have traversed brutally the trajectory of one's life: illness and death, violence, a traffic accident. They undercut a precariously constructed, existential stability and can easily lead to a personal breakdown. As irruptions in daily life, these uncontrollable events represent a threat to a scheduled life plan.

According to Giddens, individual control is an important high modern device. Mastery is the new moral demand that replaces the prescriptive social morality of traditional society (Giddens 1991, 102). That means that people who cannot cope with the biographical construction pressure are getting into serious trouble. Their sense and meaning of life, being no longer socially given, now depends on the personal success in realizing their own ambitions and on the creativity with which they are capable to re-interpret the successes and failures in their life story as a more or less coherent whole.

## **Taking Distance from the Choice Biography Model**

Giddens offers a recognizable, almost compelling depiction of the modern life course. Indeed: do people nowadays not experience their lives exactly in that way? However, his reconstruction has strong normative implications, which deserve critical assessment. Giddens seems to acquiesce rather uncritically in the individualizing dynamics of modernization. The modern individual's life course, in his description, is lifted out of the dimensions of time and space by the 'disembedding mechanisms' of the modernization process. No longer are generations (vertical attachments) and family ties (horizontal attachments)

constitutive for self-identity. Relationships, even the most intimate, now have an instrumental function, and a conditional, 'until further notice'-character. The modern life course demands an enterprising self, a self that is ready to create its identity in a constantly changing social environment. The individual has to take distance from its traditional and conventional bindings and must be prepared to accept new social roles and challenges. Coherence of identity-over-time no longer consists in belonging to (a) social group(s), but has to be constructed personally.

However, it should be doubted whether this liberal – I take this term in a rather loose meaning to stand for any vision that puts individual liberty, autonomy and reasonableness centrally, and accepts the market as the primary organizing principle of society – vision on the life course as a self-reflexive project is inescapable. The matter is not only of theoretical importance, but practical as well. The response influences for example the psychological and pastoral care that helps people taking their crucial life decisions. But also political decisions in strategic policy about social care, family politics or elderly care are at stake. They are touched by the implicit normativity in the vision on the life course as an individual project. A policy directed at individual planning of, control over, and responsibility for the personal life course will develop different instruments in the field of social and economic law and regulation to a policy focused on social community ties (whether depending on blood ties, solidarity, or personal commitment.)

The modernization process, however, seems to be an inescapable fact; after the first, Western, wave of modernization, a second global modernization is taking place, including the cultures that are not rooted in the European Enlightenment. (Beck 2000, 8f .) It seems no longer possible for any individual life on this globe to stay untouched by the rationalizing dynamism that takes away the taken for granted character of traditions and institutions. However, even when modernization is accepted as a fact, the question is legitimate whether there will be only one modernization possible. Will there be only one direction in which modernization shall continue or are there several more options and scenarios to develop? When we restrict ourselves to the life course now, in current social philosophy and ethics there also seems to be a lack of fantasy about the normative structures of modern life course. The liberal model, stressing the autonomy of the individual - understood as liberty of choice, self-reliance, or social independence - seems to be the most popular, and accepted without any reservations.

The liberal vision, it must be admitted, has a strong moral appeal. Though it has different versions and includes both conservatives and

social democrats, it defends core values as autonomy, rationality, freedom and equality. Its model on society stresses the equal value and dignity of man and woman, child and adult. In doing this, there is a considerable moral gain over long centuries of patriarchal, and authoritarian oppression. However, the liberal vision hardly recognizes the intrinsic value of communal structures in which the life course of individuals is organized. Marriage, divorce, friendships, children, parents – in this model they represent individual options in a trajectory of personal self-fulfillment. The social costs implicated in such an instrumentalization of primary personal relationships, seem to be high. The pressure on individuals to make their life course into a personal success is heavy, and often asks too much from them. Obviously, modernity has a ‘dark side’ (Giddens 1991, 122).

How good for people is the liberal life course model? Does its description really fit their lives? Do they really experience life as a linear progression in time, focused on choices and dilemmas, demanding strategic rational planning? In order to answer questions like these, empirical research will be necessary. The first – normative – question however, requires an extensive and complex conceptual approach. It calls for a broad philosophical perspective. To begin with, distance should be taken from the taken for granted character of social reality, the way it is experienced ‘as usual.’ The history of its evolution, the normative presuppositions of, and the cultural alternatives available for the liberal life course model should be investigated. In his hermeneutics, Paul Ricoeur speaks of the philosophical technique of ‘distantiation’. Answering the question what it means to live a life trajectory in modern society, requires a phenomenological abstinence (*epochè*), a detour through the history and the archeology of modern life course. How come people see their lives this way, as an individual itinerary? Then ethical reflection will be necessary. What do we mean by saying that something is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ to people? What kind of normative arguments make us accept some vision on life course and reject another?

An essential part in this method of distantiation is the acknowledgement that life course visions are cultural constructions. They may be experienced objectively, and appropriated as taken for granted, but factually they represent the outcome of a process of social interaction. A differentiation should be made therefore, between life course as a neutral concept (defined as anything that happens to a person between the moments of his or her birth and death) and the social and cultural representation thereof, the life course picture. Life course pictures should be regarded as part of what is called by social constructionists a discourse (cf. Burr 1995). There is no such thing as ‘the’ human life course. Being

born, being young, growing up, getting old and dying – they seem natural facts. But ever since the first utterance about it, the life course gets an element in the social and cultural fabric that people construct together in dialogical practices (cf. Holstein & Gubrium 2000).

Discourse I define here as a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements etc. by which people give structure and sense to their daily reality, and which is the outcome of a communicative practice of meaning-giving. Discourses are texts in action; they reflect social *practices* and are intrinsically related to them. As soon as they are sufficiently convincing to be shared by many, they have a normative impact on the personal identity of individuals that belong to the same dialogical communities. Discourses are subjected to power processes. The person that possesses discursive power can impose his or her version of reality as the established ‘truth’. Discourses structure reality, but their rhetorical force convinces us also that reality really is ‘like that.’ Discursive power is definition power, the authority to ‘create’ truth (Foucault). We can speak of an ontologizing function of discourses.

Discourse can be oppressing, but liberating as well. They can marginalize groups of people, but can also give them the opportunity to enlarge their freedom. Whoever partakes in a social practice and wants to move freely in it, has to master the discourse of the participants. One should share its vocabulary, to reveal oneself as a dialogue partner as soon as one feels addressed.

Life course discourses can be either explicit or implicit. They can be fixed in social institutions, but also be a subjective part of individual self-understanding. They can be examined scientifically, but also be an unconscious part of culture (cf. Marcoen 1986).

The liberal model of the life course, as depicted above, should be regarded as a discourse. It is the result of an effort of symbolic construction, a very popular story about human life course in contemporary social communities. Which and whose reality is depicted? What is highlighted, and what is obscured? Is this life course discourse inclusive, in the sense that most Western citizens can use it for the description of their lives? And finally: is it good for them? Do they live well by it?

For a moment we will postpone answering this question. We will just ascertain the fact that there are reasons to doubt the taken for granted normativity of the ‘choice biography’, the life course model of the enterprising self. We want to give ourselves some room, to distance

ourselves from it. To put the question – though we may not answer it -: how good is the liberal life course model for people?

Scientific research, philosophical reflections and the public discussion support putting this question on the agenda. For example, the observation is made that the liberal life course model seems to suit white Western career males very well. But it is questionable whether it fits the lives of women, children, and the elderly. Many women do not recognize themselves in the linear line of the ideal biography of career men. They are rather focused on their horizontal social networks (children, colleagues, friends) in which their lives are embedded and are satisfied with a rather loose coherence in their life planning (cf. Bateson 1990). In addition, for the elderly the model of choice biography seems to leave little more left than to look back on their lifeline with regrets, gratitude or amazement. Their identity is defined in terms of remembrance (they do have a lot of memories) and future planning (they do have far less). In this biographical model the meaning of their lives is vertically oriented towards time, not horizontally towards the social space they live in. Besides, the elderly should not count too much on being part of the self-reflexive life planning of others, especially their children or family. Children finally should regard themselves as lucky when they grow up in stable, enduring families. In one out of every three marriages however (the average divorce rate in Western societies), children must prepare themselves for a complex and painful process full of emotional and social uncertainty. In the liberal life course model, children are under pressure to grow up as quick as possible. The sooner they are able to take their own crucial decisions for their own life trajectory, the better. A carefree childhood is a lost dream from the times when parents still took care of their future.

To both men and women finding (and keeping!) a partner often represents a difficult and risky process. In the liberal life course model, intimate relationships only seem to be developed and evaluated in terms of choice, negotiation and contract. They are extremely vulnerable, for their ultimate basis, the emotional and erotic attraction of romantic love is constantly threatened. In the vocabulary of the choice biography there is little room for notions as faithfulness, unconditionality, and self-sacrifice.

The liberal life course model seems to have its dark sides. If this observation does not miss the mark, how could this life course perspective be supplemented or improved, if not replaced, by other visions? Do the 'root traditions' of Western culture (the classic humanist, the Judeo-Christian, the Enlightenment, cf. Guillebaud 2001) perhaps

provide us with creative possibilities in this regard? There is little reason to think that a return to former life forms as the traditional family (the man as wage-earner, a subordinated role for women, an authoritarian education and subtenant grand-parents) is realistic. The gain of the individualization process in terms of personal freedom and self-fulfillment is considerable, compared to the pressure of tradition and convention. But how attractive is the alternative of the modern biographical construction pressure? The 'choice biography' seems to be the only option available. The life course is a process of individualization in time. Only little room seems left for the imagination of alternatives or adjustments.

## Life Course as a Theme in Practical-Theological Ethics

How could practical theology and theological ethics contribute to the reflection of the modern life course? I think that they can help to clarify the origins and development of the liberal life course model as a choice biography (construction); that they can provide some critical observations on it (deconstruction); and can help to find alternatives or improvements for it (reconstruction). As theological disciplines, they have special attention for the role the Christian tradition (a complex notion, for within Western history Christianity and culture were inextricable intertwined, and within Christianity there is a plurality of traditions) plays in this respect.

I want to make some preliminary remarks on my understanding of practical theology and theological ethics. For that, I draw heavily on the theological hermeneutics of Don Browning (1996, 2003). Of course, theology can be called practical as such. It is practical in the sense that it is embedded in the life and faith praxis of Christian communities. A theological problem or question occurs, when – for one reason or another – a praxis is no longer taken for granted and demands critical and systematic reflection. Then there is need for a descriptive analysis and a normative evaluation, an inventory and exploration of possible options for change, in order to contribute in the end to an improvement of the problematic praxis. Time and again, theology completes this circle. Practical thinking starts in praxis and returns to praxis, after its detour through theory. A 'fundamental practical theology' – theology as such – starts with a description of a Christian praxis that is no longer taken for granted ('descriptive theology'). Through (a) a reflection on the biblical and the church tradition ('historical theology') and (b) the attempt to make this reflection fruitful for a more general answer to shared

problems ('systematic theology'), it develops proposals and strategies for a changed, improved praxis ('strategic practical theology'). Practical theology in this last, more limited sense is focused on the development and implementation of strategies of change. In terms of our theme: on how the modern life course can be interpreted and shaped in a more salutary way.

Theology has its origin and *Sitz im Leben* in the Christian community of faith. But as a practical hermeneutics of the Christian tradition it cannot confine itself to the borders of the institutionalized church. Christian faith has a broad impact on Western culture as it has had for almost two thousand years. Moreover, the religious pretensions of Christian faith transcend the community of faith. The biblical narrative aims at the humanum, and has the world as its horizon. A public theology, investigating the credits and shortcomings of the Christian tradition, includes the church praxis, but is not limited to it.

In fact, theological ethics is not a well-defined discipline, but rather a moment in the theological movement from praxis to praxis. As a discipline, it reflects on the moral dimensions of the life and faith praxis. At one time it belongs to systematic theology, taking a distance to and abstracting from practice, by putting the question: 'How to live a (Christian) life?' in a general way. But then, when it gets nearer to the praxis and participates in the development and implementation of concrete proposals for change, it moves closer to practical theology, and one is allowed to speak of a 'practical theological ethics'.

This ethics has a public orientation; though rooted in the community of faith, it puts itself in the service of the improvement of societal practices. This ethics has a theological character, by focusing especially on the reflection on the moral credits and shortcomings of the specific Christian tradition.

I want to add just two other remarks on this way of doing ethics. As already said, it is embedded in the life and faith praxis of the Christian community. That means, firstly, that by definition it has a dialogical nature and that its vision on the good life is tentative and provisional by definition as well. The 'good' is the provisional outcome of an open conversation on how to understand the practical implications of Christian faith. The good is not to be set up by monologues or declared by absolutes. Secondly, the complex and layered character of the moral dimensions that play a role in any practical discourse (coined by Aristotle as *phronèsis*, practical reasonableness) needs to be underscored. Every practical discourse operates on several different levels simultaneously.

This observation, I want to elaborate further, concretely with respect to the life course issue.

## Five Moral Dimensions in Practical Discourse

The reflection on good and evil is matured if and only if it – here I follow Browning (1996, 94ff.) – takes into account five different moral levels. First there is a *visionary* level, on which good and evil are expressed by way of narratives and symbols. For example, in the Christian tradition the creation story or the symbol of the Fall fulfills this role. Next we move to the level of the moral *principles* of obligation. Which principles to choose? In modernity, several options are available. One can opt for utilitarianism, for ethical egoism, for Kantianism, for existentialism or relativism for example. In the Christian tradition the principle of neighborly love and the Golden Rule are central. Then, thirdly, in one's ethical reflection one needs to negotiate an evaluation of fundamental human *tendencies and needs*. Do you allow human nature to take its course or do you distrust it and want to suppress its fundamental needs? And what do you mean by 'human nature'? Do you consider sex in principle to be good or bad? Are humans allowed to strive for power? Is it good to procreate oneself? The Christian tradition provides a general framework for this reflection by confessing the fundamental goodness of creation. Fourthly, every practical discourse needs to account for the influence and pressure that the *social and historical surroundings* and circumstances exert upon the search for the good. In the reflection on life course, one has to negotiate for example the role of the modernization process. People are not born, they don't grow up and they don't die in a historical vacuum. An ethical theory has to say what is good for them here and now. Finally there is the level of concrete behavior determined by the *rules and roles* in social practices, conventions and institutions. In this moral dimension the levels 1 till 4 are concretized in visible conduct. A practical theological ethics will be here practical in the utmost sense of the word: being a good person or a good Christian means to behave in this or that way. Ethics will be casuistry.

A complex vision of the good should include a reflection on all five different moral dimensions. They cannot be reduced to one another. Ethics cannot be restricted to principle ethics (level 2), nor to casuistry (level 5); it should include anthropology (level 3) and ontology (level 1) as well. Ethical theory must prove its coherence by balancing in a consistent way the outcome of the reflection on the five different levels. In order to be plausible, a 'reflective equilibrium' between background visions, practical rule guiding and moral principles needs to be realized.

## The Liberal Life Course Model and the Christian Tradition

This article opened with an explanation of what makes the life course a modern theme. In the dynamics of a modernizing society traditional social bonds in which the life course was completed lose their embedding function. The meaning of marriage and family for people's self identity-through-time is decreasing. Life course is becoming a self-reflexive project. This is an obligation with dark sides, for sometimes it seems to demand too much. It seems to be appropriate only for the experts and the lucky ones, the masters in the art of life. Then I described shortly the function and tasks of practical theology and ethics. A practical theological ethics tries to understand the moral shortcomings and credits of the (especially Christian) tradition, in order to improve the life and faith praxis in church and society.

How can an ethical reflection contribute, so we again ask, to a practical theological discourse on the modern life course?

A 'profound' reflection on the modern life course and an evaluation of the liberal 'choice biography' should take place on the level of all five mentioned moral dimensions. Attention must be paid to (1) the moral value of metaphors and narratives, (2) the moral principles at stake, (3) the legitimacy of the needs and aspirations of human nature, (4) the influence and pressure of the social and historical context, and (5) the moral rules and roles that regulate concrete conduct. In this complex conversation, the liberal discourse and the Christian tradition are brought together into a dialogue with each other. It will be an imagined conversation; the real dialogue is concretely situated in the social faith community - taken in a broad sense as the church and the society in so far as they are concerned with the Christian tradition - where people reflect on what a good life course can be under modern conditions.

The agenda of this profound reflection cannot be fulfilled within the margins of this article. In the remainder, I restrict myself by indicating some of the subject matters that should be put on the agenda of such a dialogical ethics. I cannot do much more than express some dialogue openings in that ongoing conversation.

When we put the liberal model of a choice biography to the test in this way, we can observe that in some dimensions of the ethical discourse its voice sounds very strong, and within others extremely weak.

## Principle Ethics and Neighborly Love

Let's start with level 2. Modern individualism gets considerable support from the modern tradition of principle ethics. The principles of freedom and equality, embedded in the human rights, are central to modern ethics, whether Kantian or utilitarian oriented. Every individual should be regarded as equal. Its moral status abstracts from the fact whether a man or woman, child of old person is concerned. Everybody, disregarding his or her societal role or status, has the right to develop his or her personal freedom. Seen from the perspective of the Christian tradition, both principles deserve support. Every human being is, as bearer of the image of God, equally valued. In the religious tradition, mutuality is an important ethical standard, as defined in the Golden Rule. However, while the liberal discourse almost exclusively accentuates the individual liberty, Christian faith stresses neighbor love (cf. Browning 1996, 158vv.). The other is included at the heart of ethical reflection. In every ethical consideration, the one who 'loves the other as he loves himself' will have to balance both his own interest and the (equally valued) interest of the other. Neighborly love (agape) should not be mixed up with eros; the love relationship does not depend on emotional and /or physical attraction.

Neighborly love could be defined as: 'the joyful commitment to the other as equal, in view of his or her well being.' (De Kruijf 1999, 150) Typical for the Christian view on neighborly love is that it is not limited to the circle of intimates; it includes in principle any other, irrespective the kind of relationship he or she has towards the actor. This non-exclusive stretching of the limits of love may sound (in the command to love your enemies for example) complicated, difficult or even utopian. Yet neighborly love is clear and simple in this respect that at least it takes equal account of those who are next to us and concern us the most.

In the spirit of this love command, one should introduce also faithfulness, unconditional commitment, and self-sacrifice – values in which the well-being of the other is intrinsically drawn into my own - into an ethics of intimate relationships, when one intends to re-actualize the Christian tradition in the context of the modern life course. The reduction of love to 'being in love with', to eroticism and the instrumentalization of partnership relations should be criticized from that point of view. Is marriage only a contract (Kant), or does the tradition that spoke of a sacrament (the Roman Catholics) or a covenant (the Protestant Calvinists) still have its surplus value (cf. Witte 1997)?

## Modernization and Pluralization

The model of the 'choice biography' takes good account of the influence and pressure of the (macro-) context: the modernization process (dimension 3). Stronger: it should be regarded as its exponent. It negotiates the loss of function of the traditional community structures (family, neighborhood, church) and the increasing importance of two macro-institutional structures that influence the individual's life course: the market and the state. Capitalism forces every individual to stay mobile and flexible; it represents the biggest individualizing power in modern society, more than the cultural appraisal of personal autonomy ever can be. The state in its turn, structures the life course by means of its education policy, economic and social regulation, pension system and elderly care. Market and state together define to a large extent for example the social identity of the 'retired'.

Modernization can be defined as the ongoing process in which technical rationality becomes the dominant organizing principle in every sphere of life. Not only economy or science, also the shaping of intimate relationships and the subjective perception of personal identity are becoming defined in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. The individual is an entrepreneur, the manager of his or her own biography. In his description of the modern life course, Giddens conforms himself almost without criticism to this process of rationalization. His picture seems to acquiesce in the 'colonizing' power of market and state on the personal life world, recognizable even in the subjective self-definition of the individual.

The Christian tradition however, does have a more complex and ambivalent relationship to modernity. Both the thesis that modernity is a direct fruit of Christianity (the secularization thesis, as defended again recently by Gianni Vattimo, 1997), and the thesis that modernity defines itself by its rupture with Christianity (Blumenberg 1966) have their plausibility. A renewed lecture of this ambivalent history perhaps could stimulate the development of alternative forms of (substantial) rationality, transcending the reduction to technical rationality. Interestingly in this respect, Michael Walzer (1983) defends the locality and particularity of rationalities within different life spheres. Not only the state and the market, but art, family life, church and science for example, have their own standards of rationality. This pluralistic political theory is not new or original; it has already had its long and estimated trajectory in the protestant (as an ethics of creation orders) and Roman Catholic (as the principle of subordination) ethics. According to this vision, an individual participates simultaneously in several life spheres. The intrinsic rationality of his intimate relationships has faithfulness and empathy as its standards, and should not be interfered with by

management skills and business mentality, dominant and decisive values in the economic and political spheres of life.

A Christian contribution to the reflection on life course can only be situated within the context of modernity. Once its conditions are not accepted as point of departure (as for example the Howard Center is against it, defending a return to the pre-industrial society, in order to re-create a favorable environment for the traditional family, cf. Browning 2003, 211f .) the speaker just places him- or herself outside history. We don't need to opt against modernity; we have to search for a different modernity.

### **Human Nature and Kinship**

How the conversation between Christian tradition and the liberal life course model will go, when the estimation of human nature is set at the agenda? How do they both evaluate 'natural' desires and wishes?

The concept of the choice biography fits very well into the expressive individualism (Robert Bellah) characteristic for contemporary culture. The most important value in that life style is self-fulfillment. The consumer society only stimulates hedonism. Capitalism supports an excessive 'possessive individualism'. The media culture invites the wish to become famous and the desire to be seen. Personal ambitions should be strived after and realized, if possible. Power, fame, sexual pleasure, and ownership – they may be pursued unlimitedly, as long as others are not harmed.

One might conclude that the liberal perspective offers ample room for the aspirations of human nature. Still this might be questioned. Though the desire for physical self-fulfillment and expression (sex and the need for intimacy) might be broadly legitimated, within our modern reality it stays captured within the individualizing margins of the romantic love ideal. Into the one and only idealized Other all desires and wishes must be projected (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1990, Giddens 1992). Therefore, having success in matters of love is getting more and more important for the establishment of a stable self-identity. At the same time however, depending heavily on individual luck and talent, it becomes more difficult than ever. The project of two individualized choice biographies, two enterprising selves, must be intertwined.

This love ideal may impress in its vehemence, but it actually seems to represent a rather impoverished interpretation of human nature. Many deeply rooted desires and motives that direct human behavior are lifted

out of their embedment in time and space and are brought into the framework of an abstracted relationship between two individuals. However, anthropological and sociological research for example, shows the importance of genetic kinship for the social and psychological identity of individuals. Both horizontal and vertical kinship (marriage and family) structure society. They also give shape to personal identity in time. Being son or daughter of ..., brother or sister to..., father or mother of ..., determines who we are. Sociobiologists point out how the deep desire after a child 'of one's own' is anchored in our genes (the theory of 'kin altruism' (W.D. Hamilton, cf. Browning 2003, 107ff.)). The search by adopted children for their biological parents or the relief of fathers who discover that their child is not their 'own', indicates the relevance of having a sound relationship to their 'natural' origin and offspring. The question 'where do I belong?' is answered partially by putting the question: where do I come from?

The defenders of the modern life course ideal seem to be little aware of the manifest importance of kinship relations in human striving. In this model, a child first of all is regarded as the fulfillment of the love ideal and subsequently perhaps as the risky assurance of the sustainability of the intimate relationship as such. If, unhelpfully, a divorce follows, the child represents the ultimate confirmation of one's own individual survival and endurance. In this individualistic self-understanding there is little room for the notion that an individual represents a vital link between subsequent generations, living together (as grand-parents, parents, children) and following on each other in time.

A reopening of the conversation with the tradition on this issue – for example as incorporated in the great classical Greek tragedies - would be fruitful. The generation that dominates the cultural scene at this moment (the 'baby boomers of '68') owes its self-understanding partly to its very resistance to the squeezing ties of tradition and family life. To them, 'family' stood for deadly boredom, and 'father' represented the powerless authority of old days. A new, more balanced sensibility for the complex relationship between kinship and identity is necessary; a sensibility that has in view both the suffocating determinism, belonging to an absolutism of the genetic relationship, and the possibilities it creates for acquiring a stable personal identity.

In theological tradition, individual human striving is often embedded in a theology of creation or a theory of natural law, in which kinship relations are interpreted as part of the good creation. They belong to the orders of creation. This theology has sometimes functioned as an excuse for forms of oppressing conservatism, or even worse. It legitimated

religiously political terror in name of blood and land, and created an ideology for the subordination of women and children. Yet this theological tradition had an eye for the anthropological invariables in human society. It deserves a critical re-assessment, acknowledging its explicit recognition of the fact that the desire to have offspring belongs to the goodness of creation. This reappraisal should stay critical however, by staying aware that the way in which this desire is organized in society, is a result of human history, open for revision, and of not divine command, to obey till eternity.

### **The Way of Life**

Moreover, the motive of creation integrates the individual life into the broad narrative of a Great History. In the Christian tradition, creation is oriented towards redemption and completion. The desire for self-fulfillment cannot stand on its own, but links a successive history from one generation to another. Not the individual existential security, but the salvation of mankind is its horizon. Here we touch upon a moral dimension extensively developed in religious ethics, but hardly made explicit in secular liberal ethics: the dimension of the narrative vision (level 1). Christian tradition created a rich layered symbolic world, with powerful life course metaphors. Metaphors can be considered as mini-narratives: tiny stories that give structure and meaning to chaotic events. Furthermore they function as explicators; as images they owe didactical, clarifying and explaining power. Finally they work as generators: they influence and change perception and create a worldview. In doing this, they constitute reality (Sannen 1998, 84 – 88).

One of images from the biblical tradition that became the most significant metaphor for the life course from birth until death in Western culture is the pilgrimage. The notion 'life course' as such is based on the same root metaphor. The life course is like a journey; a trajectory with possible blockades, missteps, and stand stills, but goal oriented until the end: the individual salvation or broader, the Kingdom of God (cf. Eliade 1969, Turner & Turner 1978, Morris & Roberts 2002). That the experience of the life course as a journey became almost an archetypical part of Western – also secular - self-understanding, is to a considerable extent due to John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (cf. De Lange 2004).

To this symbolic and narrative dimension in the life course discourse, little attention has been paid by in modern ethics. Yet this dimension has strong motivating and important normative implications. The person, who experiences his or her life as a goal-oriented way, gives it a teleological direction, whether immanent, or transcendent. It creates a

different outlook on the life course when it is interpreted as a cyclical movement (as a 'life cycle', also a well known image in the medieval Christian tradition, and other religions (cf. for example Burrow 1986)). The conviction that this journey in some way or another is determined (whether it be by tradition, the genes or God) shall influence the way one confronts moral dilemmas.

The way in which metaphors play a hidden role in modern life course ethics could be clarified to a large extent by making a detour through the religious traditions that shaped Western culture. It is not just important to know which narratives and images are central here, but also to discern the way they change. Is there still a Christian heritage recognizable in the secularized image of the 'way of life', or does the metaphor stand on its own feet in the meantime? Do believers really experience, evaluate and structure their lives differently from non-believers, because they still live by a strong religious visionary heritage? Or does, within the modern context, the religious story only represent one element in the protective belt of ontological security that every individual has to build up during the course of its life? Within the context of modernity the role of religion seems to be more and more biographically oriented, standing in function of individual construction of meaning. Its institutional role seems very weakened and marginalized. Modern religion is less and less the expression of convictions, and increasingly the manifestation of personal and group identities (Marcel Gauchet).

Theology possesses special expertise in the religious and mythical level of the 'deep ontology'. For that reason it can make a fruitful contribution to the modern public discourse on life course.

### **Contract Relationships**

In the last and fifth dimension of the practical ethical conversation – the level of normative rules and roles for concrete behavior – all the other four dimensions are merged together. They take shape in institutions and conventions, expectations and sanctions, but also in legislation and regulation. Children acquire these rules and roles in their socialization processes still effortlessly and unconsciously. In the choice biography model especially the period of secondary education plays a decisive role. The education of young adults is an essential instrument in the project of conscious life planning. Choosing consciously the right training and schooling is an important part of building up a good 'résumé'. Once entered in professional life, relationships stay flexible and are a constant object of calculation. The dynamics of capitalism leaves no room to the 'enterprising self' for durable relationships that have their own intrinsic

value. Who prefers to have a life long working place in the same enterprise shows a lack of mobility and healthy ambition. Intimate partnership relationships also, are modeled according to a business contract, though the terminology does not fit the symbolism of the romantic ideal. Marriage relationships are entered into in view of mutual advantage, and are conditional by definition. Children are a personal option and object of planning, in- or outside of wedlock. Factually, for having a child a partner is not needed anymore, at the utmost one needs to find a sperm-donor.

The loosening of conditions for separation in marriage regulation and family law nowadays shows the growing influence of the 'choice biography.' The same is demonstrated by the privatization of pension systems and systems of elderly care that until presently – I speak for the Netherlands - were based on intergenerational solidarity. A shift is taking place, from a system in which the young pay for the aged, to a system in which everybody pays for him- or her self.

Ethics should beware of a cheap criticism of culture. Criticism concerning concrete law and regulation practices should only be acceptable if alternatives are offered. They are very much needed, in the field of education (I mention the importance of learning to take responsibilities for future generations, creating a sense of history, the intrinsic values of friendships), social regulation (arrangements for combining work and care, especially for women), marriage legislation (the offering of 'mediation'), elderly care (facilitating the care of intimates). A practical theological contribution in this area does not need to be theological in its content; it should be first of all practical.

## **Conclusion – Life Course as a Theme in a Practical-Theological Ethics**

Helping people in the construction of their life course – that should be the aim of both practical theology and ethics. Both take their starting point in a praxis that is no longer taken for granted. Questions like 'What is a good education?' 'What does it mean to become adult?' 'What does it mean to take good care of the elderly?' should guide the life course research in practical theology and ethics.

But both must take a more profound perspective too: praxis consists of both practices and theoretical reflection on these practices. In the individual experience and societal organization of the life course mostly normative visions – usually in an implicit way - are enclosed, both in a

descriptive ('this is the right way to see it as it is') and in a moral ('this is the right way to live it') sense of the word. A practical theological ethics with life course as its theme shall analyze and evaluate its normative dimensions. What's good in it, what's wrong? How is the present influenced by the past? What could be improved with some imagination and creativity? Is it possible to renew these practices with the help of a detour through our traditions, feeding our fantasy in how to live our lives (a critical hermeneutic of 'retrieval')? Special task for a theological ethics in this endeavor is to shed light on the credits and shortcomings of the religiously inspired Christian tradition.