

# **The Importance of Christian Social Ethics for Society, University, Theology and Church.**

A Position Paper of the Society of Christian Social Ethics

## **1. The reason for the letter: Need for action for competence in social-ethical research**

This letter is addressed to decision-makers in science, church and politics, who have influence on the future of Catholic theology as well as to our theological fellows. Social ethicists in the German-speaking countries consider it of the utmost importance for social ethics to be a constitutive part of the curriculum of Catholic Theology as well as the contribution of the Church for a just and future-compliant society. Especially as this contribution has to be re-established and developed in a pluralized society, a scientifically sound reflection, language ability and differentiation are essential.

The concrete reason for our letter is the following: While scope and complexity of the field of Christian social ethics have increased enormously, genuine social-ethical chairs and therefore socio-ethical research competence are being abolished or lacking at theological faculties. If the number of professorial chairs at faculties or university organizations focused on teacher training are reduced due to declining numbers of students, Christian social ethics often is at risk of vanishing. Academically and theologically this can only be considered short-sighted.

## **2. Growing responsibility in times of historic change**

We live in a time of worldwide accelerated change processes and deep social, ecological, economic and cultural upheavals. There is some evidence for a complex interdependency of problems and causes, which challenges us to reflect anew on the fundamental ethical-political decisions of modernity with its understanding of progress, democracy as well as open societies. It urges us to further develop modern ethics for the changed conditions of the early 21st century. The awareness of ecological limits, the peaceful coexistence of different cultures living together in small areas, the effective fight against corruption and fair development cooperation - to name just a few examples - have become the survival conditions of our civilization.

The current situation of humanity, in which the different continents, nation-states and peoples are growing together, raises significant issues of justice at all levels. Among other things, we must respond to what justice and sustainability mean in the current global change, and how they can develop their normative effects under the conditions of freedom, plurality, demographic and digital change, as well as the complex economic and financial systems and, last but not least, under the fragile approval of the institutions of international politics. Particularly the pressing questions, which today arise in a new and existential way, concern the necessity of averting, respectively, moderating the overheating of the earth's atmosphere and - closely related to this - the challenges of migration, peacekeeping and human rights abuses.

In the introduction to the Apostolic Constitution of *Veritatis Gaudium*, these questions are explicitly addressed and the necessary consequences in science and especially Catholic theology are pointed out. The Pope trusts theology to make a contribution to shaping global development in a sustainable and just way. However, in the concrete ecclesiastical legal norms, there has so far been a lack of practical implementation in support of this discipline. Thus Christian social ethics should be strengthened within catholic academic theological education and in-

cluded in the Canon of compulsory theological subjects, as well as strengthened in several other contexts, too.

### **3. The importance of social ethics as an interdisciplinary bridging subject**

The awareness of the social dimension of the Christian faith is expressed in a wide range of commitments to the suffering and the poor. Since the beginning of the industrial age, it has been accompanied by its own theological and socio-ethical reflection and has been supported by the teaching authority's social proclamation. The necessity of reflection arose from the experience that social-caritative commitment, which had accompanied Christianity from its origins, was not sufficient in modern anonymous large societies to answer the pressing social question in the course of industrialization. It turned out that justice for all can primarily be guaranteed structurally and no longer by individual mercy alone. Accordingly, a new kind of scientific reflection on complex socio-ethical contexts was and still is needed in the field of theology.

Today, the social question has expanded to the world as a whole. This means that also theology has to be more global. Christian social ethics becomes one of the theological disciplines, which provide discussion, interdisciplinary interconnectedness and the interaction of theological content and subject-specific knowledge. With regard to methodology, a further developing of classical natural law and anthropological argumentation has been replenished by working with other theological, philosophical and social scientific approaches. These include practical-, action-, communication-, contract theoretical, neo-Aristotelian and systems theory approaches. They have all led to a more differentiated understanding of justice. As society has entered a new stage of pluralization and international interdependence, the theological discipline of social ethics calls for intensified efforts for intercultural and transnational, but also inter-religious learning processes in discussion with others in order to formulate generally acceptable, contemporary and practicable standards of justice for liberal and social societies as well as a just world order.

### **4. The benefits of social ethics for societies of the future**

Societies can only take responsibility for their future if they offer places for communication-oriented discourses where, if possible, everyone affected is involved from different perspectives. Christian social ethics with its academic, social and ecclesiastical discussion forums has been such a place in the past and has helped shaping the basic ethical-political orientation of the Federal Republic of Germany. A successful example is the contribution of Christian social ethics to the establishment of welfare state security systems in combination with the freedom of market economy. Christian social ethics also contributes to social interaction on behalf of the poorest and most vulnerable in terms of analyses and value orientations in the current debate on migration. In addition, Christian social ethics is committed to the process of European integration, which is a proving ground for the future of democracy, as well as to the question of what responsibility can be taken in a digitized world for the benefit of all those involved. The high demand outside of the Church for social ethics in the ethical counselling and accompanying of governmental organizations, parties, associations, business enterprises and educational institutions clearly shows that theology is in demand among the secular public and expected to make a contribution to social cohesion.

## **5. The relevance of social ethics for a responsible contemporary cooperative of the Church**

But Christian social ethics is becoming increasingly relevant within the Church as well: especially in recent decades the Popes have published important encyclicals on social ethics (Franciscus: *Laudato si'*, Benedict XVI.: *Caritas in veritate*, *Deus Caritas est*, John Paul II: *Centesimus annus*, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, *Laborem exercens*). The great worldwide response to the encyclical *Laudato si'* makes it necessary to continue the discourses on human ecology and sustainability initiated by it on a scientific level. This is to avoid raising expectations towards theology, which then cannot be met by professional competence among Catholic theologians. Particularly because sometimes the Church has recognized the signs of the times with a long delay and has only reluctantly supported the corresponding processes of change, an interdisciplinary "bridging subject" between church and society or social, human and environmental sciences proves to be indispensable for a responsible contemporary society and necessary learning processes within the Church itself. It is mainly thanks to the competence of Christian social ethics for the Church to be able to develop her communication skills on current social issues.

If we look at the focus of current conflicts within a world society, pressing socio-ethical challenges are emerging. The world is at the same time globally connected as well as torn apart by deep upheavals. Nowadays it is an essential practical test for the Christian message of salvation to actively contribute to the solution of these problems. However, this requires a reflective combination of basic theological insights combined with socio-theoretical competence. Christian social ethics itself is a place of open and controversial discourse. It provides a sense of orientation and reflection on Christian beliefs in and for modern societies. Up to the middle of the 20th century the development of Catholic social doctrine was essentially shaped by socio-ethical impulses from Germany. Today the discourses on regulatory, economic-, social-, peace-, bio- and environmental ethics are more on a global level. Therefore, a further internationalization of socio-ethical research is required. So Christian social ethics is indispensable for the scientifically founded struggle of the World Church for a responsible contemporary commitment in a globalizing world.

## **6. The importance of social ethics for ecumenical, interreligious, and intercultural dialogues**

Practical ethical problems, which affect everyone and which can only be solved in joint responsibility, require reaching an agreement with people and institutions of other denominations, religions, and cultures, as well as with people of a non-religious perspective. The subject of social ethics makes an important contribution to ensure the capacity and competence of Catholic theology to communicate within these interconfessional, interreligious, and intercultural dialogues. In recent years in particular, innovative approaches to ecumenical, interreligious and pluralistic Christian social ethics have been developed. In a religiously and ideologically pluralist society, it can also play an important role as a bridge-builder and mediator to different ethics anchored in religion, by dealing with social challenges that affect the coexistence of all. By reflecting on freedom, justice, and solidarity it essentially contributes to making cooperation possible and to solving conflicts in situations with different interests and personal convictions involved.

In doing so, it assumes that the own and other perspectives mutually enrich each other. The social-ethical dimension of Christian theology in particular can open up paths to communicate with followers of different faiths and non-believers. Thus, Christian social ethics has become a driving force of ecumenism and a force field of interreligious and intercultural cooperation.

## **7. The indispensability of social ethics for theological faculties and universities**

Especially at universities in the German-speaking countries, Christian social ethics is often integrated into interdisciplinary research training groups, clusters of excellence, research priorities or interdisciplinary academic programs. It is an outstanding example for the visibility and productivity of theology in the academic world.

Social ethics is of particular value for academic theology itself. It addresses the great ethical challenges of the "world of today" (*Gaudium et spes*), which the Church as a whole must not ignore, if it does not want to lose credibility. In this sense, Christian social ethics opens secular topics for Catholic theology as a whole. By means of this theology proves its relevance for a critical commitment to our times and the ability of the Church to contribute to a (world) society, adopting a particular responsibility for the poor and marginalized.

The structure-ethical issues and the necessary interdisciplinary-societal-theoretical approaches differ fundamentally from the methods of other theological disciplines - including those of moral theology. The range of the competence required for social ethicists, which includes aspects of economics, political, and legal sciences as well as sociology, ecology, and political philosophy, is extremely extensive. The division of labor between moral theology and social ethics is a requirement of scientific honesty. The merging of moral-theological and social-ethical chairs, which has already happened a few times, and the associated reduction of theological-ethical capacities in research and teaching have counterproductive effects on the capability to address the increasing challenges of our times.

## **8. The importance of social ethics in theological education**

The commitment to justice, responsibility for creation, and "universal fraternity" (*Veritatis Gaudium*, no. 4) as well as a solidarity-based overcoming of people's pressing worries and needs are indispensable components of Christian religious practice. It is desirable for all believers to acquire competences in social issues, especially those whose pastoral task is to accompany and support others in their religious practice. A competent confrontation with the relevant "social questions" is therefore of great importance to the Church, because through her diaconal and, in a broader sense, "political" activities in society, she develops her credibility and bears visible witness to the liberating message of the Gospel. In order to qualify students of theology for their later professional activity the subject of social ethics is indispensable. This is also true with regard to qualifying students to address socially and structurally relevant questions and to encounter ethical confrontations on new problems of the time.

In the "Framework for the formation of priests" of the German Bishops' Conference (from 01.12.1988 in the version of 12.03.2002) the "Christian doctrine of society" is regarded as an "indispensable stock" among the study of Catholic Theology. It was declared as indispensable for a complete study of Catholic theology in the "Ecclesiastical Requirements for the Modulari-

zation of the Study of Catholic Theology (theological full study) in the framework of the Bologna Process" (07.07.2008) with a fixed number of hours. Christian social ethics also is an integral part in the German teacher training program German for religious education, e. g. in the "Ecclesiastical Requirements for Religious Teacher Training" of September 23, 2010.

The World Church has a particular demand for the subject's content and training program. This is shown on the one hand by the high proportion of foreign graduates\* in the PhD program of Christian Social Ethics in Germany, which amounts to approx. 39 percent (the proportion of foreign graduates on average of all Catholic theology subjects in Germany is approx. 22 percent).<sup>1</sup>

This can also be seen in numerous interdisciplinary and international cooperation contexts in which experts of the academic discipline are involved. In this way, the subject importantly contributes to the internationalization of theological reflection and to the qualification of representatives on a world church level.

## 9. Summary

While the tasks and problems of the theological discipline of Christian social ethics have grown enormously, the number of social-ethical chairs at theological faculties and institutes is decreasing. When theological chairs are reduced due to declining numbers of students, social ethics is one of the most vulnerable disciplines.

However, in view of the growing problems of justice, peace and sustainability worldwide, the Church cannot adequately assume her responsibility for the future of humanity without intensive social-ethical research and teaching. The changing constellations of Christian responsibility in a pluralizing and globalizing world, as well as the complexity of the reference sciences to be taken into account, demand methodological and content-related expert knowledge, particularly for the translation of Christian faith into secular and plural societies. A belief that wants to enable people to assume responsibility needs social-ethical competence. As a reflection on responsible contemporaries, Christian social ethics therefore belongs to the essential core of theology.

Christian social ethics should be maintained in those places where it has already been established as an independent academic discipline, like in the German-speaking countries. Where this hasn't been the case so far, it should be further developed and expanded structurally and proactively.

Necessary strategies for structurally safeguarding social-ethical competence within theology and the church have to be tackled in the coming years. We appeal to our fellow theologians and colleagues in academic policy, to the bishops and all representatives of the world church, as well as to the representatives of politics, to secure and strengthen the necessary political conditions and resources for the survival of Christian social ethics.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Emunds, Bernhard/Hagedorn, Jonas: On the Situation of Young Researchers in German Catholic Theology, in: JCSW 58 (2017), pp. 341-403, here: S. 372.