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Culture as a Guiding Notion of Christian Social Ethics

Contrary to the animal, the human being is no pure being of nature. The environment and the world around him/her are no biotope merely provided to him/her to engage in but beyond their grasp of changing it. Rather is Man the being who is to form his world and himself in this world—precisely what we call culture. By nature Man is endowed as a cultural being and determined by an open mind to the world.¹ Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928-2014), who presented one of the important modern theological anthropologies, put it this way:

“The communal world of humankind has never been only the natural environment. It is interpreted and shaped by humans, nature made serviceable to his purposes, but also restraining Man’s realisation sometimes to the extent of utter destruction. Above all, it is the world of human conditions per se.”²

The biblical account of the creation takes up this aspect of the basic condition of Man and the human world by saying:” And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it” (Gen 2,15). Even when a few verses later it is reported that God brought unto Adam the newly formed “beasts of the field and every fowl of the air to see what he would call them” (Gen 2, 19) it becomes clear that, according to Jewish and Christian articles of faith, Man is to share with God the responsibility for the Creation.

Through the notion of co-responsibility the focus on mere anthropological constituency is shifted to a broadening ethical perspective. To the theology of creation this step goes without saying, but modern anthropology follows suit. For Man bestowed with the freedom of will and decision cannot simply live life like an animal simply driven by drive and instinct but rather must *lead* his life. Put in theological terms: to humans, life is not only a gift but, at the same time, a task.

Culture as a Guiding Category of the Classical Social Ethical Discourse

The task to lead and shape one’s life is not only up to the human being as an individual. Man is no atomistic single being but bound to live life in a community. This anthropological truism, which recently has been highlighted again in the social philosophy of communitarianism, has already been defined by the Aristotle- Thomas Aquinas tradition by naming Man as an ζῷον πολιτικόν or *animal sociale*. In this perspective, culture is the way humans fulfil this task living life in a community, forming their own environment and habitat.

Indeed, culture is not only an anthropological but also social- ethical category. Guided by this insight, Johannes Messner (1891-1984), one of the great German-speaking advocate of Catholic Social Teaching in the time after the Second World War, presented his own voluminous “Culture Ethics” in 1954. Messner, too, starts off from the anthropological understanding that “culture (...) is the way of life befitting the nature of a human being”³.

Therefore, at first, he understands by culture the “the total unfolding of the genuine human essence”⁴. This idea he developed further within the new-scholastic paradigm then predominant

in Catholic Social Teaching. Accordingly, “fulfilment of a life befitting the human being” requires that the “determining law of life” of Man is effective in it. In terms of neo-Thomism, to Messner this law of life consists of the code of mores “revealing itself to Man in evident moral truths and, furthermore, through the understanding of the human being’s purposes of life as prescribed by their nature”. In the final analysis, to Messner, culture therefore consists of “fulfilling values” leading him to the conclusion: “the moral natural law of Man, consequently, is also his moral culture law.”⁵

It is these relatively plain steps from Thomas Aquinas’s *inclinationes naturales* to the purposes of life befitting a human being, respectively from natural law to culture law, which today, in the unfolded modern times (or post-modern times), cannot be followed in this way. The uniformity of the world, which neo-Scholasticism took for granted and, to a certain extent, rightly could do so, has dissolved for us and has given way to the insight of diversity as well as the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of this diversity.

Shift of Paradigms of the Second Vatican Council

On this pathway, the Second Vatican Council is a crucial land mark for theology. In response to changed plausibility conditions in society, the Council articulates a new self-image of Church which also marks a turning point for its social teaching⁶. This shows prominently in the pastoral constitution “*Gaudium et spes*”. In the renowned introductory words of the last document passed by the Council, this shift of paradigms already becomes clear. The Council’s fathers emphasize that the starting point is the participation in the lives of people: “Joy and hope, grief and fear of the people of today, especially the poor and oppressed by all kinds are also joy and hope, grief and fear of Christ’s disciples” (GS1).

This is expressed more soberly in the second paragraph: “Before its (the Council’s) eyes stands the world of people which means the whole human family with the totality of realities it lives life in; the world, the stage of humankind’s history marked by its enterprises, defeats and victories.” Only thereafter do the Council’s fathers speak about the gospel i.e. that the Christian faith interprets this history of the world and humankind as a history of salvation:

“the world that, according to the faith of Christians, is founded and sustained in the love of the Creator, which got into the bondage of sin but was liberated by Christ who died on the cross and was resurrected by breaking the rule of evil; destined to be transformed according to God’s council for salvation thus attaining perfection” (GS2).

This order – first there is talk of the historical reality of people’s lives and then the narrative of salvation – is noteworthy and really no triviality as it shows an upending of deductive logic. The world in its historical reality is understood by the Council as a place of demonstrating the Church’s worth and its gospel of salvation and not a place for proclaiming eternal truths. The Church does not understand itself anymore as a contrasting perfect society as opposed to an imperfect worldly society but as a Church in the world, as God’s people on a pilgrimage finding itself journeying in company with the whole family of humankind.

With this decisive turning to the world, the pastoral constitution follows the track which Pope John XXIII laid down for the Council at the very beginning in his programmatic vision

aggiornamento. After the Church had positioned itself for more than a hundred years in scepticism, partly in open hostility to the modernizing world, this positioning meant to be liberation to many people but, to others, also demanding too much and even an imposition. Among the Council's fathers and advisors, there was also struggling about the pastoral constitution more than about any other of the Council's documents. Finally, this important text was resolved almost unanimously (2309 ayes, 75 noes). After longstanding debates, bishops and the Council's theologians reached the unanimous conviction that there was no alternative to the path of *aggiornamento* if the Church wanted to be true to its mission of spreading the gospel. It was not about following the zeitgeist but about "enculturating the gospel in the world of modern times"⁷. This necessitates giving way to the logic of communicative reason and dialogue as a mode of understanding in theological thinking and clerical speaking.

Plurality in the World and Church

Even today, more than fifty years after the Council, there is no alternative to this pathway. The fact that there is inherent a constant challenge becomes clear again and again, lastly, for example, in connection with the family synod and the post-synod epistle "Amoris laetitia"(2016). In the spirit of an open dialogue, Pope Francis has consequently pushed this whole process and not only with the view on the bishops' exchange of ideas in the synod hall but because of the dialogue within the Church. This has been strongly documented by the worldwide questioning of the faithful in preparation of the two synods 2014 and 2015 which were highly acclaimed not only in Germany. Here the Pope had on his mind communication and participation of the faithful, not for self-purpose but with the aim to confront the synod discussions on the theology and pastoral work of marriage and family with the real life reality of people today – also with the discrepancies between this reality of life and certain ecclesiastical doctrines respectively practice.

The findings of these questionings did not only show an ambivalent picture of the feasibility of marriage and family under today's societal conditions but also made clear the erratic nature and tensions within World Catholicism itself, for example on the theme homosexuality. This result could not come as a surprise as growing pluralisation and diversity are no simple social phenomena in the outside world which the Church faced as a monolithic bloc with closed ranks to occupy itself all alone under the perspective of having a pastoral way. It is clear to see that in the last decades pluralisation has taken place in the Church itself. More than ever diversity has become a part of social reality within the Church. To a certain extent, this is also a consequence of the process of *aggiornamento* kicked off by the Second Vatican Council. Insofar as the Church wants to engage with the world, it must also put up with the diversity of this world. This is the reason why after the Council a broad discussion has unfolded about the necessity of the contextualization of ecclesiastical practice of faith and contextual theology.

Today, basically only a few will contend that a great measure of context sensibility is to be demanded from theology, especially pastoral work. However, some debates centring around the family synod and also after the publication of "Amoris laetitia" show that it is not always easy to acknowledge that this principle of test is to be understood in concrete terms. However, Pope Francis cannot be reproached for this at all. In his post-synod epistle, he shows the path of

gradualism and deciding on a case by case basis, not lastly with a view on most familial problem set-ups. Thereby is pointed out a flexible but sound and provable pathway of dealing with the demands of idealistic doctrines and concrete reality of life. Herein becomes apparent a tendency in the development of teaching which, in a new form of normativeness for pastoral work in relation to dogmatics, moral theology and ecclesiastical law, renders it more prominent.

If this leads you to think that “*Amoris laetitia*” simply pays lip service to mere situation ethics or even encourages moral randomness and “laxity” completely misunderstands the character of this epistle and, in the end, refuses to go along with the challenge of finding an answer to the question how the Church can fulfil its mission of spreading the gospel in the context of the modern resp. post-modern world of today. That is namely one of the genuine guiding questions in the background of the family synod. In his epistle, Pope Francis does not enter the level of changes to the ecclesiastical dogmatics or the formulation of generally new moral theological principles to find an answer to this. The problem as such does not lie on this level but rests in the question how this level can be conveyed to the diversity of the reality of life. The first step in this matter is to take notice of this diversity with its challenges, to take them seriously and to acknowledge its legitimacy. Only on this basis can the Church and theology raise the claim on their part that their own Christian options in pluralistic society are respected and acknowledged. It goes without saying that the Church’s teaching may, shall and must be rich of content showing a position. Theological ethics should not offer only a negative but also positive ethics:

“But the prerequisite and morally necessary condition of such a positive Theological Ethics is the recognition that there is a plurality of legitimate options.”⁸

Perspectives of a Re-Acquisition of Culture in the Social- Ethical Discourse

Under the condition of recognizing legitimate plurality, the notion of culture again can regain an important role within the (social-) ethical discourse. It is Theological Ethics that here must and may have the courage to set self-confident impulses. Indeed, it is no coincidence that most of those values and their institutional implementation appreciated today – Humanism, Democracy and Human Rights to name a few – emerged in the context of the Judaic-Christian culture. This is not denying the fact that the context addressed here is highly complex and especially so the relationship between the Church and Democracy and Human Rights did see many changes in history. Theology and Church do very well know about these historical facts and, in the last decades, also self-critically received, scientifically researched and worked a lot to come to terms with them. The Church and theology cannot be reproached for lack of complexity in their judgement in this matter but the reproach rather applies to those who are still of the opinion that –without history - Democracy and Human Rights simply fell out of the skies as ideas of the philosophy of Enlightenment and the French Revolution and thus – often simply because of ideological reasons - denying the obvious connection with the cultural, Christian context.

Someone who put great emphasis on this connection, totally unsuspecting in wanting to elevate the societal role of Church and Theology: Jürgen Habermas. In an interview (1999) he said:

“For the self-image of modern times, Christendom has not only been a precursor figure or catalyst. The egalitarian universalism from which arose the ideas of liberty and living together in solidarity, of

autonomously leading one's life and emancipation, of an individual moral conscience, human rights and democracy is a direct heritage of Jewish justice ethics and Christian ethics of love. Unchanged in its substance, this heritage again and again has been critically acquired and newly interpreted. Up to today, there has been no alternative for it. Also in view of current challenges of a post-national constellation, we ever draw on this substance. Anything else is post-modern trivial talk."⁹

Someone who had taken notice of this way of thinking, especially of Habermas' address on his being awarded the peace prize in 2001, could not be surprised that, at the beginning of 2004, he met with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at the Catholic Academy in Munich for a dialogue about the pre-political foundations of the free-democratic state leading to a large measure of agreement, at least a mutual understanding between both partners of the dialogue. To the surprise of several listeners, Ratzinger noticed that in the talk with Habermas he did not want to recur to the typical figure of argumentation of natural law typical of traditional Catholic Social Teaching. This sword had become blunt after the findings of evolutionary biology had shattered the idea of rationality in nature. At the same time, however, Ratzinger also emphasized that things for the claim of universal liability had not become any better for a post-metaphysical philosophy steeped in the tradition of Kantian universalism.

"At any rate, it is a fact that our secular rationality, the clearer it appears to our westerly formed reason, is not lucid to any reason, that rationality, in its attempt to make itself evident, meets limitations. Its evidence is factually bound to certain cultural contexts and it must acknowledge and that as such it cannot be understood in the whole of humankind and thus cannot operative as a whole"¹⁰

In his talk with Habermas, against this background, Ratzinger stated "the factual non-universality of the two great cultures of the West, the culture of Christian faith and the culture of secular rationality, as both co-marking in each other's specific way the cultures in the world"¹¹. In this figure of argumentation one finds a hint in what way culture can be reconstructed as a social-ethical guiding category in a multi-polar and multi-cultural world: through recognition of the particularity of one's own culture without sliding into cultural relativism. Or, worded in positive terms: acknowledgement of particularity without yielding the claim that a – deeply formed and permeated by Christendom – culture like ours has contributed important assets for the humane development of humankind beyond the boundaries of its own cultural region. How such a claim can be implemented in a social-ethical approach, Hans Joas has demonstrated in his exemplary attempt at an affirmative genealogy of Human Rights¹².

The Social-Ethical Challenge by Culture Racism

Diametrically opposed to this re-acquisition of culture in the social-ethical discourse of the unfolded modern times are those positions put forth by the so-called "New Right" which misuses the term culture to construct a pseudo-theoretical framework for a "modern" racism. In research, this new form of racism, among other things, is labelled as "racism without races", because *prima facie* it does not postulate the biological superiority of one race over the other, but, in the name of conservation of cultural identity as well as plurality of different ethnic groups, warns of their "mixing" respectively campaigns against immigration from foreign cultural regions. Here

“Conservation of Christian Europe” is a topic put forth in the political arena in the environs of this concept and its rank growth which, in recent times, many Christians unfortunately have also fallen prey to.

Here, a lively Christian identity of Europe is the Church’s matter of heart. On the long run, this reality can only be lived by a positive strengthening of this identity from the inside, i.e. out of faith. Someone who thinks that Christian identity of Europe can be preserved by hostile dividing lines from the others, keeping out different and foreign things has understood little or nothing about the essence of this Europe, its history and culture strongly marked by Christianity. In his works, among other things, the French philosopher Remi Brague demonstrates that Europe has come into being because of its merging the old and new again and again; therefore he calls European culture a “culture of adding”. One must not forget: Christendom is no culture but a faith seeking to encompass all cultures and peoples. Brague’s words mirror the missionary zeal essentially making up Christendom from its very beginning one still should be proud of and stand up to:

“Christ has not come to build a civilization but to save people of all civilizations. That, what one calls ‘Christian Civilization’ is nothing else but the totality of ‘side effects’ which the belief in Christ has rendered on civilizations that crossed his path. If one believes in His resurrection and the resurrection of each human being in Him, one sees things in a different light and acts accordingly in any area. But it takes a long time to become aware of this and to put it into action. Perhaps, therefore, we are still at the beginning of Christendom.”¹³

Therefore, Christendom is not at all suitable to serve as a background foil for the identitarian, ethno-pluralistic and culture racist phrases of the New Right. The intellectual forerunners of this movement very well know about this. Their most important protagonist, the French journalist, Alain de Benoist, decisively fights against what he calls “Judaeo- Christendom” and propagates a new heathendom in the way he also attacks the concept of Human Rights and the idea of their universalism. That shows: The demagogues of the New Right pretend to defend Europe from outside attacks; but the truth is that they rather undermine Europe from the inside. If this ideology were to be successful, nothing would be left of what makes up Europe and its culture. Showing this up today is one of the important tasks of culture ethics in the sense of social ethics, especially of a Christian Social Ethics.

Annotations

¹Cf Arnold Gehlen, *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* (Man. His Nature and Position in the World) Bonn ⁴ 1950, 86; cf. Franz-Josef Overbeck, *Der gottbezogene Mensch. Eine systematische Untersuchung zur Bestimmung des Menschen und zur „Selbstverwirklichung Gottes“ in der Anthropologie und Trinitätstheologie* Wolfhart Pannenberg’s (God-Related Man. A Systematic Study on Defining Man and On the “Self Realization of God” in the Anthropology and Theology of Trinity of Wolf-Hart Pannenberg). Münster 2000, 111 f., 123, 144.

² Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropologie in theologischer Perspektive* (Anthropology in Theological Perspective). Göttingen 1983, 305

³ Johannes Messner, *Kulturethik mit Grundlegung durch Prinzipienethik und Persönlichkeitsethik* (Nachdruck der Ausgabe von 1954) (Culture Ethics with Foundations in Ethics of Principles and Personality-Reprint of the edition of 1954). Vienna 2001, 407

⁴ Ibid.336

⁵ Ibid.407

⁶ Vgl. dazu ausführlich Franz-Josef Overbeck, Soziallehre und Lehramt. Zum Pluralismus in Geschichte und Kirche, in: ders. (Hg.), Freude und Hoffnung. Die Kirche in der Welt von heute und die Aktualität des Konzils (Cf in details Franz-Josef Overbeck, Social Teaching and Teaching Profession. On Pluralism In History and Church, in: same (ed.), Joy and Hope. The Church in the World of Today And the Topicality of the Council. Ostfilden 2017, 103-124)

⁷ Arnd Küppers, Postmoderner Pluralismus und Theologische Ethik (Post-Modern Pluralism and Theological Ethics), in: same/Peter Schallenberg (ed.), Interdisziplinarität der Christlichen Sozialethik (Interdisciplinarity of Christian Social Ethics). Paderborn 2013, 181-197, 194

⁸ Ibid.191.

⁹ Jürgen Habermas, Ein Gespräch über Gott und die Welt, in: ders., Zeit der Übergänge. Kleine Politische Schriften IX. (A Talk about God and the World, in: same, Time of Transitions. Little Political Epistles IX.) Frankfurt 2001, 173-196, 174 f

¹⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, Was die Welt zusammenhält. Vorpolitische moralische Grundlagen eines freiheitlichen Staates, in: ders. / Jürgen Habermas, Dialektik der Säkularisierung. Über Vernunft und Religion.(What Keeps the World Together. Pre-Political Moral Foundations of a Free State, in: same/Jürgen Habermas, Dialectics of Secularization. On Reason and Religion) Freiburg 2005, 39-58, 55

¹¹ Ibid.54

¹² Cf. Hans Joas, Die Sakralität der Person. Eine neue Genealogie der Menschenrechte. (Sacredness of a Person. A New Genealogy of Human Rights) Berlin 2011.

¹³ Remi Brague, Christen und „Christianisten“, Interview mit Gianni Valente (Christians and “Christianists”, Interview with Gianni Valente), available online:www.30giorni.it/articoli_id_5435_15.htm#.

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