



Hansjörg Schmid {*}

Interreligious Social Ethics

Christian-Islamic Dialogue in view of the Problems of Modern Societies

German Version

From: *Herder Korrespondenz*, 11/2012, P. 564-569
webmaster's own, not authorized translation

Especially the Muslim side often wants to conduct a result-oriented dialogue on concrete society-related topics. A paradigm shift is currently taking place from the Churches' advocacy of Muslim concerns to a partner-like commitment to general societal concerns. The focus is thus on socio-ethical issues, as e.g. secularism, economic and environmental ethics.

With the increasing dissolution of those Catholic milieus that since the 19th century had supported the Church's social teaching, the awareness grew that an ecumenical dispute on socio-ethical topics was needed. In Germany, for instance, it found its expression in the common word of the Churches "[For a Future Founded on Solidarity and Justice](#)" (1997). The concern of the ecumenical dialogue was to meet with more response in society, and more easily to reach consensus in actions than in doctrinal issues - according to the statement of **Nathan Söderblom** "Doctrine divides, but service unites." Meanwhile, one even speaks of ecumenical social ethics (see HK, August 2004, 406 et seq, and HK, April 2008, 192ff.). Here, it is controversial how differences in the methodology and in individual issues are to be weighted. Overall, however, a rapprochement between the denominations can be noticed here (see **Ingeborg Gabriel**, Zur Bedeutung der Sozialethik für die Ökumene. Ein Plädoyer, in: *Una Sancta* 66 [2011] 170-179).

In the interreligious dialogue, too, the expectation sometimes is expressed that an agreement could be reached more easily in ethical issues. But, the differences are here larger than in the ecumenical social ethics. The "Global Ethic Project" (see *Konflikt und Kooperation*, HK Spezial No. 2/2010, 38ff.) has awakened an awareness of the role of religion for peaceful coexistence. But in the following discussion it became clear that complex and divergent positions can not offhand be reduced to simple formulas. In the context of interreligious dialogue, every kind of monopolization of the other side should be avoided.

From Ecumenical to Interreligious Social Ethics

Due to the societal pluralism, today not only the Catholic but also the ecumenical social ethics reach their limits. The presence of other religions cannot simply be ignored. The Christian social ethics is developing in accordance with the social structure of Catholicism and society as a whole. Due to immigration, globalization, pluralism, de-Christianization and a new presence of Islam in Europe, a new dimension of social ethics is required today: it does no longer take only the denominational heterogeneity of society into account but also the religious one. It is also for theological reasons necessary to take Islam into account. It shares with Christianity the belief in a merciful God as Creator of the world and eschatological Judge. Thus, the possibility comes into view that Christians and Muslims together grapple with the achievements of the modern age and make jointly contributions to societal issues.

565

Current Islamic discourses, as they are often reflected in the media, are dominated by the topics of church and state, human rights, women and violence, and thus essentially include issues of social ethics. Here, an opinion is often formed merely according to the outward appearance and on the basis of a sweeping preconception about the supposed views of Islam. Interreligious social ethics provide the opportunity to counter this by a dialogic debate, and to connect thus theological and political discourses with each other. The debate about the modern age turns out to be a unifying element between the religions. A closer look into the ambivalent history of this debate in the Catholic Church forbids without saying any kind of triumphalism. Rather, the prospect is opening up to look together at learning steps, without making a specific historical development the universal model.

Asymmetries as a Starting Point

If socio-ethical issues are to be treated in the Christian-Muslim dialogue, you have to take various asymmetries into account as initial conditions. Thus, in Islam, issues of ethics are treated primarily as part of Islamic law. So there is no direct parallel between the theological disciplines. Also in Europe, traditional Muslim circles are to date oriented towards individual decisions of Islamic scholars in the form of fatwas. The "European Council for Fatwa and Research" would like to take the European context into account, but it is strongly influenced by non-European authorities.

In addition there is a second way that may more easily be adopted for the current socio-ethical discussion. Today, many Muslim authors propagate in secular contexts an ethical interpretation of the *Sharia*. Its standards are no longer sanctioned by the State but are relevant only for the decision of the individual and for the faith community. Moreover, those authors give priority to the leading intentions and principles of the Sharia (as e.g. the protection of life) in comparison with individual standards. Comparable with developments on the Christian side, in Islamic theology a shift from a more formal performance of one's duty to personal responsibility with an awareness of the ethical principles and for the consequences of actions can be noticed. If one speaks of Islamic "law", this may be the expression of a restriction. **Barber Johansen** speaks therefore in the broader sense of "Islamic normativity".

With it, a further difference is connected: Christian ethicists and experts in social ethics are currently primarily oriented towards philosophical conceptions, whereas on the part of Islam one seeks usually to build on the Qur'an or on principles of Islamic law. Besides the law, however, the Islam has also philosophical and ethical traditions. The fact that classical authors of Islamic ethics drew on ancient thinkers could even today encourage similar processes of reception. **Al-Farabi** (d. 950), for instance, conceived the model of a perfect state on the basis of Plato's *Politeia*. The

moral-philosophical tradition of Islam is also strongly influenced by the Aristotelian theory of virtue, and aims thus primarily at the individual's ethics. But many contemporary issues are structural issues and pertain to institutions, economic laws and political basic conditions. You must therefore take them into account according to their own logic, but also critically examine them.

Another asymmetry concerns the *structures and forms of organization*. In public debates, ethical issues come often to the fore by statements of organizations and their representatives. Islam, however, is not a church, and has no magisterium. It is therefore impossible to make out *the* Islamic position. You have always as starting-point an uncircumventable inner-Islamic pluralism. In recent years, even in the Christian social ethics it became clearer that the Catholic social teaching is just one point of reference, and that the scientific socio-ethical landscape is heterogeneous. But in Islam there is by no means such a magisterium as point of reference. Both in dialogue and socio-ethical research, it is therefore necessary to take a variety of Islamic positions into account. Currently, for instance in Islam in Germany, a controversial debate about the prerogative of interpretation can be noticed. Islamic organizations have the tendency of adopting characteristics of the Churches (Verkirchlichungstendenzen), and make great efforts to examine or even to control the life and religious commitment of religion teachers in schools, and of academics. There will certainly be conflicts in this area. They are in turn comparable to intra-church disputes.

All these asymmetries do not make an agreement impossible. But they already presage that interreligious social ethics is a complex undertaking. It can not be reduced to pithy short formulas.

Key Topic Secularization

It is often claimed that in terms of secularization a basic disagreement between Christianity and Islam prevails. Already due to their origin, the churches would be compatible with secularization, whereas the unity of religion and state in Islam was diametrically contrary to it. However, in Islam often a positive reception of secularization takes place.

566

Against a background of positive experiences, context-sensitive approaches by Bosnian and British Muslims are in their respective countries open-minded as regards secularism: With regard to the State, it is indispensable for the Bosnian Shariah expert **Fikret Karcic** that religions limit their universal claim. A recent publication from the UK sees itself as a plea to take not experiences in the Islamic world as one's starting-point but the European context, where in religiously and ideologically neutral states religion is not excluded but continues to play a vital role in public (see **Yahya Birt**, **Dilwar Hussain** and **Ataullah Siddiqui** [ed.], *British Secularism and Religion. Islam, Society and the State*, Markfield 2011).

Precisely an author as the sociologist of religion **José Casanova**, who supports secularization in principle but at the same time critically argues as regards the modern age and secularization, turns out to be compatible with Islamic thinkers. According to Casanova, secularization is one of the "founding myths of contemporary European identity" (*Europas Angst vor der Religion*, Berlin 2009, 10). He distinguishes between three dimensions of secularization: differentiation, decline of religion and privatization of religion. This takes a burden off the discourse, since secularization needs no longer to be understood as "universal category for the interpretation of the present" (**Walter Kasper**) and not as aggressive "secularism" - as by some Muslim thinkers. The general statement that Islam is incompatible with

secularism does therefore not apply.

Both religions have a very different history of separation. It is difficult to compare them. In this connection, in Islam the non-existent church structure has its effects. Over long periods in the history of Islam, elements of differentiation can be identified: as e.g. the separation between the caliph as symbolic representative of the Ummah and the legal scholars as the actual religious authorities.

According to **Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde**, in the secular state not only the Christian churches but also other religions, as e.g. Islam are therefore "binding forces" by a positive adoption of secularization. The state is dependent on those bond forces, because it can not guarantee its foundations. But especially in the British context, Islamic thinkers prefer to give religions their place in civil society. **Dilwar Hussain** from the "Islamic Foundation" in Markfield, the largest Islamic educational institution in Britain, criticizes a too great orientation of the religions towards the State. He sees them positioned in pluralistic societies, where also Muslims have to form alliances with other societal forces.

The result of a positive reception of secularization is a method of ethics which relies on secular knowledge, by use of the relevant sciences. Christians and Muslims have to deal jointly with current societal phenomena. They must study them in the light of their religious sources, come to an understanding about their different perspectives, and look for courses of action in a particular context. Also the situational perception and the social-scientific assessment of concrete examples play a central role here (see HK, January 2012, 33ff.).

Prohibition of Interest as a Model?

The economy, for instance, plays a guiding role in a globalized world. In Islam, too, much attention is given to economics and business ethics. Already the question whether one should speak of "Islamic economics" is controversial, since an encroachment of religion on the autonomy of a different system is quickly linked with it. In recent years also in Germany a discussion on "Islamic Banking" emerged. The Sparkassen-Verlag, for instance, has dedicated a special publication to it (**Hans-Georg Ebert** und **Friedrich Thiessen**, Das islamkonforme Finanzgeschäft. Aspekte von Islamic Finance für den deutschen Privatkundenmarkt, Stuttgart 2010). Since 2011, the Kuveyt Türk Bank, based in Mannheim, is the first Islamic bank in Germany.

In the center of Islamic discussions on business ethics is the prohibition of *riba* - usually translated as interest. In recent decades it increasingly attracts interest. There are starting-points in the Quran. "Those who swallow usury cannot rise up save as he ariseth whom the devil hath prostrated by (his) touch. That is because they say: Trade is just like usury; whereas Allah permitteth trading and forbiddeth usury." (Sura 2.275 et seq.)

What exactly is meant by this statement is interpreted differently. Modernist thinkers confine the prohibition: Only usury is forbidden and numerous exceptions are allowed, whereas traditional thinkers comprehensively understand it as the prohibition of interest. In "Islamic banking" interest is avoided either by concluding a contract between investor and entrepreneur with a profit-sharing or by resale with a profit tax. The surcharges are equivalent with the lending rates in the conventional banking system. Here, however, both profits and risks are supposed to be shared equally by the investor.

From the perspective of Christian social ethics different assessments are possible. In the context of a differentiation between economics and religion since the 16 century, in Christianity one did no longer adhere or only to a limited extent to the prohibition of interest (see **Jochen Schumann**, Zur Geschichte christlicher und islamischer Zinsverbote, in: **Harald Hagemann** [ed.], Ökonomie und Religion,

The prohibition of interest can therefore be seen as backward-looking and as an obstacle to a modern economy. With this, however, a not unproblematic logic of progress is connected. And it is overlooked that Islamic banking is long since part of modern economies and makes compromises in many places.

Other authors expect to rediscover Christian traditions of social responsibility by means of the Islamic ban on interest. "With regard to the interest on capital it is noticeable that a once by Christians and Muslims shared conviction - ethically speaking a common good - was abandoned in the Christian West, because here financial interests proved to be stronger than morality" (**Peter Schmiedel**, Gedanken zum Verzicht auf Kapitalzinsen, in: **Johannes Wallacher** et al. [ed.], Kultur und Ökonomie. Globales Wirtschaften im Spannungsfeld kultureller Vielfalt, Stuttgart 2008, 109-116, 115). However, this raises the question of whether the Islamic financial system provides a real economic alternative or ultimately hangs a religious label on economic practices which are adapted to the laws of the market.

Both views consider insufficiently that interest rates are today no longer, as in stagnating economies, to equate with the exploitation of impoverished people. They are rather a necessary condition for the capital market and thus for economic growth. In both religions a possible middle course would be to compare the many and diverse dimensions of the principles on which the concrete issues of business ethics are based, as e.g. the option for the weak and justice (see, for example, **Mehmet Asutay**, Islamic Moral Economy as the Foundation of Islamic Finance, in: **Mervyn King** [ed.], Islamic Finance in Europe. Towards a Plural Financial System, Cheltenham 2012). Then the prohibition of interest would be a starting point for a more profound discussion, which would contrast pleasantly with the cited hasty judgments and ahistorical transfers.

Muslims have often pointed out that the global financial crisis could have been avoided by applying the Islamic financial market instruments. The in Islam demanded continuous feedback of the financial system to the real economy stands in the way of unlimited speculative trading. But here you have to take also state and transnational governance mechanisms and measures of social compensation into account. A solution to the financial crisis with Islamic tools is not possible offhand. On the occasion of the Mannheim Katholikentag, the Catholic social ethicist **Bernard Emunds** emphasized at a Christian-Islamic panel discussion that ethics-related investment and Islamic banking have comparable problems. The positive motivations would admittedly have an effect on the investors, but the effects on business and economy as a whole are limited.

Ecological issues, the solution of which is required for the survival of mankind, are for Islamic thinkers a fairly new topic. The reason is that in countries with a Muslim majority other political, economic and social issues had initially priority. Meanwhile, the beginnings of a Muslim-ecological movement can be noticed. Examples are the in Birmingham based "Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences" (IFEES) or the in 2011 in Germany founded group "Hima". In the Islamic environmental discourses one often had resort to creation-theological fundamentals in the Qur'an, even though many current questions can not be answered directly from there.

Ecological Crisis as the Flip Side of the Modern Era

A pioneer on the Islamic side is **Seyyed Hossein Nasr**. He comes from Iran and has a central position in the dialogue process of Muslim scholars with the Vatican. Since the late sixties, he publishes books on issues of environmental ethics. Nasr's interfaith approach, which is close to pluralism, lets us initially expect an approximation. But Nasr's basic thesis says that, in comparison to all other religions, in Western Christianity due to Renaissance and humanism a special path emerged and led to the ecological crisis (see *Religion and the Order of Nature*, New York / Oxford, 1996). As vicegerent of God, man has a special position in creation. That's why Nasr speaks also of man's "theomorph nature" (219).

Against this background, Nasr opposes not only anthropocentrism but also biocentrism and argues for theocentrism. The special status of man is therefore not grounded in his autonomous reason but in God. That's why Nasr sees an insurmountable antithesis between the modern conception of man which developed since the Renaissance, and the Islamic conception of man. Nasr sees prospects for overcoming the ecological crisis in a resacralization of nature. Here, he draws on mystical and wisdom traditions, cites repeatedly Hildegard of Bingen, and also refers to contemporary Christian theologians.

In the European context, **Mawil Izzi Dien** is the only author who has developed his own draft of environmental ethics (*The Environmental Dimensions of Islam*, Cambridge 2000). In a holistic view, based on the principle of the protection of human life Izzi Dien deduces the obligation to protect also the environment as a necessary possibility condition for this. Izzi Dien selects from the Islamic tradition also other concepts, as e.g. Hima ("protected area"), the use of which by man is prohibited (cf. 42-44). He sees Islam as critical antithesis to contemporary materialism. All tools and instruments of Islamic law should therefore be used in the service of environmental protection. Apart from that, Izzi Dien sees broad agreement between the Islamic view and non-religious beliefs. One might initially assume, that an interreligious consensus may be found easily in the field of environmental issues. But the exemplarily selected Islamic positions illustrate that also here the basic conflict erupts, namely the question of how the modern era has to be assessed, and that anti-modern reflexes sometimes return in an ecological disguise. It becomes evident once again: the confrontation with the secular modern era is the central question.

Even where in concrete dialogue projects issues of environmental ethics were treated, there is still often a state of mere juxtaposition. In a Shiite-Catholic dialogue asymmetries became apparent: the Catholic contribution refers largely to papal encyclicals. One of the Muslim contribution is oriented towards virtue ethics; it ends with maxims for action (**Anthony O'Mahony, Timothy Wright und Muhammad Ali Shomali** [ed.], *A Catholic-Shi'a Dialogue. Ethics in Today's Society*, London 2008, 105-158). The principle of human responsibility which is taken up here by Islamic thinkers could perhaps be the key to environmental ethics.

In a book of the series "Building Bridges", which is to date chaired by the Archbishop of Canterbury **Rowan Williams (Michael Ipgrave und David Marshall** [ed.], *Humanity. Texts and Contexts. Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, Washington 2010) both the Islamic and Christian side speak of man as a "custodian" or "guardian" of environment. A more detailed dialogue about such possible common concepts has still to be conducted.

Muslims Take Part in Ethical Discourses

In April 2012, with the philosopher and physician **Ilhan Ilkilic** (University of Mainz) for the first time a Muslim was admitted to the German Ethics Council, both in terms

of content and symbolism an equally important step. In the future, members of the second largest religion in Europe will necessarily participate in ethical debates. To date there are only a few skilled Muslim ethicists in the German-speaking area. With the centers of Islamic Studies at five universities in Germany, this will change in the near future, although until now ethical issues are rather weakly embodied there. But the Islamic theologian **Ömer Özsoy** who is teaching in Frankfurt emphasizes, "Issues such as human rights, environmental protection, genetic engineering, bioethics, globalization are just some fields of discussion and research, where one increasingly asks about the position of Islam. They should therefore get a sound basis in Islamic theology."

569

At the University of Frankfurt for instance two Islamic female theologians are currently writing dissertations on bioethical issues. At the University of Münster, a research group "Religious Plurality as a Challenge for Religions and Societies" has been established as part of the Centre for Islamic Theology. At the University of Tübingen, an interdisciplinary research team "Work Ethics in the World Religions" is currently constituted, under the direction of the Muslim theologian **Mouez Khalfaoui** and the Catholic social ethicist **Matthias Möhring-Hesse**.

The presence of Islam requires to practice a new type of ethics. Some Muslims and Christians will be under the illusion that they will jointly defy the advancing secularization. However, there is no getting around it, we must critically deal with the achievements of the modern era. What is characteristic of interreligious social ethics is "learning together" as regards the developments and concepts outside of religion. Muslims and Christians are able to be allies, not in a common opposition to the secular society and culture but by jointly advocating, in the sense of Jose Casanova, an active and public presence of religion.

What matters here is not to reach an agreement on as many as possible individual issues. Dealing with positions of the other religion may turn out to be a learning field, where you'll see your own beliefs in a new light. For the purposes of the practical orientation of social ethics, it is about more than reflection. Thus, in the future there might be oftener situations in which the common voice of Christians and Muslims will be heard in public. There are also numerous fields of action especially in the area of charity, where local examples of cooperation can be extended and help to build structures.

{*} **Hansjörg Schmid** (born in 1972), Doctor of Divinity, is Director of Studies at the Academy of the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart with the focus on Christian-Islamic dialogue, coordinator of the scientific network "Theological Forum Christianity - Islam" and a member of the discussion group "Christians and Muslims" in the Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken. Latest publication: *Islam im europäischen Haus. Wege zu einer interreligiösen Sozialethik*, Freiburg: Herder 2012.



[top](#)

