

Nuebel\_Hans.doc

Give World Religions a Chance to Justify Communitarian Relations?  
www.dekomnetz.de

Abstract:

With many communitarian thinkers we view religious communities as embedded in culture. Out of the desire to be disrobed from isolation religions are acted out as community actions (Max Weber). Their encounter of the great religions shows exclusive competition. On the other hand the World Council of Churches as an ecumenical body promotes a “Decade to Overcome Violence seeking Reconciliation and Peace”. A “communitarian” encounter is like an embrace: opening of arms, trying understand each other, exchange of ideas and feelings, and let each other go in his/her alterity. Irritation is imminent from the conflation of nationalism and religious expressions a Civil Religion of the present administration.

It becomes dangerous, if in World religions fundamentalist groups make themselves instrumental for global players in politics as well as in economics. They should be more are on guard of the “danger of a conflation of biblical religion and patriotism”; otherwise they will not bring forth the moral tradition of balancing and exploring in the communitarian way a dynamic equilibrium between ethical rationality and the powers of nationalism and economism.

### **End of a major burst of communitarian theory ?**

“From where will thinkers draw their inspiration” asks Ed Lehman on page 74 of “The Responsive Community” spring 2003, when he ends up his review of Philip Selznick’s “The Communitarian Persuasion” with some questions, which I try to touch in this paper: “Are we at the end of a major burst of communitarian theory and should thinkers now shift entirely from precepts to problems? Is there still room for further productive elaboration of (and debate over) communitarian precepts, from where will thinkers draw their inspiration? Are problems the only reliable source of new theories, are there developments in philosophy and sociology that need to be now closely examined?” There were more incentives in this conference to enlarge the view on “community” by its being embedded in culture, which means in a multiplexed network of dependencies. What I am trying here, is to explore some recent traces in theologies of World Religions, Christian, Judaism, Muslim and some others on the fringe and to find out, if there is more communitarian development in them to be

found than just some answers on “problems”. I would like to demonstrate that it makes sense, not only to start from the question what community gives man, but also from the question, why man needs community in a world he ultimately cannot comprehend and where religions give their guidelines. To me the most important aspect seems to see communities in their evolutions and to find a model for desirable ones – it is the idea of embrace!

First let me quote Amitai Etzioni (A. Etzioni NGR 245): “As I see it, moral order and autonomy, the “twin” virtues, crown the communitarian normative account; they provide the final, substantive normative criterion this account requires.” Where Etzioni speaks of twin virtues, Selznick refers in view of religion to the “interplay” of civility and piety as central to communitarian thought. (The Responsive Community Summer 2002 p. 74).

The imagening of interplay, balance or equilibrium in between two desires or interests to me is characterizing communitarian thought. Yet the weightiness on each side never can be set firmly in place because of the dynamics in life and so it is not just a question of problems but also one of precepts how to think of a mobile and fragile momentum between the interests of a person and the one of an community. . religions are not at all static entities but like streams running through communities and persons. An important issue to me – to mention it now already – is to adjust to the living character of religions to the current interplay. It means to revision their stream of traditions, their given confessions, their in most cases deeply respected languages language and highlights the importance of interpretation. Such interpretation needs courage and - never is innocent, but it is the only way for partners in a dialogue to make traditions vice versa understandable, acceptable and keep them justifying.

### **Max Weber revisited**

Almost a century ago Max Weber in years of partial recovery from nervousness and prolonged illness was led to develop brilliant insights into the relationship between various religious ethics and social and economic processes, and into many other questions of lasting importance. Recently we are able to study in a carefully prepared edition<sup>1</sup> the ideas he wrote down on “Religious Communities” (Religiöse Gemeinschaften) as result of a thorough study of the comprehensive investigations on religions of the time. His acute interest grew in social phenomena such as mysticism, which are antithetical to the modern world and its underlying process of rationalization (EC)<sup>2</sup>.

Maybe it reflected some of Weber’s personal experience in the years of illness before World War I when he found the justification of the religious development as a basic element in the cultural history of man in the experience of a world having the quality of being meaningless and hopeless. Out of the desire to be disrobed from isolation religions are acted out as community actions, while the power of euphoria (even sorts of inebriation) in followers and believers creates ecstasy. Through charismatic prophets early forms of totemism are substituted by more rationalized sorts of practice in the religions of culture. As the

---

<sup>1</sup> Hans G. Kippenberg ed. Max Weber: Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Die Wirtschaft und die gesellschaftlichen Ordnungen und Mächte. Nachlass, Teilband 2: Religiöse Gemeinschaften. J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) Tübingen ISBN 3-16-147562-3.

<sup>2</sup> (EC) refers to Encyclopedia Britannica 2001

equilibrium shifts from a more irrational feeling of togetherness in the community to a more rational commitment the path leads to more and more of a rationalization. In each stage images of the world (Weltbilder) give communities a meaningful order for the conduct of life of their members

Only relatively rational prophecy is able to break through magic and in the long run prophecies have brought about what he called the “Entzauberung” (demagification) of the world.

Many religious communities are created by charismatic prophets, who are gaining assistants that cooperate in his “mission” and in the course of time are able to secure the continuity of the mission in a community which thereby originates. Important from the view of sociology to Weber of this new volume in the chapter “standing, classes and religion” is the respective assignment of religions to social layers or movements (eg. originally Islam and middle age Christian knighthood were belonging to a class of warriors and their religion was less oriented towards salvation but victory, whereas early Christian missionaries (as Jesus himself) as “petit bourgeois” he assigned to craftsmen living in towns or migrant from town to town<sup>3</sup>. Where a religiousness in communities settled, it was easy to find followers, especially if it was rational and ethical und so it could have lasting effects the conduct of life in these circles<sup>4</sup>.

### **Communities embedded in Culture**

Jeffrey C. Alexander<sup>5</sup>, who further developed the concept of Weber in a debate on the functionalism in “culture” was led to find what he calls the interpretative dilemma (Alexander 1987:311,315) of postulating either cultural determinism or contingent acting in respect of. material conditions. The communitarian mental image of equilibrium between autonomy and order pays attention to the dilemma of determinism and contingent acting, so this again leads to our mental image of balances dynamic processes towards rationalization, a “reaching out”. He writes:<sup>6</sup>

World religions convey solutions of how to avoid both: strict determinism and exuberant liberalism. They open a space for interactions between the transcendent and man.

### **Competing World Religions**

The encounter of the great religions being embedded in cultures from the beginning and up to now shows exclusive competitions: Jews and Christians in the time when the New Testament was written, Muslims versus both of them in the time of the Koran, nowadays Hindus versus Muslims or even the peaceful Buddhist in Sri Lanka in confrontation with the

---

<sup>3</sup> Religiöse Gemeinschaften S. 231, S. 239

<sup>4</sup> Religiöse Gemeinschaften S. 243

<sup>5</sup> We follow here the introduction for German readers given by Harald Wenzel S. 23 in: Jeffrey C. Alexander: Soziale Differenzierung und kultureller Wandel, Campus Verlag Berlin/ New York 1993 ISBN 3-593-34743-1

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey C. Alexander and Paul Colomy, editors: Differentiation Theory: Problems and Prospects. Columbia University Press ISBN 0-231-06996 – 0 p. 1

Tamil minority, when peaceful Buddhist monks change their robes with uniforms. We must not forget the mutual aggressive actions between Israelis and Palestinians. In these confrontations there are competing cultures and orders of life in one country, which is believed to be “holy”, because of religious revelations that were ascribed to certain sites there.

It must be acknowledged as true to each party: these religions claim exclusively to “possess” (as far as this in the stream of religious experience this word is acceptable) the “Holy”, be it a massive source of life like a country or a building or the realm of a spiritual source. The World religions are often competing for the possession of or control over a “Holy Land”, but they also possess holy scriptures, that can be read or listened to in any country. There is still a great interest to organize the order of life in a certain region of the world according to the precepts of these scriptures – and tensions arise in overlapping neighborhoods because of different orders of life.

These scriptures actually are supposed to influence today’s order of life? But they once were conceived or revealed in times and living conditions of long ago in countries usually far away under circumstances that are not easy to imagine. Thus these scriptures in order to be applied thoughtfully, need historic assignment, hermeneutical reflection on their true “meaning” for men and must be translated into the language of today. Their content by itself calls to be defended against arbitrary interpretations, but this needs much learning and responsive research. This task is taken serious up to now in respect of biblical texts. Jewish and Christian scholars carry out it in cooperation, and to some extend even in contact with Buddhist and Hindus working on their sources, but in connection with official Muslim teachers this is hardly possible. Therefore an exchange on the interpretation of these texts, as hopeful it might become, is now hardly possible in the interpretation of the Koran.

### **Ecumenical developments**

The word Ecumenical (ecumene from Greek: “the inhabited earth”) was used at first for the global unity of the world’s Christian churches, but now it is in the heart of a vision for an “Ecumene of all World Religions”. In the effort to gain influence upon the world the World Council of Churches as an ecumenical body nowadays is promoting a “Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace” that calls churches, ecumenical organizations, and all people of goodwill: To work together at all levels – local, regional, and global. <sup>7</sup>

General Secretary Konrad Raiser on July 4th of 2003 accordingly expressed the ecumenical view in an interview: “None of the recent military interventions against dictatorial regimes and in situations of massive human rights violations have brought about effective solutions. There is a semblance of efficiency at first sight, but military intervention never gets at the root causes and leaves the majority of problems unresolved. The war on Iraq did not produce regime change, but a regime demolition without a constructive and sustainable change. The United Nations could be much more effective, if governments like that of the United States would allow and strengthen it to use the available political instruments.”

---

<sup>7</sup> see <http://wcc-coe.org>

Very similar are the academic views of Philip Selznick “On a Communitarian Faith”<sup>8</sup> “Communitarian principles do not stand alone. They draw credence and support from fundamental understandings of human nature and the human condition. .. made wisely they create a legacy of well- founded precepts, which are sometimes made explicit by a Buddha or an Aristotle, by Jesus, Calvin, Hobbes or Kant. Or they can be only dimly perceived, crudely expressed, or followed but not acknowledged.

### **Religious Identities and the need for “space”.**

To understand the religious background of a true ecumenical spirit we quote from this study program:

The fact is, though, that it is religion which is used to define the identity. Conflicts are seen to be between Christians and Muslims, Christians and Jews, Muslims and Jews, Hindus and Sikhs and many more combinations.

For identity building, there needs to be space for us to explore who we are and how we relate. There has been discussion in the WCC around the idea of ecumenical space – space where those with differences can feel safe to be themselves. This means being respected without the threat of exploitation.”

Questions are asked towards the end of this study which are left to the reader like these: “Is there a difference between accepting people at the level of good human relationships and accepting what they believe? How do we reconcile deep commitment with an openness to the other? How do we see those who believe differently as embodying a potential for enriching our own faith and not as a threat to our identity?”

### **Expectations of Muslim Leaders**

If we compare a Muslim Text (<http://muslim-answers.org>) published in Germany we find quite a different attitude and language and miss any reflection of the own share in prevailing iniquities:

Islam has been under attack from its very inception, but in recent years it has come under a more fierce ideological attack from its historic foes – Christian Missionaries and Orientalists as well as other allies of Western neo-imperialism and monoculture. This should come as no surprise, since Islam is Almighty God's final dispensation to all of mankind and Muslims are the only significant religious community standing in the way of the complete secularization of the World..”

In a statement more open-minded we read: “We do not miss the basic declarations of the guidance of both of the great churches in detail and of the Work Association of the Christian Churches (ACK) relating the fundamental

---

<sup>8</sup> The Responsive Community summer 2002 p. 67 ff.

rights of Muslims in this society; of this we are aware with acknowledgment and deep respect. The “Common word” of the churches to migration and fleeing is a clear example for it. Yet we miss substantial declarations of the church administration and probably possible actions together with the Muslims in view of topics as Islamic slaughter, Islamic teaching at school, building of mosques and call for prayer, and practical steps in solidarity to fight discrimination of Muslims e.g. in the market for work and dwelling, and the discrimination of Muslim wives on behalf of the wimple. “

The comparison of these statements indicates internal conflicts in between the Muslim Communities, especially between two groups: “The Charta of Islam” published by ZMD (Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland) and the “Islamrat”. They read like this: “The Zentralrat is committed to the integration of the Muslim population in the society, maintaining their Islamic identity and supports all efforts, that promote the teaching of language and naturalization”. Another body is the so called “Islamrat”, who does not use the word “integration”, but “care for Muslims in Germany”: „The Islamrat feels obliged to the history of Islam in Germany and considers himself the bridge between Germany and the world of Islam”.

In the latter the basic idea is shaped by a relation between Germany as a country and “The World of Islam”. there is no hope for a dialogue on religion as it is understood in Germany. Two power- groups are opposing each other strongly: those who are ready to translate the religious traditions into modern conditions of life and others who disagree convicted to the “pure” heritage<sup>9</sup>. Yet it would unjust to depart from these internal tensions in Islamic community without addressing similar conflicts in between Christian groups – some of them welcome dialogue and others reject it – the “modernists” and the “fundamentalists”<sup>10</sup>; The term “fundamentalism” pertaining to this conflict only recently is used for related tendencies in the other World Religions. As fundamentalism has been very much promoted from such “evangelical” groups in the USA and throughout the world it should not surprising that the equivalent is promoted from correspondent groups in other world religions. We find them in wide range of Jewish organizations as well as in brotherhoods in Islam. They are the opponents to any promotion of “Communitarian” dialogues. Their mutual influence must be clearly addressed for a détente on both sides. Would it be possible to think of a reconciliation? It would undoubtedly have to start from personal acquaintances, encounters in the neighborhood and growing interest in the study of converging as well as diverging moments.

---

<sup>9</sup> Often this tendencies are addressed as “modernist” and “fundamentalist”. The terms are now used for pressure groups in all World Religions; in the debate on this issue (see below Note <sup>17</sup>) the horizon of other groups in Protestantism has been broadened. Corresponding developments in other World Religions are emerging here and there.

<sup>10</sup> The high point of millenarian influence upon the conservative tradition within evangelical Protestantism occurred when millenarians cooperated with other defenders of the inerrancy of the Bible in founding the American Bible League in 1902 and in writing a series of 12 pamphlets entitled *The Fundamentals*. The pamphlets attacked the current theories of biblical criticism and reasserted the authority of the Bible, using the arguments developed at the Princeton Theological Seminary. The series was a summary of the previous generation's attempt to oppose biblical criticism and modernism through argument (EB)

## **“The Parliament of World Religions”**

On another level in 1999 from December 1st to 10th, at Kapstadt the “Parliament of World Religions” was assembled in the continuation of a parliament of the same name which held a first conference in 1893 in Chicago connected with the World Exhibition and exactly 100 years later again at Chicago, where in 1993 the declaration on a World Ethos, conceived by Hans Küng, was approved. Close to 7.000 people attended over 800 events. The most prominent guest and featured speaker was the 14. Dalai Lama. In view of the millennium it was intended to deal with the specifics of questions of faith and of the trustworthiness of governments. Among the participants were Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Taoists, Buddhists, Hindus, Catholic Christians and Baptists. As a result more than 250 projects for the “Improvement of the World” were fixed, one of which was an index of 500 companies that should be explored in view of how they followed their social responsibility.

"We feel that bridges of understanding have been built between the people who have attended, and the communities around the world that have sent representatives here," said co-chairperson of the board for the PWR's South African chapter Dr Amy Marks.<sup>11</sup> Half a dozen cities had already begun to make bids for the next PWR, which will take place in five years. It is currently being organized for an invitation to Barcelona, Spain in summer 2004.

### **Modern Christian Concepts of religious „mission“ as an attempt of reconciliation :**

How could such a building of bridges become more elucidated and made comprehensible? Every religion uses comparisons. So please accept here one which struck me most.. In an attempt to creatively connect the Christian vision of reconciliation with the burning issues of a fragmented world a fortunate paper was presented to the Council of EMS (Protestant Missions Cooperation Body) , Stuttgart, 3. July 2001) by Klaus Schäfer, because of the imagery he uses. From it I will even draw my final contribution to a further development of communitarian precept. I quote from his paper “Towards a Theology and a Ministry of Reconciliation”. - Tentative Explorations into the Relation of Mission and Reconciliation. Its focus is in the respect of the alterity of the other and he uses the image of embrace (introduced to this subject by Miroslaf Volf) in a sequence of movements

Open arms are a sign that I have created *space in myself* for the other to come in and that I have made a movement out of myself so as to enter the space created by the other.

The second act in the movement of embrace is *waiting*. The initiated movement of embrace is not "an act of invasion". One desires fellowship and embrace with the other, but one waits for the sake of the integrity of the other,,,

---

<sup>11</sup> 2004 Parliament of the World Religions brochures are now available at The council for a Parliament of the World's religions (CWPR) 70 E. Lake Street, Suite 205, Chicago, IL 60601 Tel. 001-312-629-2990 Fax -2992. Next session “Pathways to Peace: The wisdom of listening, the Power of Commitment” Barcelona, Spain 2004.

The third act, the closing of arms, is the goal of embrace, which is unthinkable without *reciprocity*; each is both holding and being held by the other, both active and passive. it does in no way extinguish the alterity, but it does open possibilities to see the own self and the other in a new light....

In the movement of embrace there is a fourth act necessary: The opening of arms again. *The other must be let go so that his/her alterity may be preserved; and the self must take itself back into itself so that its own identity, enriched by the traces that the presence of the other has left, may be preserved.*

There is a risk of embrace. I open my arms, make a movement of the self toward the other, the enemy, the stranger, the other, and I do not know whether I will be misunderstood, despised, even violated or whether my action will be appreciated, supported, and reciprocated. I can become a victim or a savior - possibly both, like Christ Jesus himself. This, however, is the mission of the church!" 12

This is obviously a rather protestant comparison, a vision for believers who are not narrow-minded. It does not fit well in the evangelical concept. In Roman Catholic views we find another appalling idea as expressed by Michael Barnes, SJ 13 whom I quote:

Communities exist through a process of constant self-identification in face of the other and are no more complete and blissfully at home than any other individual person. 249 I have tried to sketch the terms of an "theology of dialogue", a Christian reflection on an intrinsically relational existence – with "learning about learning, Aloysius Pieris<sup>14</sup> makes a distinction between two missiologies, one which 'defines mission as somehow procuring a place for Christ in Asia' and another which, as he puts it, 'spells out the missiological consequences of recognizing and proclaiming *Christ as the one who has no place in Asia*'. Pieris is highly critical of a missiology of 'conquest' which presumes to 'place' Christ in territories which are alien to him. Rather, he argues, Christ is already there before Christian missionaries succeed in establishing a special place for him.

From these approaches from the side of Christian theology I will try to outline in short, how these may help to further the development of the Communitarian precept, Ed Lehman has asked for as many of us do:

At first I was looking for a dynamic image in the relation between autonomy and order. Next I found there is always an equilibrium, in which both sides continuously need to be balanced mutually, and now I see there are typical stages in the development of such an

---

<sup>12</sup> printed from <http://emw-d.de>

<sup>13</sup> M.B.: Theology and the Dialogue of Religions, Cambridge University Press 2002, p. 248, ISBN 0 – 521 – 00908 – 1

<sup>14</sup> Pieris, Aloysius: Does Christ have a place in Asia? A Panoramic View, Concilium, 2;33-47

equilibrium: Openness, waiting, finding each other and respecting his alterity. As often there is an important potential hidden in the constellations between partners, even in a situation, where they at first act aggressive against each other.

### **The pressure of politics and US Civil Religion**

Some Christian theologians, plead very much on goodwill, show openness to encounter, and clear personal commitment. We also had to mention the “evangelicals” the fundamentalists who are more closely related to a recent manifestation of a certain civil religion in the US: But in the year We cannot close our eyes in front of this outbreak of Civil Religion in the US. It appears in many actions under the title of the execution of the “New World Order” according to the National Security Strategy (NSS).

In it the President of the United States has pointed out: *“As we defend the peace, we will also take advantage of an historic opportunity to preserve the peace.”*<sup>15</sup> How does this recent appearance of a US- Civil Religion fit into the development of new and more “communitarian” balances between World Religions? Of a public debate, which I found in the Internet, arranged in February 2002. In this debate the use of the term community was restricted to the different religious communities that were represented in the panel.

I am glad to quote Richard John Neuhaus, Editor-in-Chief, FIRST THINGS from a public debate in the The Brookings Institution, Stein Room , Washington, DC : “God Bless America: Reflections on Civil Religion After September 11” Wednesday, February 6, 2002 10:00 – 11:30 a.m. <sup>16</sup>

Civil religion, if it becomes a religion, inescapably is, as it was in the Roman Empire, and was protested by Christians even to the point of suffering martyrdom for their protest, idolatry. And that is always a very real danger, that the conflation of biblical religion and patriotism and the national sense of crisis and the need for a commanding set of truths that will congeal the allegiance of people in pursuit of a purpose that is attended by a high cost, there will always be a temptation to turn civil piety or the commanding truths of the public square into a sort of religion, and that, it seems to me, is something that we need to resist even while we recognize that American society, like any society, does have a need for commanding truths in public. But these should be, and in fact are in the American experiment with very, very few historic exceptions, commanding truths that cohere and provide purpose are derived from and dependent upon and very self-consciously normed by what in the United States is aptly called the Judeo-Christian moral tradition.”

So the real trouble is, that the fundamentalist groups in all World religions become instrumental for global players in politics as well as in economics. They should be more are on guard of the “danger of a conflation of biblical religion and patriotism”; otherwise they

---

<sup>15</sup> from <http://whitehouse.org>

<sup>16</sup> Taken from the Internet –The Brookings Institution

cannot follow their appropriate office to bring forth the moral tradition of balancing and exploring in the communitarian way a dynamic equilibrium between ethical rationality and the powers nationalism and economism.. Here is the challenge, to find, to keep up and to refine a dynamic but peaceful equilibrium between the autonomy and a binding order, between World Religions and World Powers in the same way as communitarians deal with it in each of their communities, they be religious based or not, and it would mean to follow the communitarian way on the high scale of the responsibility for the World Politics of World Religions - to resist conflation. This is the “schedule for the day” in the encounter of the World Religions. They thus may even be helpful to promote a responsiveness in forceful governments like the administrations in the US and in many other countries in dealing with the real deficiencies in our present world in view of education, struggle against starvation, International Criminal Court and last but not least – sustainability.

What World Religions should be able to contribute? They could use their chance to justify the development of communitarian, i.e. dynamic balanced relations; to promote encounters as expressed in the example of the embrace that ends with giving space to each other, accepting alterity. That is meant by reconciliation.

I am not trained as economist and by no means as sociologist. But I remember that . the word “economy” stems from living together in one house, and a “socius” I call my friend. World religions might be able to let not forget these basics. Thus the world be able to justify communitarian relations between religious communities, political partners and in pursuing economic exchange.

### **Points of interest from the following debate**

Productive money

Grassroot

Opportunities in collective actions

What do we have in common?

Europe postreligious and postnational? –Did they therefore reject the use of force?

Civil “Religions”: the duties are the same

Labels affect each other

Legitimacy

Social integration

Global information economy – global information religions.