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Christian Ethics in Europe
A Perspective from the *Societas Ethica*

by Werner Wolbert

When I was asked to present a paper on Christian Ethics in Europe I accepted the invitation gladly at first. Afterwards I had some scruples. Of course, I am not competent to report on ethics in all European countries. There is, first, the problem of the Eastern (Central) European countries, of which especially Poland is important. From historical reasons not to be discussed here there seems to be in force a rule in Western Europe: „*Slavica non leguntur*“. Especially for German-speaking people there is little incentive to learn any Slavonic language, because till now German is often a kind of *koine* between people of different Slavonic countries.

The problem of language is only an indicator for a more fundamental problem, a serious danger that demands a change of our attitude in Western Europe. After the fall of the iron curtain another curtain could be strengthened or built up again: the demarcation between the Europe of Latin and that of Byzantine tradition. The wars in former Yugoslavia have illustrated that danger sufficiently.

Nevertheless, for a long time the *Societas Ethica* has had members from the countries behind the iron curtain that participated in their conferences. Most of these colleagues were from Poland and Hungary. But we had only very rarely orthodox participants. I remember one from Belgrade and one from Sofia. At least there was and is some exchange between East and West.

The languages in our society are English and German. This means of course an obstacle or difficulty for people from the Romance countries, especially from France. The (linguistic) difficulty for people from Italy or Spain is decreasing because in these countries English has already taken the place of French as the first foreign language. Nevertheless there is very little representation from France, Italy, Spain or Portugal (but there are now some members from French speaking Switzerland and the president is from Ticino living and working in Zürich). Most members are from Central Europe, the Netherlands and the Nordic countries. The Presidents were always from these countries.

The society was founded by H. von Oyen, a Dutch professor teaching in Basel (from 1948 on). His original idea was to gather those European colleagues who taught ethics in Protestant theological faculties to whom he sent letters in the beginning of the 1960ies. In this letter he

exposed his plans for the foundation of a *Societas Ethica*, which took place in 1964. The first members were mainly from Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland, later on they came also from Eastern Europe, Austria and Scandinavia (eventhough the second conference was already in Lund in Sweden). In the German speaking countries the chairs for ethics were (and are) mostly not dedicated to ethics exclusively, but one of the teachers of systematic theology (or all of them) taught ethics among other things. Sometimes those teachers confine themselves to questions of general theological ethics (the person as sinner and just etc.) and leave applied ethics to an assistant professor. In my view, this is a bad solution, because without reflecting concrete problems of moral acting you get a too narrow perspective of the field of ethics. Van Oyen himself had a chair for systematic theology (beside Karl Barth), but concentrated on ethics. Although one of the founding members was a Catholic philosopher (Hans Reiner), in the beginning the society was predominantly Protestant and in the first years only one fifth of the members was allowed to be Catholics. Of course, this rule was abolished later on and in the meantime there are also (even non-religious) philophers among the members. In our last conferences there was nearly no representation from Britain (neither from Ireland), unfortunately. There are, at least, two reasons for this lack of participants from the British Isles:

1. Britain and Ireland have a society of their own: the Society for the Study of Christian Ethics;
2. Many of those colleagues do not speak or understand German or at least not sufficiently.

This short outline of the history and present situation of the *Societas Ethica* can already give us some hints on the situation of Ethics in Europe which I will sketch in three points:

1. the relation between philosophical and theological ethics;
2. communication and cooperation between ethicists.
3. the debate on communitarianism in Europe.

1. My first point concerns the relation between philosophical and theological ethics. From the fact that one of the founding members was a philosopher one should not infer that German speaking philosophers dealt much with ethics in that time. Hans Reiner was (so far as I know) in his time the only one to hold a chair (ad personam) for philosophical ethics. In 1974 there was published in Germany a collection of essays in two volumes under the title „*Rehabilitierung der praktischen Philosophie*“. This title indicates that among philosophers practical philosophy was not taken serious or important for some time before. So far as I know, the situation was similar in the romance countries. Ethics was studied mostly from an historical perspective. It took still some more time for philosophers to address questions of practical ethics which theologians always had done. Now, of course, philosophers use to contribute also to public discussions on matters of practical ethics. Moral theologians, therefore, have no more monopoly in these matters, eventhough their voice is still important, at least in Central Europe. In France, on the other hand, only recently a theologian has become a member of the National Ethics Committee (after roughly ten years of its existence). In the meantime, philosophers as well as theologians are consulted and elected in respective commissions by the public authorities on the regional, national or European level. But even if there is some exchange and cooperation, one can observe that theologians are familiar with the contributions of the philosophers, but, in general, not vice versa. Theologians are rarely quoted in philosophical essays.

This description, so far, applies to Central Europe and (I think) also to the Nordic countries. Among the Romance countries the situation is remarkably different especially in Italy. Here, the terminology is already treacherous. They use to distinguish between *morale cattolica* and *morale laica*. And *laica* often means: anticlerical. There is a gap between theologians and philosophers which is caused, among other things, by the fact that there are no (more) theological faculties within the statal (and even ecclesiastical) universities. The Italian colleagues lack the reputation (and independence) of a university-professor. An Italian colleague once illustrated to me the difference. He said: In Germany or Austria you are asked: „What do you think about that problem?“ In Italy I am asked: „Cosa dice la chiesa?“ Another reason is the proximity of the Roman magisterium whose interventions become more and more heavy, as an Italian colleague complained¹. If a theologian is invited to a philosophical conference, he is normally esteemed only as an ally (for instance, if they share with him a pacifist position), but one is not very interested in his arguments. (That may be different if a good personal relation exists between two persons.) What makes the relation still more

¹ Piana ...

difficult, is the fact that most philosophical ethicists hold a non-cognitivist position, as the title of a book „Etica senza verità“ may illustrate. That title does not suit very well to the „Splendour of truth“, which the pope conjured up in his encyclical.

The Italian situation reminds me on some remarks I read about Ireland in a short article by an Irish theologian (E. Conway) titled „Theology at the margins“²:

„Most theologates are free-standing, therefore dialogue between theology and other disciplines seldom occurs. These are some of the reasons why, in the popular mind, theology is seldom distinguished from religious education or from Church teaching and generally theologians lack a distinctive identity and relevance in Irish society.“

About the future orientation of Irish Theology he said³:

„It is appropriate that we would try to locate such issues in the wider European theological context. Up until now we have tended to look more to North America for enlightenment. Many of our theologians studied there, many of our own people have emigrated there, and we speak the same language - more or less. However, there is growing awareness that the future landscape of faith in Ireland is more likely to resemble that of present day mainland Europe and that careful study of the situation in which our European neighbours now find themselves would be rewarding.“

The next remark is relevant for ethicists:

„Do Irish theologians have any contribution to make to Europe today? It has been noted at meetings of the Irish section [of the European Society for Catholic Theology] that theological exploration of the Irish experience of colonialism might help develop and maintain a sensitivity in Europe to the plight of developing countries. Regrettably Ireland also has considerable experience of sectarianism, and theology has been more part of the problem than of the solution.“

Moral theology in such a situation like in Italy or Ireland is endangered to become one school, one voice among others, to remain within a self-chosen particularity and so to fail to proclaim the ethical message of the New Covenant to all people.

The situation is remarkably different in Spain. On the one hand, there is no open dissent to the magisterium, but a moderate freedom to express one's view. The difference to Germany may be illustrated by the following observation. In Germany, there was published a collections of essays critical of the encyclical „Veritatis Splendor“. It received an angry commentary in the „Osservatore Romano“, but only when it was translated in Spanish. On the other hand, the relation between theologians and philosophers is very different from Italy. In Spain, philosophers can afford to proclaim themselves as Catholics without losing their reputation. Philosophers contributed to a book „Conceptos fundamentales de ética teológica“.

² Conway 90.

³ Conway 91.

In Spain, it is not a „morale laica“ that is considered as a basis for a democratic society, but an „ética civil“ which is understood as a common undertaking, as „expresión de la convergencia de ideales de vida publica, de ideales de perfección“. To understand this relation one has to keep in mind that in Spain both, theologians and philosophers, were critical against the dictatorship, against which they fought together, and prepared the way for democracy. The theologians in Spain don't claim any monopoly. Vidal speaks of the⁴ „superamento dell' ,imperialismo morale“. Even the bishops proclaim the dialogue between Christian ethics and other etical models in a pastoral letter. Christian ethics no longer proclaims to be the only moral guardian and interpreter. It seeks the cooperation of all people of goodwill.

A last remark concerns Sweden. On the one hand, theologians there have a respected position within a university like in Central Europe. But, on the other hand, there is still to be felt the influence of Axel Hägerström, whose philosophy was similar to logical positivism and to Cambridge Analysis⁵: „Like logical positivism it was antimetaphysical, and also like logical positivism, it rejected the supposition that moral sentences have a truth-value.“ It was, of course, antitheological as well. Theologians in Sweden have still to fight against the impact of Hägerström.

⁴ Vidal 484.

⁵ Hartnack 295.

2. My second point concerns the means of communication and cooperation between ethicists. As the history of the Societas Ethica demonstrates, there is no regular congress of German speaking protestant theological ethicists. The Societas (at least at present) does not succeed to foster the communication between these people. On the other hand, they have at least a common periodical, the „Zeitschrift für evangelische Ethik“. The German speaking Catholic moral theologians didn't succeed to establish something similar. On the other hand, they have their congress every second year. Moral theologians from other countries have their regular meetings as well. The Italians and Spanish have their respective periodicals above that, the *Rivista di teologia morale* and the *Moralia* respectively.

From my personal experience, a regular personal contact, as it happens in a congress is an important means of communication. Let me first concentrate on the communication between ethicists of the same Christian denomination. My experience is limited to the congress of the German speaking Catholic moral theologians and social ethicists which I attended in 1981 for the first time. The regular congresses had a decisive role for the discussion especially among the moral theologians, for the growth of some consensus, for understanding other positions and for mutual acquaintance between professors and representatives of the new generation. The impact of these meetings may be illustrated by a recent example. In Germany, there was and still is a vivid controversy on questions of organ transplantation, especially its legal regulation. The „Zustimmungslösung“, according to which an organ may be explanted from a dead person only if he (she) during his (her) lifetime or his (her) relatives had consented, was questioned and the „Widerspruchslösung“ was considered, according to which explantation is allowed if neither the person nor her relatives have contradicted; this latter solution is practiced in Austria. These considerations caused an intense controversy on the criterion of brain death which was not questioned in the years before. This controversy was mainly between protestant theologians (and also some physicians). A common declaration of the German Catholic Episcopal Conference and the Council of the EKD (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland), which was published in 1990, suddenly became the object of harsh criticism, because it had accepted that criterion. Among the Catholic moral theologians there was a far reaching consensus in favor of the brain death criterion. At least one reason for this difference to the protestant colleagues is, in my view, the opportunity to discuss questions of common interest and to develop common convictions or at least more mutual understanding that is made possible or easier by a regular congress. In the history of the congresses we can observe the discussions on central subjects of the respective period, for instance, the problem of the *optio fundamentalis* in the sixties, problems of natural law and normative ethics (teleology -

deontology) after 1968 (*Humanae Vitae*) or the question of the *proprium* of Christian ethics. I myself experienced a growing consensus in this last debate which was a bit late in Catholic moral theology. Within protestant theology this question was raised especially by Karl Barth and Anders Nygren. For some years there was an intense controversy between two positions, called autonomous ethics and ethics of faith of which the last one (although not consistently) contended that some moral norms were understandable only on the basis of Christian faith (or theism). In the middle of the 1980ies there was a consensus that the *proprium* is at least not to be found in particular moral norms (of applied ethics). The recent controversy between liberals and communitarians may confront us with this question from another point of view.

One negative side effect of the important role of those congresses is the fact that only very few of my catholic German speaking colleagues participated in the meetings of the *Societas Ethica* in the past. However, in the last years we can observe an increasing participation of younger Catholic moral theologians. Let me illustrate the usefulness of such participation with two examples. An Italian colleague once told me that he had learned a lot from a doctoral dissertation of a Swedish colleague (Göran Lantz) on property. (Since it was written in German, he was able to read it.) My own teacher (Bruno Schüller) remarked on a meeting: If in the 1960ies one of the Catholic moral theologians (who in that time dealt especially with problem of the *optio fundamentalis*) had come to a seminar of Ragnar Holte in Uppsala, he would have had serious difficulty to understand only some of the questions they were discussing, for instance problems of metaethics which were not taken notice of in the German speaking countries in that time. (The first German translation of G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* was published only in 1970.)

Before the last war the first foreign language in the Nordic countries (and, I think, in the Netherlands as well) was German. After the war they were totally orientated to the Anglosaxon world. So ethicists in these countries were generally well informed about the development of Anglosaxon ethics. In Germany, however, the philosophical communication with Britain was interrupted already after the first world war (and vice versa). (The situation was a bit different in Austria; I need only to mention the Circle of Vienna.) The translation of G.E. Moore may mark the shift in attention (insofar as ethics is concerned). Among the German moral theologians it was mainly Bruno Schüller who introduced the topics of the anglosaxon philosophical ethics in the discussions of moral theologians. He had above that good relations to Sweden.

These remarks may have sketched the importance of the *Societas Ethica* as an intermediary between different traditions.

3. In my last paragraph I would like to give an example of a different approach to a particular question, different between European countries and between Europe and the US: the debate on communitarianism. Besides Britain, of course, there has been taken note of the debate at least in Central Europe and in the Nordic countries. In Europe communitarianism seems to be not so strong a challenge of liberalism or universalism as in the US. One reason may be the specific American context of the debate: the appeal to more common sense, the critic of an atomistic individualism, the thinking back to basic common values. On the other hand, the US has not experienced religious wars like Europe (although religious freedom was one of the main reasons for the immigration to North America). The problems resulting from the religious division in Europe are impressively depicted in St. Toulmin's book „Cosmopolis“ which I never found mentioned in a communitarian publication. The conflicts in Ex-Yugoslavia (and in the former Soviet Union) were a horrible example of an extreme practical communitarianism. Is not an uncritical loyalty to one's own community as dangerous as a limitless individualism? Bosnia may illustrate the question, on which F. Ricken confesses to have found no answer in the publications of Charles Taylor⁶: how a common conception of the good is possible in a pluralistic society. The answer could be: in the tradition that brought forth the liberal state. But how far is this tradition still vivid in pluralistic societies? The least communitarian country in Europe seems to be France. They have suppressed all regional languages, dialects and traditions. And the people who fought for rights of foreigners were sometimes identical with those who strongly opposed the veil of muslim girls in public schools. The question is: Will France manage to preserve its uniform culture? On the other hand, in which society is the acceptance of different cultures, traditions and communities easier possible than in a modern one?

The debate on communitarianism seems not to have had an impact on Spain. *Ètica civil* is a universalistic approach. Let me sketch the main ideas of this approach already mentioned above⁷. Civil ethic is supposed to lead people of different convictions (religious, agnostic, atheistic) to loyal cooperation for aims which go beyond purely individual interests. This kind of universalism is, therefore not suspected to be based on an individualistic or egoistic approach. Moral motivations have to be distinguished from religious convictions. Civil ethics is autonomous from the state and the church. This autonomy does not mean indifference towards different denominations.

The Spanish seem to have a basic confidence in the convergence of different ideals. A democratical ethos, of course, is not uniform. But there are indispensable common moral

⁶ Ricken 64.

values: freedom, justice, equality, political pluralism. (MacIntyre, probably, would ask: Whose rationality? Which justice?). Civil ethic is not confined to a basic minimum, it encourages civil virtues as there are: resistance against every humiliation of human dignity, courage (*valentia civica*) etc. Civil ethic is supposed to foster pluralism as well as express common moral values, for instance, tolerance not as a kind of indifference, but as joint responsibility. The difference to Italy may be illustrated with the following quotation (277):

„Ha llegado la hora de percartarse del patrimonio moral común acumulado y de romper ... con toda razón perezosa (fideísta o laicista) que evita aportar argumentos, sino todo deseo de autocomplacencia resignada que por el miedo evita el testimonio“.

(The hour has come to take notice of the common moral heritage and to break ... with all idle reason (fideistic or laicistic) which avoids to bring arguments without any desire of resigned complacency which out of fear avoids testimony.)

The theologian regards civil ethics as a bridge or mediator between an atheist ethics and the ethics of a believer. (He may appeal for this conviction to Rom 2, 11-16.) Faith has to be active and to intervene in the field of civil ethic with his own intuitions and challenges. Christian ethics must incarnate itself in the respective culture so that it may foster the conversion of the hearts, social and structural transformation. (Cf. *Redemptor hominis* 14). The tolerance proclaimed by civil ethics is not indifference, but a „tolerancia preferencial“ or „intolerancia justa“ fighting for emancipation, participation, equality and real democracy. Civil ethic is not a distant observer or a negotiator only. It is the struggle to preserve personal and cultural differences as sources of originality, creativity, of the richness of the society and the church. Summing up it is characterized as (289) „una mediación y un instrumento apropiado para afrontar hoy los graves problemas de la convivencia.“

There is more awareness of the comunitarian challenge in the Nordic countries. As an example I take the controversy between A. Rasmusson and G. Bexell in STK 1997. The thesis of Rasmusson is: „There is no humanity in general“. Rasmusson admits that theological ethicists in Sweden know about the changes in the debates of moral philosophy that have happened roughly since 1980, but that it had no impact on their basic consent. Ethics in Sweden is conceived as a Lutheran creation ethics. Morality is something common to all human beings. Specifically theological motives are the idea of creation and the doctrine of natural law. The universality of ethics is stressed and one looks for an adequate ethical method. This universality is in Rasmussons view the ideology of the national state and the

⁷ Cf. Moratalla/Benássar.

national Lutheran church of Sweden. The reflection on the correct ethical method mirrors the the philosophical ethical reflection of this century especially in the Anglosaxon world.

As an example, R. discusses the ethical approach of G. Bexell. Bexells conception of ethics is grounded on the reflection of three factors: the necessities of man, the social situation's claim, and the ethical phenomenon. Are these factors common for all human beings? Are they the basis for a common morality? Rasmusson objects that all our experience is mediated by our language. Experience and human necessity cannot be described in neutral terms. Our moral convictions influence our language and our view even in descriptive sciences as psychology, for example. Modern psychology, sociology, biology and economy often recommend egoism and aggression as basic human behaviour. R. mentions Adam Smith, for whom following one's self-interest is a means for the achievement of the common good⁸.

It is true for R. that we have to work for the well-being of the individual and of the community, but the real difficult question is, what is the best in the concrete situation. If one avoids this second question, the ethics becomes minimalistic and sometimes justifies all: marriage and other forms of partnership, pacifism and just war, celibacy and intercourse for homosexuals etc. Unambiguously condemned is something outside of Sweden: apartheid. R. doubts the usefulness of the distinction between basic principles and their concrete application. Principles for him are abstractions from specific cultural and social moral practice. R. does not plead for more unambiguous precepts, but for a virtue ethics. He illustrates this preference with a comparison. A good soccer-player is not somebody who obeys the rules. His behaviour concerning the rules says nothing about his ability, his skills. Virtue ethics looks for the good life, how it can be lived. The question of acting right cannot be answered independently of the actors understanding of his life. For Bexell, first there are the rules, afterwards they are practised.

⁸ In my view, the allusion to Smith is not very appropriate here. R. fails to distinguish between egoism as the opposite to love as impartiality and an ethical egoism as a way to achieve the best for all people involved. According to the last view, everybody should strive for his own well-being, for the egoist in the former sense it would be best, if he alone would care for himself, whereas others would care also for their fellow-human beings. Smith' own attitude is characterized by Lindgren in the following way (1162):

„The picture of the good life that Smith entertained was devoted neither to self-indulgence nor vaulting ambition, qualities often associated with ‚economic man.‘ Instead it was marked by ‚self-command,‘ by moderation of one's actions in accordance with the sentiments of the supposed impartial spectator. That emphasis on self-restraint is more reminiscent of the normative theories of the Roman Stoics than of the egoism either of Thomas Hobbes ...or Bernhard Mandeville“.

I mention this one-sided characterization of Smith because it manifests a problem which I sometimes have with communitarian authors when they stress the differences between different ethical approaches, different cultures and traditions. Sometimes these assertions are too superficial. Some differences are only verbal, and, at least, one has to ask which differences are real, which are only apparent (and to what amount).

In the discussion between different traditions one does not need arguments from an absolute point of view. One has to argue for what is convincing from our own point of view. We cannot discover unity neither can we presuppose it.

In his reply Bexell stresses first that creation ethics is neither *typically* lutheran nor typically *lutheran*. The German lutheran theology after the last war was very critical about creation ethics. This kind of ethic had not distanced itself from the Nazi regime. It is not typically lutheran because this approach is also typical for Catholic moral theology. This coincidence was the basis for a recent ecumenical document in Sweden about the responsibility of state and church for the society. For B. it is a matter of course that nobody can have a point of view totally outside his own tradition. But he stresses the difference between genetic questions (about the origin of certain convictions) and the question of the validity of an argument in which he is interested. He does not understand his position as absolute or neutral, but he thinks that his conviction is right until he can be convinced of the opposite. But of course there is no absolute point of view above all particular ones. There is something common to all moralities, but this cannot be found outside its cultural context. The difference to R concerns the question how much can be said about this common content. B has more trust in the possibility of a neutral description of the human necessities, the social claim and the ethical phenomenon, even if there is no absolute objectivity. Science can answer only those questions which she raises and which their methods permit. It is not so difficult to demonstrate the utility and significance of the commandment of love. If from an purely neutral point of view love were harmful, how could it be justified from a Christian perspective?

B. protests against the verdict of legalism (does AR mean a deontological theory in the way of fiat iustitia - pereat mundus)? We need not to know if a person is good to be able to judge his action.

Concerning universalism B. tries to clarify: There is an intercultural, interreligious, international ethic. One has to distinguish universalism in a descriptive and normative sense. Even a particularistic ethic can have an universal meaning in a normative sense. Particularism holds that there is nothing intercultural to be found neither in the descriptive nor in the normative sense. Ethics then is totally determined by its context.

My last example shall be Otfried höffe who questions the alternative between Kant and Aristotle; the latter of them is often regarded as the church father of the communitarians. For Höffe Aristotle is not a communitarian or Anti-kantian *avant la lettre*, because he does not

defend traditions that were not judged according to common obligations. The very different language of the two authors may conceal what they have in common. Kant's aim is practical (like that of a spiritual leader): the purification of moral theory. A false moral theory may corrupt morality itself.

Neither Kant nor Aristotle offer a theological foundation of moral theory. Reason has a central role. At least for some part of his ethic Aristotle claims universal validity, for the life of *theoria*. Kant's universalism does not intend to dissolve the national states (therefore it does not exclude some kind of patriotism), but he tries to give rules for their peaceful coexistence. Aristotle, on the other hand, regards the teachings of his ethics, politics and rhetorics (e.g. *eudaimonia* as supreme end) as valid for any person and any polis. For communitarians the way of life is rooted in a particular community. From the four ways of life which are discussed by Aristotle only two (political and theoretical life) are acceptable from a universal ethical point of view. The exact shape of a virtue like courage may depend of the particular community. But anyway it has something to do with the domination of an affect: fear. Not morality itself, its rules and virtues, are particular, but its appropriation. The virtues are required not because of some convention, but because they are the way to *eudaimonia* and insofar they conform to reason. Aristotle does not present a catalogue of human rights, but he distinguishes the *physei dikaion* from *thesei dikaion* and proclaims the protection of property, life, freedom and political participation.

I am not sure if these three examples concerning the question of communitarianism are representative. But, at least, they may illustrate a more cautious attitude against the communitarian challenge. A possible impact on the Catholic church could be that she tries to have it both ways: she could argue in a communitarian way *ad intra* (and so strengthen the role of the magisterium) and in a universalistic way *ad extra* to be able to speak to all people of goodwill. But that would not be a good solution.

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