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Kenosis and Krisis.

Reflections on Christianity in Modernity as an Inculturation *sui generis*

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In one of his later papers, the eminent Russian philosopher, Sergej Bulgakov compared modernity to a sphinx with a human front and a beastly backside.¹ This metaphor admirably describes the ambiguity of the modern world as a highly complex phenomenon. The fact that we are part of this historical process allows us to understand it in a rudimentary way only. What makes Bulgakov's image so poignant, however, is that it not only captures this ambivalence of modernity, but also hints at its significance for Christianity. The mythical creature at the entrance of the city of Thebes asks a question to everyone coming by: which being walks on four legs in the morning, on two at noon and on three in the evening? Those who give the right answer may pass, whereas those not able to respond are devoured by the beastly guardian of the city. This illustrates the situation of Christianity vis-à-vis modernity, moreover pointing out the paramount importance of the anthropological question in this encounter, based on the humanistic belief in Christianity and in modern thought that asserts that man can and should create a better world with less human suffering and misery. This article reflects on the relationship between Christianity and modernity, and here mainly its political side, as a challenge for the churches in the European context and beyond. Its main hypothesis is that modernity demands an inculturation *sui generis*, which as any inculturation has its preconditions in a kenotic as well as critical attitude. This topic is of an enormous scope, spanning complex historical, cultural, and religious developments. The aim therefore cannot be but an attempt to map out this highly diverse territory. The first part of this contribution deals with inculturation in general as a specificity of Christian faith because of its close relation with history, describing its main phases. The second part is to take a closer look at the inculturation intended by Vatican II, focussing on the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*. The third chapter will address the challenges that modern political ideas and institutions pose to the churches, stressing the need for a kenotic as well as a critical attitude, as the necessity of an ecumenical approach to tackle the immense task of formulating a public theology that proclaims the Gospel in this time.

¹ Sergej Bulgakov, *Social Teaching in Modern Russian Orthodox Theology* (Evanston Illinois 1934), 10.

1. Major Phases of Inculturation in (Western) Christian History and Their Actual Significance

Any reflection on inculturation has to start with a short reminiscence about the fundamental meaning of history for Christian faith.² It is in history that God reveals Himself to the people of Israel and through the incarnation of His Word, Jesus Christ, in the Spirit to the Christians and their church(es). This biblical view considerably differs, as is well known, from that of classic antiquity as well as from that of Enlightenment philosophy. History here does not constitute an addition to a timeless cosmos or to a-historic reason and an unchanging human nature. It rather is the very medium through which God speaks to His people and to each individual believer. It is God's action in individual and collective histories that is to be remembered, praised, and testified to. Christian faith history thus is not merely a chain of factual events in the past, as modernity with its belief in linear progress has it, but "in its remembrance the past becomes effectual and authoritative for today"³ as the very place of interaction of God and His people. The God of the Bible is not an "unmoved mover" outside of time (Aristotle), nor the god of modern deism who leaves creation to itself like a well-oiled machine. He is the "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" – a personal God. The belief in God's being actively engaged in the history of mankind and that of each human being as in His ongoing creativity through the Spirit are fundamental for a Christian worldview and therefore also for theology. The traditional inscription *Anno Domini* (AD) added to each calendar year, a chronology that has turned global, echoes this basic Christian truth. This fundamental theological relationship with time constitutes the basis for Christianity's intimate relationship with culture as a phenomenon in time.⁴ The conversion of individuals therefore must have a correlate in the transformation of cultures, bringing them closer to the realization of the Kingdom of God.⁵ Cultures are to be

² Since the 1970s, the term has replaced that of "adaptation" in Catholic theology, indicating that the Christian message is never *extrinsic* to cultures, cf. Roest Crolius, Arij A., Surlis, Paul, and Langan, Thomas, *Creative Inculturation and the Unity of Faith*. (Working Papers on Living Faith and Cultures Nr. 8, Rome 1986), 3; Ingeborg Gabriel, "Truth in Earthen Vessels. Catholic Reflections on Contextualization" in *Eastern Christian Studies* 69 (2007), 357-72.

³ Hans Eising, *zahar* erinnern in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* ed. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, Volume II (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1977), 571-593, 575.

⁴ *Gaudium et spes* dedicates a whole chapter to culture (GS 53-62), cf. Ingeborg Gabriel, „Überlegungen zum Thema Kultur“, in *Welt in Begegnung, Welt in Bewegung*. Ed. Petrus Bsteh (Wien 1999), 37-49.

⁵ For Bernard Lonergan, conversion is the first principle of theology. Cf. Bernard Lonergan, "Pluralism and Conversion" in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan: Philosophical and Theological Papers 1965-1980*, ed. by Robert C. Croken and Robert M. Doran (Toronto 2004), 86ff.

transformed by the dynamics of God's and man's interactions. This specific Christian dynamism also holds true for modern culture grafted on Christianised cultures (Rm 11, 17ff) as it developed during the past two centuries. The aim is a step-by-step transformation, a process at the same time subjecting the Christian message to changes, with different cultural expressions creating new variants of Christian life, thus testifying to the unfathomable "fullness of Christ" (Col 2,19).

This importance of time as well as culture for the Christian faith has become concrete in different phases of inculturation in the history of Christianity. Three of them are to be sketched briefly. It is after all remarkable that the most radical transformation of the Christian *euangelion*, the "good news", happened at the beginning of the age of the Church. The transition from the (marginal) Semitic-Jewish into the hegemonic Hellenistic culture initiated by St. Paul constituted what must be seen as the boldest change so far. It is documented in the New Testament, giving it normative significance for Christian faith and life throughout history. It laid the foundations for Christianity to become a world religion. That it was "a Pharisee faithful to the law" (Phil 3,4b) who abdicated the law, makes it even more poignant. The texts of St. Paul's letters and the book of Acts demonstrate the dramatic character this experience had for himself and for the early Christian communities, as well as the conflicts it provoked between them. Jewish Christians could rightly claim that the Lord Jesus Himself had been faithful to the law (cf. Gal 4, 4). St. Paul, however, relativized this law in an act that can best be interpreted as a fundamental *kenosis* in obedience to the Spirit of Christ. With this he was able to open the doors of the Church, further the conversion of heathens and thus the expansion of Christianity into Greek-Roman culture (1Cor 9, 21f). To make the message of Christ understandable, he related it to the religious, cultural, and philosophical background of his audience: "What therefore you unknowingly worship I proclaim to you" (Acts 17, 29), at the same time affirming that the Christian message transcends all human expectations, those of Greeks and Jews alike (1Cor 1,22f). It introduces new values into the culture so as to transform it. Inculturation thus requires a kenotic attitude towards the cultures encountered. At the same time, it must also lead these very cultures into a *crisis*, i.e., a process of fundamental change, demanding a re-interpretation of cultural standards and norms that gives them a completely new perspective. In this paradoxical way, which may be regarded as a realisation of the cross as of the resurrection, the Christian message is to initiate and sustain what may be called a cultural re-creation.

Patristic theology continued this process of inculturation into the culturally dominant world of antiquity, deepening and unfolding the bold initiative of St. Paul. The centuries-long struggle

to bring together biblical revelation and the highly developed speculative and ethical philosophy of the Hellenistic world constituted a gigantic intellectual achievement that laid the foundations for all further theological thought in the East and the West. The Church Fathers thereby also used non-biblical, i.e. philosophical categories as well as those of Greek mythology⁶ with an awe-inspiring sense of freedom. They saw themselves as standing in the service of a deepened understanding of the Christian faith in their own cultural context, furthering the proclamation of the Gospel. Through their interpretations and re-interpretations of the biblical texts, these also underwent considerable changes and shifts in emphasis. Ethics and law, for instance, lost the central position they have had in the Judaic culture and faith traditions echoed in the synoptic gospels. It was these intellectual efforts that created a synthesis laying the foundations for Christianity in Europe and beyond, initiating fundamental cultural changes effective to this day.

After the fall of Rome (410 AD), the Western church experienced centuries of turmoil, tribal conflicts, and cultural degradation.⁷ During this long period the Church succeeded under most difficult historical circumstances to inculcate the Christian faith and with it, transmit the heritage of antiquity, at first mainly in monasteries and later also through universities.⁸ From the 12th century onwards it was scholasticism in its original form that initiated what may be called a third phase of theological inculturation mainly in the West, in an increasingly divided church. Inspired by the rediscovery of Aristotle in the by now Islamic Arab world, it reinterpreted biblical and patristic writings for a new era, which the Dominican M.D. Chenu has termed “early modernity”.⁹ Two characteristics of this phase seem of particular significance: The emphasis on empirical realities, and their relevance for theology based on the assumption that God manifests Himself through the Scriptures but also through nature, the term in its teleological sense including facts regarding the social world.¹⁰ Scholasticism also placed a renewed emphasis on ethics (and law) as the theological reflection of human actions under God’s grace. Both developments went hand in hand inasmuch the renaissance of interest in natural and social sciences enhanced the need for a deeper reflection of human action as

⁶ Cf. Hugo Rahner, *Griechische Mythen in christlicher Deutung*, (Freiburg: Herder 1992, original 1966).

⁷ For an account of this fundamental change cf. Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle. Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2012).

⁸ Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp 2019), 617-758. (English translation: *This too a history of philosophy* 2019).

⁹ Marie-Dominique Chenu, *La Théologie au Douzième Siècle*, (Etudes philosophique médiévale XLV) 2eme ed., (Paris : Vrin 1966), 390.

¹⁰ Yves Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions I*, Essai historique, (Paris : Cerf 1960), 77.

central for human salvation. This phase of inculturation came to an unfortunate end because of the bitter fights within Western Christendom during the age of Reformation, a period also marked by the petrification of theological thought, which generally became apologetic and directed *against* the other.¹¹ Since denominations constituted the basis for the legal and political life, a development that was formalised in the Treaty of Augsburg (1555), the split was also of a cultural and political nature. The fact that the churches increasingly stood under the control of absolutist rulers as well as under inner-Christian struggles constituted a severe hindrance for the inculturation of Christian faith into the rapidly changing cultures of the Renaissance and later of Enlightenment. The Canadian theologian Bernard Lonergan writes about this period: “Contrary to the creative adaptation and assimilation in the Middle Ages from the 15th century onwards the intention was a-historic absoluteness.”¹² The ascent of the natural sciences as dominant cultural force intensified this trend as did the intellectual upheavals and revolutions of the 18th century.¹³ Catholic “positivistic scholasticism” could not be an adequate partner in the intellectual battles of the day. It maintained and stabilized an official ecclesial dogma for the state church, but it no longer was able to creatively reinterpret its contents so as to testify to the liberating and life-giving vitality and social relevance of the Christian message. Theological voices attempting to inculturate faith into the modern world were silenced more often than not. The effects of this stagnation can be felt to this day. They are one of the reasons for the gradual de-Christianisation of Europe. Instead of the enhanced efforts direly needed to inculturate the Christian faith through theological argument in an “age of reason”, theology was curbed in the vain hope of overcoming the storms of the time by creating a monolithic church isolating herself from her surroundings. An immanent humanism negating God and the onslaught of secularist thought and culture found few answers in a Christian humanism not negating human dignity but enhancing it. This opting out of the intellectual battles of the day led to a growing muteness and a sort of anti-modern self-ghettoization instead of creative interpretations of faith which put the rich heritage of the Gospel “into new wineskins” (cf. Matt 9, 17) for a new age and time.

¹¹ Cf. Thomas Prügl, „Bibeltheologie und Kirchenreform – die Errichtung der Wiener Fakultät und ihre theologische Positionierung im Spätmittelalter“ in *Vorwärtserinnerungen. 625 Jahre Katholisch-Theologische Fakultät der Universität Wien* ed. Johann Reikerstorfer and Martin Jäggle (Göttingen: WUV 2009), 377-398.

¹² Bernard Lonergan, “Theology in a New Context” in *Theology of Renewal, Collected Works*, Vol I (New York 1968), 34-46, 21.

¹³ Charles Taylor writes about “The great invention of the West was that of an immanent order in Nature, whose workings could be systematically understood and explained on its own terms...” Charles Taylor, *A secular age*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2007), 15.

2. Vatican II: Inculturation by the Catholic Magisterium

Vatican II was the great and decisive event in the 20th-century Roman-Catholic Church. The date of its proclamation by Pope St. John XXIII symbolically demonstrates its two major aims: It was the feast of the conversion of St. Paul (25 January 1959) and the week for Christian unity. As the apostle Paul had brought the Gospel to the Hellenistic world, the Council was to initiate a process of inculturation into the modern world, leaving behind the Tridentine epoch with its anti-ecumenism and apologetics as well as the Constantine epoch with its ideal of a Catholic state and – even more important – to initiate a process of discernment with regard to modern developments. In his sober language, John XXIII called this *aggiornamento*, originally meaning the updating of (commercial) books. He thereby did not succumb to a *zeitgeist*, as conservatives and secular contemporaries like to suspect. Such an idea would have been as alien to his thought as to his piety. What he intended was to inspire a more balanced and non-ideological view of the present world. The other focal point of this ecclesial project was what has been called *resourcement*, i. e. a renewed valuation of the biblical, patristic, spiritual, and ethical Christian heritage in relation to the aspirations and questions of the modern age. The second aim of the Council – as shown by the date of its announcement – was the re-establishment of close bonds with Christians of other denominations and their churches. For the Church to be a “sacrament, i. e. sign and instrument, for unity with God and mankind” (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium* 1 *et passim*), unity needs first to be lived and promoted within the Christian community itself. It was the conviction of the fathers of the Council that Christian unity lies at the basis of the service of the Church to the whole of mankind with its various religions, nations, and ethnic groups as to each and every human being, this service being the very *raison d’être* of the Church. They moreover affirmed that in this universal mission of salvation, the religious and the humane, i. e. the faith and ethical dimensions are inextricably linked, showing the Church’s “religious, and by that very fact, supremely human character” (GS 11).

The dogmatic method of exclusion, which had dominated the magisterial announcements of the Church for long parts of her history, is thereby supplemented if not replaced by a *hermeneutics of recognition*, that first and foremost is to discern the good in other

denominations, religions, and world views.¹⁴ Such an attitude is rooted in the profound spiritual insight that any communication of truth has as its prerequisite the respect for the other as an individual and for his/her convictions. It is part of the love demanded of the disciples of Christ. The proclamation of the Gospel as a message of salvation for a multifaceted world through a world church thereby requires a sociological analysis of the realities of today's world, as well as profound anthropological, ethical, and theological positions. The notion of the "signs of the time" as a central concept of *Gaudium et spes* methodologically combines these three dimensions of the empirical, the ethical, and the theological. With this it wants to speak "not only to the sons of the Church and to all who invoke the name of Christ, but to the whole of humanity" (GS 2). It thus claims to develop a public theology for contemporary societies.¹⁵ It was the merit of eminent theologians, mainly of French origin, who had laboured for decades – frequently under difficult ecclesial circumstances – to reinterpret the Catholic theological heritage so as to responsibly fulfil this mission of the Church in and for the context of modernity. The aim of their pre-Vatican II work was to formulate adequate theological answers to the questions posed by the modern age.¹⁶ Sociological analysis was thereby considered to be a tool to understand its complexities better but also "to decipher the authentic signs of God's presence and purpose" in them (GS 4 ;11). The central question of the Pastoral Constitution thus was: Which social trends have got the potential to make the world a more humane place for all peoples and persons in accordance with God's plan for this world? This required a discernment of the seeds of the good in the present age, against a Manichean view which sees this world as dominated by evil. The acknowledgement that modern thoughts and practices contain positive elements to be discovered through prudent spiritual discernment echoes the words of St. Paul: "Test everything and retain the good!" (1 Thess 5,21). It constitutes an attitude of *kenosis* that, despite the presence of sin and corruption, the Church can and indeed must learn from modern inventions and innovations. (GS 43-45). This includes the re-evaluation of central ideas of its political thought and institutions. Through the acceptance of the right to religious freedom in

¹⁴ Ingeborg Gabriel, „Christliche Sozialethik in der Moderne: Der kaum rezipierte Ansatz von *Gaudium et spes*“, in *Erinnerung an die Zukunft: Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil*, ed. Jan-Heiner Tück (Freiburg: Herder 2012), 537-553.

¹⁵ Cf. Karl Rahner, „Theologische Grundinterpretation des II. Vatikanischen Konzils“, in *In Sorge um die Kirche (Gesammelte Schriften Band 14)* (Zürich: Benzinger 1980) 287-307.

¹⁶ Cf. the remark of Yves Congar that the theological questions most fiercely disputed at and after Vatican II were those to which pre-Vatican theology had not yet worked out valid answers, Yves Congar, *My Journal of the Council* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press 2012), 4.

the Declaration *Dignitatis humanae* (1965), the Roman Catholic Church renounced its claim to being the state religion in countries where Catholics are a majority; with *Unitatis redintegratio* she opened the door for dialogue with other Christian churches with the aim of promoting Church unity on a basis of equal dignity; in *Nostra aetate* she proclaimed her intention to engage in dialogue with Judaism as the basis of Christian faith, as well as with other world religions. The new approach concentrates on the *common ground* between religious and cultural groups instead of on their differences, condemning them as heresies.¹⁷ This was the precondition to opening the doors to a world which, comprehensibly, is less interested in religious demarcations and profiles, but rather asks for the inputs of Christian faith in view of severe political and social ills as well as the answers it can give to the existential plights of humanity, i. e. its contribution to salvation. It is therefore not without reason that the call for an increased sensibility of Christians to oppose all forms of social evil und injustice constitutes a critical point of *Gaudium et spes* (GS1). This is high on the agenda of Pope Francis who, not least because of his Latin-American background, developed a high degree of evangelical sensibility for human poverty and misery in this age.¹⁸

3. Ideas and Institutions of Political Modernity: An Inculturation *sui generis*

Gaudium et spes states at the beginning of the first Chapter on anthropology: “According to the almost unanimous opinion of believers and unbelievers alike, all things on earth should be related to man as their centre and crown” (GS 12). This must not be seen as a form of “anthropocentrism” to be rejected, for it is embedded in the theocentric and Christocentric approach of the whole document. It rather signals that anthropology constitutes the central question of our age. Because of its ever-changing nature and likewise because of its foundation in Christianized cultures, this inculturation is of a particular nature and must be understood as a work in progress. Modern political thought and the institutions created as a result of these ideas constitute a centrepiece of the modern project. They therefore deserve a closer look in this final part of this paper. As the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has

¹⁷ For such resources in Christian denominations see Peter L. Berger (ed.): *Between Relativism and Fundamentalism, Religious Resources for a Middle Position*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company 2010).

¹⁸ Cf. Ingeborg Gabriel, „Das humanistische Credo des Zweiten Vatikanums und seine Neuinterpretation durch Papst Franziskus. Von *Gaudium et Spes* zu *Evangelii Gaudium* und *Laudato si*“ in *Barmherzigkeit und zärtliche Liebe. Das theologische Programm von Papst Franziskus* ed. Kurt Appel and Jakob Deibl (Freiburg: Herder 2016), 128-140, and other contributions in this volume.

showed, the affirmation of the dignity of man lies at their basis, and their intention may be summed up in the effort to alleviate his/her suffering.¹⁹ This aim constitutes common ground with Christian faith. I will after some examples, which serve to show an often-overlooked historical continuity between Christianity and modernity, briefly describe these political institutions as genuine modern inventions and finally point to the substantive deficits that can and indeed must be addressed by the churches through a public theology. The affirmation of modern political institutions may be seen as the sort of *kenosis* forming part of any process of inculturation, which then must be complemented by a critical approach, the overall aim being to further the “good of the city” (Jer 29,7).

The humanistic, and with it, ethical basis of the modern political order may be summarized by “liberty, equality, and fraternity”. Despite its origins in the secularist setting of the French revolution, these key ideas are also the result of a long history inspired and formed by Western Christianity. It was in Christian contexts that they had been thought and rethought for centuries before taking their secular form. This needs to be accentuated because of views held by secular contemporaries and Christian anti-modernists in all churches alike, which tend to over-accentuate the discontinuities between a pre-modern Christianity and modernity, which is then often seen as a form of apostasy. This “unholy alliance” is thought-provoking and should indeed make us suspicious. From a secular viewpoint it presupposes that Christian cultures did not leave any positive traces in the one and a half millennia during which they dominated the European continent. Modern ideas and modern institutions were consequently constructed from scratch. Such a *tabula rasa* theory is historically highly implausible. Despite the complexity of centuries-long religious, cultural, and political developments, any glance at history shows a considerable degree of continuity between the modern and pre-modern political ideas, whereby the former often have biblical roots. Though I would not go so far as to call modernity’s institutions a “potentized (enhanced) form of Christianity”²⁰, any closer look shows that modern political thought is indebted to Christian notions as to their interpretation and re-interpretation through the ages. The real innovation of modernity thereby was that it made biblical and philosophical concepts politically and legally operational. To name but two examples concerning modern core values: equality and freedom. The so-called

¹⁹ This is the main hypothesis of Charles Taylor, *Sources of Self and the Making of Modern Identity* (Harvard: Harvard University Press 1989).

²⁰ Charles Taylor, “Die immanente Gegenauflärung. Christentum und Moral“, in Ludwig Nagl. (Hg.), *Religion und Religionskritik* (Ouldenburg: Ouldenburg Verlag), 61–85, 65. Since I retranslated the German text the original English wording may be different.

treaty theory of English philosophy with its precursors in Late Spanish Scholasticism is based on the notion of human equality as the prerequisite of equality before the law of the state. Thus, in the first book of his most important work *Two Treatises of Government*, the father of modern constitutionalism, John Locke, argues against an otherwise rightly forgotten philosopher, Robert Filmer, who had claimed that only the king is a son or daughter of God. Locke to the contrary asserts that this holds true for all humans since they have been endowed by God with the same dignity and therefore have inalienable rights. For this he relies on the creation narrative in Genesis. This equality as the basis of modern democracy and human rights alike lies at the very basis of universal suffrage and individual rights vis-à-vis the state, which it does not grant but is only obliged to safeguard. This idea of human equality can be seen as one of the central contributions of the Jewish and Christian traditions to humanity,²¹ having been interpreted and re-interpreted in theology over time. As a consequence, laws must be open to criticism, an idea that under the heading of “natural law” forms as an important resource in the history of legal philosophy as in Catholic Social Thought and in politics as a resource for human resistance to immoral positive laws. Formulated in biblical terms: “One has to obey God more than man” (Acts 5,29).

A second example shall be given with regard to freedom: For Enlightenment philosophy, a freely entered *covenant* of all citizens lies at the foundation of the state. This takes up the profoundly biblical notion of a contract between man and God, reinterpreting it for a new way to conceive the political sphere. Even though this covenant is concluded between humans – here deism shows – it is founded on the idea of the dignity of man, requiring positive laws and legal procedures for its preservation. The overall aim is to limit the arbitrary usage of political power as it existed and exists throughout history, particularly in absolutist states, and to enable citizens to lead responsible lives without being repressed and harassed unjustly. Freedom in modern thought thus has two sides: A collective and an individual one. As already is the case in the Old Testament, independence from foreign rule and oppression is regarded the result of God’s merciful action, who led the people of Israel out of the serfdom of Egypt. Michael Walzer, a Jewish-American philosopher, has shown that this biblical narrative of the Exodus was central to the development of modern political thought,²² the aim of the “new Exodus” being a political order based on freedom, i. e. human rights limiting political power, which no longer can infringe on the life and property of its citizens. Freedom rights are thus

²¹ Jonathan Sacks, *Essays on Ethics. A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books 2016), xxv.

²² For the historical stages of this development cf. Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (London: Basic Books 1986)-

not the outflow of an ill-conceived individualism. Their very purpose is the creation of a sphere of freedom for the citizens that allows for dignified lives, their contribution to the common good, the free practice of their respective religions, and their participation in the political process by choosing their government in democratic elections, thus realizing their personal responsibility as the ultimate aim of liberty.

Finally, the third keyword of the modern political setup, fraternity, is of particular significance for this age. It highlights the fact that ethical attitudes and virtues constitute the very foundation of all political institutions and any good government. In classical political theory, the state is founded on friendship, a term Pope France used recently in the subtitle of his encyclical *Fratelli tutti. On fraternity and social friendship* (2020).²³ Political institutions for their establishment as for their functionality depend on a high moral ethos practised by large parts of society. Because of a major shift of focus away from personal virtue ethics to institutional ethics, this has often been overlooked in modern thought. Modernity's fascination with mechanics led to the vain hope that society can be constructed in an analogous way, functioning like a mechanism coordinating the self-interests of individuals. The aim is to make moral behaviour – which is always in short supply – superfluous. Immanuel Kant once writes pointedly that even a devilish people, if only they would act rationally, can build a good state.²⁴ This remains a rather doubtful, if not to say false presupposition. Moreover, one may rightly ask: Who would like to live in such a community? This socio-technical approach shows its limits, in that a lack of moral praxis necessarily hampers the good functioning of any institution. The absence of a coherent moral basis constitutes a great challenge for modern states, as the German jurist Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde already wrote some time ago.²⁵ The present intense debate on virtue ethics echoes this deficit. Lived ethical attitudes, such as private and public kindness, loyalty, truthfulness, and solidarity are a prerequisite for good life. Individual freedom demands enhanced responsibility. Thereby a minimal basic consensus is not enough to maintain satisfactory ethical standards for the whole of society. For this, democratic states depend on groups who live a higher ethos. It is essentially conveyed through small groups, above all the family, but also through religious communities. The churches and

²³ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html (accessed 10/11/21)

²⁴ Immanuel Kant, „Zum ewigen Frieden, Ein philosophischer Entwurf“ in Immanuel Kant, *Schriften zur Anthropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik 1* (Werkausgabe XI), hrsg. von Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1977), 195-251 (BA 59ff).

²⁵ His dictum has triggered widespread discussion. This so-called Böckenförde paradox can be summed up in that the modern liberal state cannot guarantee its own moral foundations, but depends on contributions from groups, primarily the churches and the family. Cf. Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, *Der säkularisierte Staat. Sein Charakter, seine Rechtfertigung und seine Probleme im 21. Jahrhundert* (München: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung 2007), 8.

their proclamation of the Gospel remind us of the importance of ethics. Above all, they are communities themselves and thus cells of a lived high ethos, which is to demonstrate symbolically what it is that constitutes a good human life for society as a whole.

Social friendship makes considerable demands on every person to respect all others in everyday life. This requires ethical judgements and discernment in a wide range of situations. Such virtue ethics have been highly developed in the writings of Christian theologians, being more detailed than modern norm ethics and thus providing more greatly differentiated orientations for righteous behaviour towards others. These virtues are the necessary basis not only for smaller communities, but also for new forms of global conviviality.²⁶

In the following I want to dwell briefly on the central political institutions of human rights, democracy (with its division of powers and system of checks and balances), and the nation state.²⁷ After a long and winded history, human rights coupled with the right to democratic participation became the backbone of national constitutions and of the international order alike. Their internationalization began with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) as the foundation of an edifice of international law, spelling out fundamental rights, such as the prohibition of slavery and torture, the right to religious freedom, to asylum and other core rights, in detail. Albeit that some recent developments may be judged to not always be in accordance with Christian moral teachings, the overall legal framework can be seen as corresponding with Christian fundamental ethical presuppositions.²⁸ Thus its basic intention to limit the arbitrary exertion of political power by law, further the respect for human dignity, and reduce human suffering cannot but be supported. In a similar way, modern democracy based on constitutional rights may be judged to be ethically superior to other forms of government. The equal participation of all citizens constitutes a valid expression of their dignity; it allows for legal and non-violent changes of those in power and, most importantly, reduces violence through legally embedded procedures and a culture of debate. This stands in stark contrast with most forms of government in history where political conflicts have

²⁶ The document On human fraternity, signed in Abu Dhabi by Pope Francis and Great Imam Ahmed al-Tayyib in February 2019 is an excellent example of this approach http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html (accessed on 10/11/2021).

²⁷ Cf Ingeborg G. Gabriel, *Ethik des Politischen. Grundlagen – Prinzipien – Konkretionen* (Würzburg: Echter 2020), further with contributions from Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant authors Ingeborg Gabriel (ed.), *Politik und Theologie in Europa. Perspektiven ökumenischer Sozialethik* (Ostfildern: Grünewald 2008).

²⁸ Cf Gabriel, *Ethik des Politischen*, 34-80, with further literature.

generally been resolved by force.²⁹ Though democratic mores are frequently by no means inspiring, corruption may be widespread, and constitutional rights are more often than not disrespected, it must be acknowledged that these institutions are the most humane form of government invented so far.³⁰

In contrast to human rights, the third pillar of political modernity, the nation state, is limited to a particular territory and a people with a specific history. Its present form has frequently been the result of conquests, which still fire separation movements in Europe and beyond. Nationalist ideologies moreover are prone to further conflicts. Despite these shortcomings, the nation state remains the most important political entity to realize a legal and democratic order for the common good. However, the main problem is an inherent tension between the *universality* of human rights and the *particularity* of the nation as the very place where these rights are to become concrete. This creates practically unsolvable conflicts, e. g. regarding migration – a situation which will not change in the foreseeable future. A world state is not in sight, and it is doubtful whether it would be desirable. As the European Union of 27 states demonstrates, large political entities are hard to govern. Still, the call of Catholic Social Teaching since the 1960's that a globalized world needs a "world authority" points to a fundamental challenge. Global issues, such as climate change, international crime, etc., require for their solution an international order based on universal rights and multilateral institutions. This is true all the more, since economic liberalism on the basis of enhanced technologies (internet etc.) had a globalised economy lacking rules and regulations as its result during the past decades. Social ills and ecological disasters thus demonstrate an institutional vacuum that results from these severe imbalances between national politics (at best regional politics such as those of the EU) and economic actors performing on a global scale.

Despite these shortcomings, liberal political institutions must be seen as modern inventions that, from an ethical point of view, are preferable to any other forms of government. Hardly anybody would wish to live in pre-modern political conditions, where rulers wielded absolute

²⁹ The judgement, which is often cited in Christian contexts, of Plato, who judged democracy to be the second worst form of government, refers to its antique form, which did not yet have a legal basis and therefore could easily deteriorate into an arbitrary "tyranny of the majority".

³⁰ Winston Churchill's famous dictum is to be cited here: „No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time“ in Winston Churchill: Speech 11th November 1947, in: Commons and Lords Hansard, the Official Report of debates in Parliament, 11 November 1947, Vol. 444, 203-321, 207, cf. https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1947/nov/11/parliament-bill#column_207 (accessed 16.01.2021).

power that was at best limited by their – always unsure – virtuous behaviour. Neither would one wish to live under feudal group rights or under autocratic not to speak of totalitarian rule. Laws and political institutions are thus to be supported and complemented by Christians and their churches as long as no better ones have been invented to further peace and justice in the human family at whose service the universal Church stands (GS 32 *et passim*). This acceptance of modern political institutions, which were not created by Christians, may be understood as an act of *kenosis* in the sense described above. Theologically this presupposes the belief that the Spirit is at work not only inside but also outside the Church furthering the good, in the words of *Gaudium et spes*, that He “leads the Church” and “fills the earth” (GS 11).

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that political institutions constitute but a framework for human life. They are neither sufficient for its flourishing nor, and this is even more important, are they able to give direction and meaning, to fill it with joy and open it up to the promises of eternal life and salvation. The freedom from “fear and want” (see preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) constitutes a high ethical aim for the world community. It would be perverse to negate its relevance, since from a Christian point of view, it cannot be good if people are subjected to violence, insecurity, or scarcity – in short, when they have to endure severe suffering. As Nicolas Berdyaev once formulated: „Bread for myself is a material question; bread for my neighbour is a spiritual question.”³¹

However, the kenotic affirmation of these institutional inventions must go hand in hand with a clear view of the deficits, on that which the eminent theologian Henri De Lubac has described in his classical study as the “drama of atheist humanism”. In this sense, public theology has not only a kenotic but also a critical, and theologically speaking, a prophetic function for modern societies. It is to lead them into a crisis, i. e. a process of transformation, putting into question norms and standards that are not life-giving and thus does not show new perspectives. This prophetic ministry of Christians and their churches would require extensive reflections, which by far surpass the scope of this article. Moreover, prophetic voices of criticism always speak for a specific time, situation, and place, i. e. they are contextual by definition. Today, this ministry is local and national, but in an age of globalization it is also global, since the two dimensions can no longer be seen in isolation from each other. Prophets stand up with their whole personality against the neglect of God and his commandments, and

³¹ Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press 1964), 185; cited in: Pantelis Kalaitzidis, *Othodoxy and Political Theology* (Geneva WCC Publishing 2012), 122.

thus the social ills of an age, bearing the burden of holding up a mirror for their respective societies. I want to finally name but a few areas where such criticism would be urgently needed.

- The commitment to the weaker members of society, the "option for the poor", asks for neighbourly aid and charitable efforts materially as well as immaterially. Even the best state organization cannot help in all, often very individualized, situations of poverty and misery. Thereby poverty also takes the form of loneliness and a lack of meaning in modern societies, having an essential spiritual dimension. A profound lack of orientation regarding central dimensions of one's own life as well as the lives of loved ones, an incapacity to make sense of death, illness, and failure as well as of guilt is therefore of utmost importance. The churches are to give answers, however fragmentary, in all these events which are part of human existence, reaching far beyond political institutions.

- The tendency of modernity to forget the victims of history and to discard traditions also leads to existential impoverishment. They leave a vacuum because there is no longer any meaning in suffering and little joy in a life that lacks the depth and beauty given to it by the recurrent feasts of the year, the memory of the saints, and the beauty of the liturgy and its redemptive quality. In the present situation, it becomes a service to society to keep evident what it means to be human in general and therefore also in a moral sense, e. g. to offer interpretations of the overall human situation, and thus counteract alienations of the self that would have serious consequences for society as a whole.

- Excess and hubris in modern societies often silence the inner knowledge of human finitude, fallibility, guilt, and the need for forgiveness. The interpretation of these indissoluble givens of the human condition is one of their most important services in societies which – in the West as in the East – have long drawn some strength from a belief in progress that has become fragile (the pandemic being just one more step in this process). This leads to a loss of hope for the future. The Christian message must and cannot only offer orientation, it can and indeed must be a source of deep faith, offering hope of eternal life that goes far beyond the hope for the improvement of societies, as important as it may be.

To fulfil these tasks, the churches in democratic societies are not limited to their relations with the state, but have a rich field of opportunities to perform their mission in the area of civil society as a specific feature of liberal societies because of freedom rights. This constitutes a chance as well as a challenge since it demands flexibility and innovation of the "Christians of

the Church" as well as of the "Authority of the Church" (Karl Rahner). Though the Church is not suppressed, persecuted, or subdued by state authorities, it would be a mistake to assume that this engagement in civil society is easy. It requires mature Christians who are able and willing to assume responsibility with competence and in dialogue with others, this being one of the imperatives in this historically new situation. Ecclesial initiatives need the readiness to experiment and take new paths in confidence of guidance by the Holy Spirit. St. Teresa of Ávila, the great Catholic mystic, once wrote that to live faith in everyday life may be more difficult than martyrdom. This can be applied to the challenges facing churches in liberal societies.

The more Christian it is, the more useful the church will be to society. Since the fullness of what human life can and should be was revealed in Jesus Christ, there exists a natural convergence between the Christian message and immanent humanism with its emphasis on human dignity and the alleviation of suffering, including its political institutions. On this basis, the churches may strengthen the good developments and attempt to hold back those that harm humans. For this, ecumenical cooperation with fellow Christians of other denominations and with all people of "good will" is imperative. Such an inculturation asks for creativity and demands a high degree of kenotic sensitivity. At his first public appearance, Jesus circumscribes his mission as good news for the poor, the afflicted, those in prison, the blind, and those crushed by any malady (Lk 4,18). An inculturation *sui generis* will start with these deeply human concerns. Its contributions to peace and reconciliation, social justice, and ecological improvements are already a presentation of the Gospel, which can lead our contemporaries to ask the more profound questions of God and His Kingdom, acquire hope in His greater eschatological promises already represented in the Church, and stimulate the greater future hope for a "new heaven and a new earth in which justice reigns" (1 Petr 3,15).