

Europe with a Human Face or an Ethical Consensus in Europe

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Without an ethical consensus the entire European project loses value and neither economic union nor a common currency can do anything to help it. Of course, these practical developments are important. During my two-week holiday at the Swiss–Italian border I had to use Swiss francs in Switzerland, but back in Italy I could once again pay in euros. Nevertheless, without conscience leading the way, questions of mere convenience do not mean anything. An ethical consensus should be leading the future development of Europe. Alas! the balance between them was lost long ago.

Can we intervene in this process and breathe soul into this overinflated economic colossus?

Jacques Delors, a great European, understood the importance of this long ago. “Europe lacks heart and soul”, – he announced at the beginning of the 1990s. He spent five years fighting to set up the European Union’s own, self-funded programme called “The soul of Europe”. Once established it survived a mere four years before its funds were withdrawn and applied to other budgetary purposes.

In pursuing these aims, Jacques Delors had particularly hoped to have the support of the Churches and other religions, cultural coalitions that are taken seriously for their common humanitarian ideology. But the majority rejected his efforts to endow Europe with soul.

Do we, as representatives of the Church, want to take some action today even in a limited way?

My conclusions are based on a fundamental position.

Evangelical Academies have a special responsibility in the work of the Evangelical Church in Germany. One of the main reasons for this is the moral bankruptcy of the Church during the so-called Third Reich. In those days the Church was mainly put in the position of defending its own existence. German Christians, realising their evangelical mission was their main role, put up a fierce defence, but when

social issues were raised, the Church's answer was a surprising silence. Not one representative of the Church defended either Jews or Gypsies. It allowed, of its own accord, very many people suffering from mental illnesses to be sent to their deaths. When Hitler attacked the Soviet Union, the Evangelical Church even sent a telegram of congratulations in which it blessed him for cutting open this "abscess on the body of Europe".

In 1945 the Church recognised how low it had fallen; it must never allow such a thing to happen again. The Evangelical Academies, as the meeting point between Church and society, became its instruments. Their task was to act as the eyes, ears and voice of the Church, so that it could express its position and react with sensitivity to any social developments. This task placed on the Evangelical Academies determined my own actions. In 1996 at the Mühlheim Academy we set up a fund called "Europe with a human face". Its task was to promote efforts to develop a democratic, socially just Europe whose aims would include strengthening family values and protecting the environment.

We chose this title because we could see that Europe is at constant risk of losing its human face as diverse forces seek to leave their imprint on her. Our task at Mühlheim was to raise the question of the human face of Europe, and to discover which values are consistently seen as important for Europe by all States whether Western, Central or East European. The fund at Mühlheim ceased to exist a long time ago. It met the same fate as the efforts of Jacques Delors.

I was reluctant to abandon my idea. In 1997, by which time I was already a pensioner, I came here to Görlitz, at the invitation of Bishop Claus Wallenberg as honorary Head of Research. In parallel with creating the external structure of the Academy, I was to bring to the project the benefit of my experience of co-operation with Central and Eastern Europe. As a result, the Church leaders decided that co-operation should become the first of five key issues in the work schedule of the Academy's new administration. The final result was a seminar on the topic "Europe without values is a worthless Europe".

If Europe is to have a future in an expanding world, it has to include those values that are mutually agreed to be fundamental to the creation of a strictly ethical consensus.

The fundamental consensus I proposed for a spiritual Europe was as follows:

JUSTICE BASED ON RECONCILIATION –
REAL AND LASTING PEACE –
PRESERVATION OF THE PLANET
FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Before substantiating my choice of the above, I must make a few comments about these values and how I came to choose them.

The values acquire their meaning only in relation to each other; none of them has an absolute meaning on its own. Politicians are well aware of this: when canvass-

ing for votes they proclaim: “Vote for us, and the good old-fashioned values will point the direction of our policy, for example:

HARD WORK – CLEAN LIVING –
DISCIPLINE – ORDER –
LOVE OF THE MOTHERLAND

“We will give them meaning and show young people that these are the virtues that will set them on the right path”.

A teacher called Bernhard Dressler pointed out that it would be difficult to argue against such basic propositions. One would immediately be accused of supporting laziness, selfishness, indiscipline, and neglect. “He points out that virtues, of themselves, do not have an intrinsic value but can be used as an instrument. The statement that false virtues can be used to run a concentration camp is as true today as it was then”.

To find their place in the consensus, values have to be invested with a dual purpose. They need to be oriented towards actions and to the people around us.

What has been said here can be explained by two examples that have a very important meaning, – loyalty and truth.

It is obvious that loyalty can be distorted. SS troops had “My honor is loyalty” (Meine Ehre heist Treue) on their belt buckles. In the name of loyalty to one man, many millions were brutally tortured and killed. Equally the oath of allegiance to Hitler, taken by the Wehrmacht, kept the majority of officers from rising against Hitler, or from taking part in the assassination attempt on June 20th, 1944. They continued to obey criminal orders from Hitler until the very end.

This is far from an exception. Loyalty cannot be looked upon as an absolute in all circumstances whether it be an elite group, a family or a marriage. The question should always be asked: how does loyalty to one person affect my neighbour?

The same logic applies to truth. In the chapter “What does truth mean?” in his book *Ethics* Dietrich Bonhoeffer gives the following example:

A teacher asks his pupil in front of the whole class: “Well now, was your father drunk again last night?” As it happened this was true. The pupil, nevertheless, answered: “No, my father was not drunk”. Was the pupil lying? Dietrich Bonhoeffer says: “No”. He took responsibility for his father as a person close to him. The teacher, on the other hand, perverted the truth with his insensitive behavior.

Values acquire their significance or insignificance only in relation to each other. The main reason for this is that every human being was created in God’s image.

At the beginning of the Old Testament it is written: “God created man in his own image. Male and female created he them”. As a man and a woman. It means that identity is linked with interconnection. Through woman I become a man, a father

– through a child, a teacher – through a pupil. The contrast between ‘likeness’ and ‘actuality’ embodies my human identity. I am in the likeness of God. I was created in his image. I can distort it, turn it into a monster when I fail to treat someone with seriousness, someone who is also created in God’s image. I can deprive someone of his dignity, like that teacher who asked his pupil in front of the whole class: “Was your father drunk again last night?”

From this likeness to God, that seeks to realise itself through relations with others, comes the key tenet of the German Constitution: “The dignity of man is untouchable”. This applies to the dignity of anyone – whether it be an invalid, a mentally-ill person with a deeply disturbed psyche, or a healthy man, an asylum seeker, or a man without a roof over his head, a German, a Russian or a Pole.

The value of man lies not in his achievements, but in his dignity, given to each one of us by God. He may only lose it. One event made a particularly strong impression on me during my stay at the Evangelical Academy of Mühlheim. In our basement we gave shelter to homeless people who might stay there for several years. One day at Christmas-time a man called Ernst sat at the table opposite me. I offered him a glass of wine and we sat drinking and talking. Suddenly he said: “Dieter, do you know why we feel good in your place?” I looked at him enquiringly. “Here we are not tramps. Here we are people.” He meant the way he was treated by all 65 members of staff he met at the Academy.

And here are the words of theology teacher Karl-Ernst Nipkow: “The Biblical image of man created in God’s likeness paves the way to the universal ethics of human rights, which finds its highest manifestation in the fundamental value of human dignity”.

That is why when we talk about Europe with a human face, we say that it acquires its intrinsically human features when, and only when, Europe takes responsibility for people in every country and in every respect. This is a point of principle.

This point of principle underlies the key priority values which are at the heart of the question about the dignity of man.

On the subject of these priority values, in 1988 in a dictionary of the Evangelical Community “Compact”, I wrote in relation to the notion of “Value”: The Constitution states that “human dignity is untouchable”. In Gettysburg’s programme of 1959 the SDPG developed a triad, which later on, to a greater or lesser extent was accepted by all parties: “Freedom – Justice – Solidarity”. Ten years later, when the notion of environmental protection was incorporated into this triad, it came close to an evangelical formula “Justice, Peace and the preservation of all God’s creation”.

These key values regulate people’s relations with each other.

They exist only when interconnected, not each one in isolation.

When forming the question about the number of key values that were essential to a fundamental ethical consensus in Europe, I put down: Justice founded on reconciliation, Real and consolidated peace, the Earth preserved for future generations. I will try to explain what that means.

JUSTICE FOUNDED ON RECONCILIATION

The premise for Christians is that they live in the world in which God made peace with them. "In Christ, God made peace between the world and himself". (1.Cor.)

This is a key tenet. Because God accepted us, accepted us unconditionally, Christians are called to fight for reconciliation between peoples and to do it unconditionally.

In a paper, read in connection with my departure from the Evangelical Academy of Mühlheim, the President of the Evangelical churches, who was also Chairman of the Council of Evangelical Churches, Manfred Kok said: "As far as Christian impulses are concerned, Europe in the East was formed under the influence of Churches of Byzantine-Orthodox persuasion, in the West – those of Roman Catholicism and Protestant Reform. These different confessional regions that were formed over centuries are still discernible. Linked with modern education, they influence our culture and perception of life to this day. We also have to take into account the considerable influence of Judaism on Europe. The task of reconciling nations and cultures in Europe requires a great deal of strength. But reconciliation, freedom and justice are the essence of Christian mission. Therefore, based on our self-awareness, it is our duty to engage in a dialogue in the fields of ethics, culture, education, politics and economics".

The Synod of Evangelical Churches in 1996 promulgated a paper "To build Europe together – a task for Christians, Communities and the Church". Point 30 states: "Churches must participate in discussions about the spiritual foundations of Europe, about social and cultural forces and the humanization of its framework, about building democratic relations, the importance of human rights and freedom, the protection of minorities and the infirm, and about the relationship between individual nations and Europe".

At this point you encounter the whole spectrum of meaning of the notion "Responsibility", which stems from fundamental values.

The Church throughout its history has been both addressing this task of reconciliation and failing to carry it out. Here are a few examples. In its brochure on the status of displaced persons in 1965, attached to the so-called Eastern memorandum, the Evangelical Church gave a strong impulse to reconciliation with Poland. It was especially useful that this brochure, a few months later, was followed by an exchange of letters between Catholic bishops in Poland and Germany and was endorsed at St Peter's in Rome by the raising of hands as a gesture of reconciliation. "We forgive and ask for forgiveness" – this was the key phrase. Without this impulse coming from the Churches, we would have seen neither the Warsaw nor

Moscow agreements so quickly, nor Willy Brandt kneeling at the memorial to victims of the Warsaw Ghetto.

A speeding-up of reconciliation with the people of the Soviet Union happened under similar circumstances. In 1984 Bishop Verner Krushe, on his own initiative, announced at the Peace Congress in Kiel that reconciliation with the people of the Soviet Union had still not taken place. This had the effect of a word spoken at the right time. The following year Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union and twelve months later the end of the War was acknowledged – forty years after the fact. One Synod after another talked about reconciliation with the people of the Soviet Union. Rein Church participated by publishing 16 theses on reconciliation. This led to intensive contacts with the Soviet Union and to the founding of the Mühlheim initiative which was also a partner in this seminar.

Similar circumstances surrounded the velvet revolution of 1989 whose peaceful process was decisively affected by actions of the Evangelical Church.

The concluding words of the film *The Church of St Nicholas*, spoken by the head of security services, sound quite true to life:

“We had taken everything into account except for candles and prayers”.

There were more serious consequences, undoubtedly, where Christians caused schism and hatred instead of reconciliation. I recall the actions of the Teutonic Order in North-east Russia, where it ruled, killed and torched just as badly as the Nazis. I recall atrocities by Latvian and Lithuanian armies in the 16th century on the same Russian territory. I recall the Hussite Church, which devastated Lausitz, the horrors of the Thirty Years War, the expulsion of citizens of Salzburg by Prussians, wars with Hottenots... the list goes on and on.

AND WHAT ABOUT TODAY?

Let us remember the troubles between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, the crusading zeal of George W. Bush against Afghanistan and the ideology of Vladimir Putin against Chechnya.

This implacability finds concrete reflection in the opposition between Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches in Russia.

From the time the Pope introduced dioceses into Russia, relations grew cold. The Pskov example was clear proof. The Orthodox Bishop prohibited the building of a new Catholic church. He collected signatures in monasteries and churches and publicly declared that there is no place for Catholics in Pskov.

In connection with this, in his aforementioned paper, chairman Kok stated: “Schism between Churches paints a very negative picture. It undermines trust in their efforts. As long as Churches use growing contradictions between them as grounds for aggression and misuse their differences of origin as an ideological

weapon in a struggle between economic systems, they remain an obstacle to the process of unification of Europe". (s. 6)

In relation to this issue Christian Numberger in his book *Church, where are you?* demands the following. "The current situation in the world is a challenge, to people in general and to Christians in particular, of such a magnitude that it requires unification of all forces and a joint struggle... Instead of hopelessly quarrelling about matters of secondary importance... all "fighting cocks and hens" must address the main problem and channel their energies toward the fight for the main cause". (s. 10)

The key issue at the present time is the establishment of an ethical fundamental consensus in Europe.

First and foremost it concerns the question of justice.

For me justice is respect for the rights of others, an acknowledgement that they have the right to live, and that they have equal entitlement to the chances you have. For all this two Biblical sayings are fundamental to me. I took one from the Old Testament. Martin Buber puts it like this: "love your neighbour for he is just like you".

The other is possibly one of the first sayings of Jesus of Nazareth: "do unto others as you wish they would do unto you". This is a conversion into an active voice of our German expression: "do not do to others what you do not want to be done to you".

In connection with this, by an example of social justice in the sphere of economics, we will show what it means to seek justice as a factor of fundamental consensus in Europe.

Naturally, one could choose some other aspects like justice between men and women, for example.

An example: Social justice.

It finds its Biblical origin in a just attitude to the weak, confirmed in both in Old and New Testaments. One of the most important books in the Old Testament in this connection is the Book of Amos. In this book in the same language and with the same clarity exploitation is castigated – I deliberately use this word – exploitation of the poor by the rich, who sell honest people into slavery for a sum as small as the price of a pair of sandals used for kicking beggars. Here father and son are criticised if they force a slave woman to become their concubine. Those who drink, in the temple, wine they received in compensation for debt are likewise castigated. Amos describes the wives of rich men as plump and good-looking like contented cows, but they behave exactly like their husbands. They too will be judged without pity.

The same pitiless judgment by Jesus will befall those, who did not clothe the naked, feed the hungry, or visit the imprisoned and infirm. These omissions mean people are guilty before God.

The Church is very fully involved. Manfred Kok points out that many Churches in Europe “were engaged in colonial domination, justified the destruction of native cultures and kept quiet while tolerating the extermination of entire groups of people”. (s. 7)

Their repentance should be expressed through being especially vigilant, and not allowing themselves to be subdued by the market under the banner of “globalisation”.

As Manfred Kok says: “the market does not have right on its side. Cartels and agreements often exist in secret even though this cannot be proved. The market, in the first place, is a fiction since it does not make businesses bear all the costs involved in their undertaking. Losses, the necessary costs of infrastructure and, first and foremost, the ecological consequences of production are most likely to be borne by society. The capitalist economy in Europe needs to be restrained since man is not the sole owner of the planet earth, but only has it in trust. Europe must heed the voice of the Church. Otherwise no one will seek the truth and speak it out loud. We are not talking about the Church itself; we are talking about the binding power of mission “you are here not for yourself”. In the cycle of economic development Churches represent something akin to the power that protects the life of the suffering, the dying and invalids” (s. 9-10). Back in 1996, shortly before his death, Peter Byer, president of the Council of Evangelical Churches, formulated 5 questions directed towards the search for social, economic justice in Europe in order to reach consensus. They are still relevant today. First of all, the following four questions.

Question 1.

Which political and economic steps should we jointly take in order to lay the foundation for a new, just economic world order?

This is necessary for us, Europeans. What should be done to overcome the differences between Western and Eastern Europe? It is not only in our country that capitalism is an obstacle. It makes it difficult to achieve social justice in the newly joined countries such as Poland and the Czech Republic. And the further East we look, the greater its after-effects. It has worldwide application. Do we really think that in our closely guarded fortress “Europe” we can be safe from the onslaught of successive waves of people seeking to escape poverty? They will inevitably overwhelm us unless economic and social justice are made criteria in the globalisation process.

Question 2.

How should Europe's policy towards refugees and immigrants be developed and implemented following the 1999 Treaty of Amsterdam and the adoption of a common approach to migration management?

The importance of this question is clear from the fact that in Germany we took it to the Federal Court; the political parties were hoping to gain electoral advantage by appealing to nationalist instincts.

Peter Byer speaks here about an acceptance of joint responsibility. I mentioned before that fortress "Europe" in the long run will not be able to hold firm. Quoting the words of Manfred Kok, I have already remarked on Europe's inheritance of guilt from its colonial policy dating back to 1492. This policy is still in place today. Third World debt, now as then, can be explained by the rich countries' policy of exploitation. One only has to think of the way we limit our imports from poor countries by the imposition of punitive tariffs. And it does not stop there. Talking about universal social justice, we are a society that recognises the burden of responsibility and, together with other nations, we have an obligation to put right the deeds of our forefathers in places we still have not left. We must make a positive about-turn by accepting responsibility for the elimination of poverty. Handouts such as development aid, offering bread to the world and help to the poor are not a sufficient response.

This leads us to the third question.

At what co-ordinates and in what context do we see a Christian social charter for Europe which would aim to prevent Europe from turning into a fortress?

We must try our best to move the Iron Curtain to Bug, although, alas, the Poles object to it. We spend an enormous amount of money on this. We utilise human intelligence and human resources to secure the borders using night vision equipment and advanced electronic control systems. But I could not say whether we could organise a brain-storming process to develop the charter in ways which could reflect the main conditions of social justice in Europe and the rest of the world.

We did not look into the fourth question as yet. What is Europe's future priority? Is it the primacy of politics over economics or the primacy of economics over politics and culture?

Politicians, for once, should stop mumbling that if they came to power, unemployment would be eliminated and the capitalist sharks restrained. They also should stop babbling and saying that they have as much influence over it as over the weather. If it does not happen, politicians and all socially important institutions, and here I include the Churches, should begin, at last, to make a serious challenge against the primacy of politics. In this respect the issue should be evaluated during pre-election campaigns. Are the parties so entrenched in the system that they are no longer capable of that?

Should we retreat in disillusion or join the cry of Christian Numberger “Church, where are you?”

It seems that the impulse should come from the Churches, and that they should finally stop navel-gazing and face their responsibility for the world in its entirety.

More than six years have passed since Peter Byer recalled the words of Jesus of Nazareth who 2000 years ago rebuked: “What you have done to the poor you have not done for me”. 2700 years have passed since Amos condemned the social justice of the period.

Is this question just a pretty slogan for Sunday sermons or do we see our responsibility in only putting our fingers into the wounds instead of making this problem a key problem of our existence and finding a solution within the framework of our existence?

The question of social responsibility is the key question of this triad:

Justice based on reconciliation – real and consolidated peace – the planet saved for future generations.

It is for this reason that I discussed it in detail. I can be brief now in talking about the two other fundamental values.

First of all, let us consider the main value – peace.

In 1985 we published a book under the title *Wars do not end at the moment of peace*.

We wanted to say: the silence of the guns does not mean peace has been achieved in the positive sense that people are ready to live at peace with one another. The road towards peace will still require great efforts.

Up to this day we have never managed, even once, to silence the guns in both Europe and the rest of the world.

Europe’s numerous wounds are still bleeding.

In Kosovo and Yugoslavia, factions that hated each other could only be restrained by the force of arms. In Ireland and Spain we witness outbreaks of hatred again and again.

And what of the situation in the rest of the world?

Troubles in Palestine and Israel are still not over. Instead the hatred is rising. In Chechnya, Russians are fighting for total victory. In Afghanistan troops will have to remain for much longer. America plans to invade Iraq.*

The level of our mental and emotional involvement in all this is plainly exemplified by military reports. We trace the path of a fallen American soldier from transportation of the flag-draped coffin right through to burial with full honours, whereas the death in the same battle of hundreds of Taliban rebels is announced with triumph.

When a Russian helicopter is downed in Chechnya it makes worldwide news.

No one asks any more how many Chechens have perished, how does this nation endure suffering for so many years, how bad is the damage to the foundations of its life. The only good Talib is a dead Talib, the only good Chechen is a dead Chechen.

No one wants to look the truth in the eyes. And when we speak of guilt, we think of someone else's guilt first of all.

For example, it is hard to believe, when Frau Steinbach, chairwoman of the Council of Refugees, in a Church newspaper *Der Veg* demands the abolition of the Benesh decree: she speaks of the persecution of Sudeten Germans by Czechs in 1938 and right after that about their expulsion in 1945. She makes no mention of the horrific German rule between these two dates, about the murder of tens of thousands of people, about repression and slavery.

In many places on earth the guns still roar preventing us from talking of positive peace. Should Europe wish to establish and spread positive peace across the globe, then we must find the way towards it, find the people and organisations which can lay the foundations.

Is it possible for the Churches to show us the way to the right path?

Notes:

* – this article was written before the US military intervention in Iraq.

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