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The Church and Personal and Public Morality

by
Prof. Dr. Christoph Stückelberger

1. Theme and personal background

The issue of personal and public morality, including especially family ethics, is a hot issue in the ecumenical dialogue. First, I will describe a Protestant position in Switzerland, then compare it with an Orthodox position and show the methodological common ground and differences. But let me start with a few information on my personal background for the better understanding of this short presentation.

The Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches (FSPC), a member of the WCC, which I represent here, develops ethical positions mainly through its Institute for Social Ethics. I participate in the discussion of these themes since twenty years as a member of the Commission for Social Ethics of the FSPC. I myself look at the themes from the point of view of a theologian, as professor of Ethics at the Theological Faculty of the University of Basel. My publications focus mainly on economic ethics, environmental ethics, bio-ethics and peace ethics[14], but family ethics is the theme of a seminar this semester a the university and is of course very important for Christian ethics, also for me personally as husband and father of four children. As a member of two consultative commissions of the Swiss Government (for International Relations and Bio-Ethics) and head of the development organization "Bread for all", I'm constantly obliged to make Christian ethics relevant for society and test it in the dialogue between the church and society. Since the WCC conference on "Faith, Science and the Future" at MIT in 1979 I participate in WCC-related ecumenical debates on ethical issues.

2. Swiss Case Study: Consultation on the Future of Switzerland

"Common Future. Ecumenical Consultation on the Social and Economic Future of Switzerland."[15] This is the title of a contribution of the Reformed and the Roman-Catholic Church in Switzerland for the reorientation of Swiss society and politics at the beginning of the new millennium. The study is the result of a broad consultation between 1998 and 2000 among the public and specific target groups. It deals with economy, labour, environment, migration, politics and in chapter 3 with "family: life in alliance"[16]. The chapter starts with the reaction of Swiss people describing their difficulties in modern family life and the high expectations that the churches should defend more often the family interests in political and social life (para. 47-49). The churches then describe their own analysis of the situation of families (para. 50-57) which broadly concludes as follows: not enough public recognition of the importance of families for society and especially economic reasons for the difficulties of young people to build sustainable families (job mobility, necessary flexibility in professional life, speed of productivity, pressure for individual professional success). Families exist in pluralistic forms.

Under the title "our clue", the document then comes to criteria for value judgments of family life (para. 60-65):

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[14] See e.g.: Stückelberger, Christoph: Global Trade Ethics, WCC Geneva 2003; Umwelt und Entwicklung. Eine sozialethische Orientierung, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 1997, Vermittlung und Parteinahme. Der Versöhnungsauftrag der Kirchen in gesellschaftlichen Konflikten, TVZ, Zürich 1988. List on the homepage www.christophstueckelberger.ch

[15] Schweizer Bischofskonferenz SBK/Schweizerischer Evangelischer Kirchenbund SEK: Miteinander in die Zukunft. Ökumenische Konsultation zur sozialen und wirtschaftlichen Zukunft der Schweiz, Bern/Freiburg 2001; L'avenir ensemble. Consultation oecuménique sur l'avenir social et économique de la Suisse, Berne/Fribourg 2001 ; idem : Welche Zukunft wollen wir ? Auswertungsbericht (Evaluation Report, Bern/Freiburg 2000.

[16] Miteinander in die Zukunft, p. 31-42. The FSPC published various other studies on family issues, such as: Freiheit und Verantwortung in Partnerschaft, Ehe und Familie, ISE, Studien und Berichte 34, Bern 1984; Familie. Sieben Beiträge, ISE Studien und Berichte 46, Bern 1994; Ehe und Familie für homosexuelle Paare? Rechtliche und ethische Aspekte, ISE Studien und Berichte 49, Bern 1995.

- The families are seen as the most important form of community life.
- "People who say yes to family life take – in a Christian perspective – the chance to experience God's love through the family members and to pass it on to other people." (para 61)
- The family provides the chance of a "life in all its fullness" (John 10,10).
- The family provides the opportunity of free space for display and responsible life for the balance between display and life in a community.
- The modern plurality of forms of family life is positive and an expression of freedom. "In the Protestant churches, marriage and wedding are very important. Yet, the content and the quality of the human relation in marriage and family – even in form of homosexual couples – is more important than the historic forms. The forms have to serve people and not the opposite." (para 53)
- Families contribute substantially to the humanisation of society.

Overall, the study wants to motivate people to respect the importance of family structures and to appreciate their advantages and not only their limitations. "To struggle for families is an innovative, future-oriented task" says the study (para 65).
The chapter on the family concludes with concrete recommendations and steps to be done (para 65-74):

- The freedom of everybody to choose his or her own form of life must be respected.
- But economy and politics have to create conditions in favour of families, such as family-friendly tax systems, apartments, salaries (one salary per family should be enough to maintain the family), reconciliation between gender equality and family life (work/jobs in and outside the household for women and men), social security system affordable for families,
- social nets in the neighbourhood and social support for divorced persons and broken families.

The study emphasises the public (economical and political) responsibility for the private morality of human relations.

3. In Comparison with the "Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church"

The document "Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church"[17] is very substantial and helpful for ecumenical dialogue. It includes family ethics in chapter X on "Personal, family and public morality"[18]. This chapter is mainly concerned with four issues related to family life: marriage (X,1-3), family (X,4), women (X,5), chastity and vices (X,6) [19]:

Marriage: The Orthodox Church respects common-law marriage (X,2), but underlines the importance of Orthodox marriage which is in principle indissoluble (X,3). The document gives nevertheless 15 reasons where divorce is valid. A second marriage is accepted only for the innocent spouse or after repentance of faults committed in relation to the marriage ((X,3).

Family: The family is seen as a "domestic church" which plays a central role in forming personality (X,4).

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[17] Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church, in: Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC. Methodology in Approaching Social and Ethical Issues. Background Material, WCC Geneva 2003, 69-126.
[18] Ibid., 99-105.
[19] See also, as another example of Orthodox family ethics: Sister Magdalen: Orthodox Tradition and Family Life, in: Living Orthodoxy in the Modern World, eds. By Andrew Walker and Costa Carras, New York 2000, 50-63.

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Women: The document starts with the theological basis that men and women are "equal bearers of the divine image and human dignity" (X,1). On the other hand, it accepts Paul's view that the marriage is like the union between Christ and the Church and "the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church" (according to Eph. 5,22-33). The woman's role is mainly seen as wife and mother, but also as a "participant in the cause of the human salvation" in church community, in "liturgical life, mission, preaching, education and charity" (X,5).

Chastity and vices: *The document underlines the importance of chastity as the "basis of the inner unity of the human personality" (X,6) and condemns pornography, fornication and free love as an exploitation for commercial, political or ideological purposes (X,6).*

This Russian Orthodox document and the Swiss Protestant document are written in the same period (2000 and 2001), but for different target groups. Nevertheless, a comparison of the content and then of the methodology is fruitful:

Common content: Both documents emphasise the importance of families for forming personalities and for contributing to society. Both see the modern family under pressure from society and contemporary developments (the Swiss document more than the Russian one). Both recognize the secular legal framework of the state and the special role of church marriage. The equality of the sexes is an important common basis between Orthodox and Protestant ethics.

Different content: Fundamental values such as faithfulness and freedom are common, but weighted in a different way. Whereas the Protestant position encourages people to decide for a family life in freedom and accepts different family forms, the Orthodox position emphasises faithfulness and describes marriage and family in a church framework. The Orthodox position sees – implicitly – the roots of the difficulties of modern families rather in the individual morality whereas the Protestant side underlines the influence of the structural (political and economic) factors and the responsibility of the state and the private sector to support families.

4. Protestant Ethical Methodologies

There is not one Protestant or Reformed ethical methodology, but different methodologies. The one in the case study "Common Future" of the Swiss churches represents an important and often used protestant methodology in ethics. What is the ethical methodology in the case study? Particularly five characteristics should be emphasised:

1. Participatory: A consultation means a broad participation of the population or specific target groups. Listen to the needs of the people means theologically to listen to the cry of God in a specific context and situation. Of course, protestant ethics knows that "vox populi non est vox Dei", the peoples voice is not automatically God's voice. "The majority does not make the truth." (Reformer Huldrych Zwingli).

2. Contextual: People formulate their problems and describe their situation which has to be taken seriously. Why? God's truth is not abstract but God's word incarnates always in a specific context. In a specific context God's eternal word has a specific expression. In protestant ethical methodology, incarnation, inculturation and contextual ethics are linked. That's the reason why in the case study the description of today's families and their needs is an important part of the chapter. Contextual ethics does not mean situation ethics which denies in its extreme form common values beyond a concrete situation.

3. Biblical: of course, Protestant ethics has to be rooted in the biblical revelation, otherwise it can not be called Christian ethics. The use of biblical references varies in the different position papers. In our case study it's – in my view - rather weak.

4. Value-oriented: On the basis of biblical and theological reflection, Protestant methodology often develops norms and values as criteria for value judgment (in the case study values such as freedom, self-reliance, responsibility and solidarity).

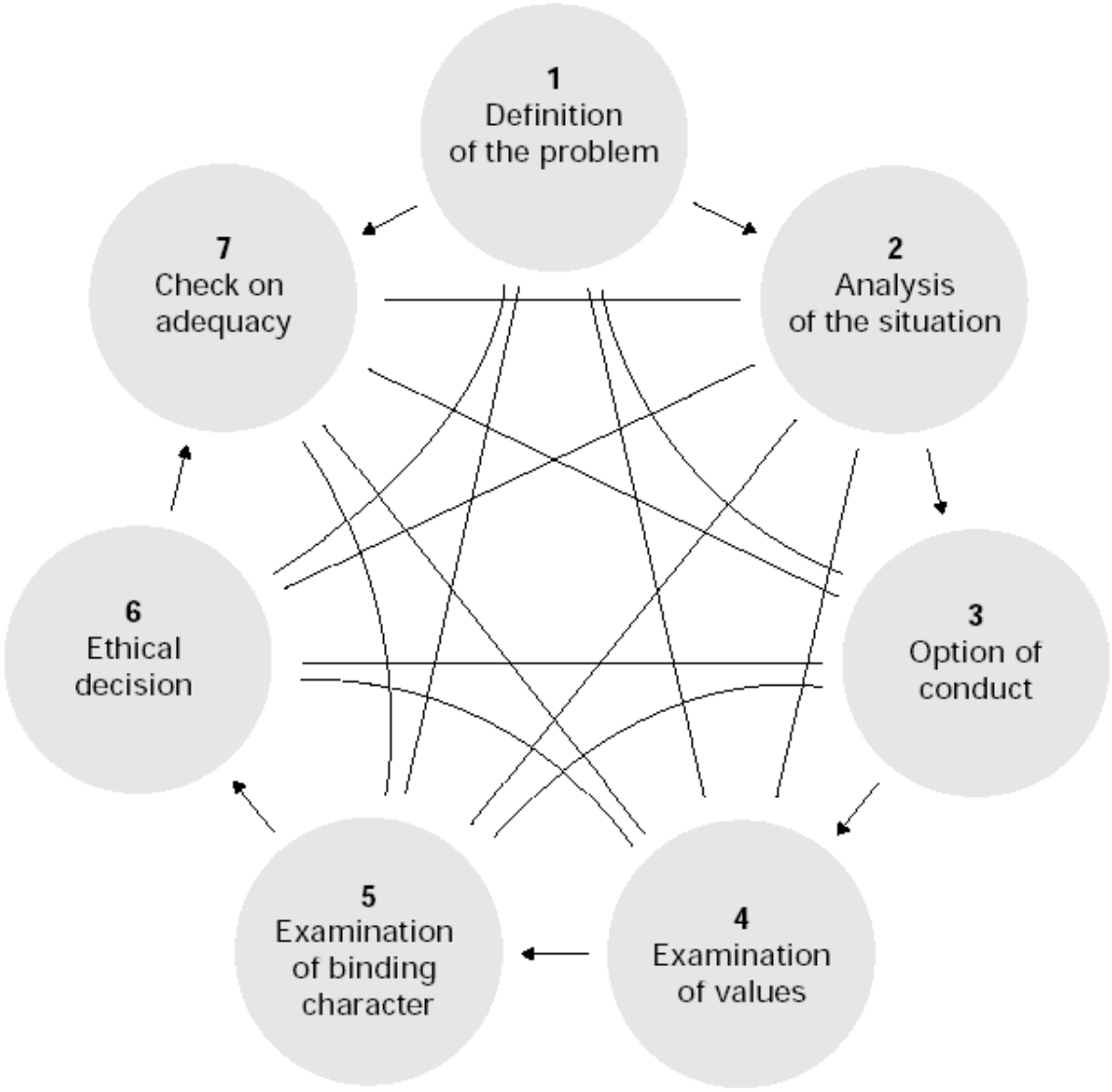
5. Ecumenical: The consultation was done ecumenically. In the Swiss context where half of the population are Protestants and the other half Catholics, a common voice is much more relevant for society than a confessional voice. Protestant methodology therefore tends to be quite often an ecumenical methodology.

Today's most often used Protestant ethical methodology can be summarised by mentioning the methodology of seven steps of the ethical decision-making process (developed by the late German professor of ethics Heinz-Eduard Tödt). Here below, a graphical illustration of this process[20]:

[20] Stückelberger, Christoph: Global Trade Ethics, Geneva 2003, 38.

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Most important is the fourth step which is the ethical and theological "core business".

5. In comparison with Orthodox Ethical Methologies

The methodology in the Russian orthodox document can be described with the following characteristics:

1. Biblical: Biblical references, in a christological perspective especially from the New Testament, play a central role.
2. Value-oriented: Fundamental values build the key criteria in this position as in the protestant one.

3. Church-related: The historical positions of the church and therefore the emphasis of the ethical continuity and the church-centred arguments play a central role.

4. Hierarchical: The binding character of the orthodox position is rooted in its ecclesiology. "The Church is a divine-human organism" and "the body of Christ" (I,2).

Common methodology: The fundamental premise of both documents is that God is creator and king of the whole world and the churches' ethical contribution therefore wants to be relevant to the whole (secular) society and not only to the Church. The biblical references are a strong common ground even if it's less explicit in the Protestant position.

Different methodology: The way to define the ethical problem is different. While the protestant participatory approach is mainly based on today's experiences, the orthodox hierarchical approach defines the problem more as a tension between reality and dogmatic positions. The sociological, economic and political analysis of the context plays a much more important role in the protestant position than in the orthodox. On the other hand, the continuity with positions of Church history, especially the Church fathers, is much stronger in the orthodox methodology. Ethical positions of the orthodox church hierarchy as a "top-down approach" claim to have a stronger binding character than the ethical positions in the protestant "bottom-up" approach.

6. Some Conclusions

There is a broad common ground for ecumenical ethics, based on the common biblical ground and on Christ's call for all churches to be his body, his witness and to work for his kingdom in society. The comparison of the two case studies shows that the different traditions can learn a lot from each other, while respecting at the same time the differences. I see two main challenges which should be addressed in more depth and detail:

1. The balance between common fundamental values and their *contextualization*. We can continue this reflection on the broad methodological experience in the ecumenical movement during the last decades[21].

2. The different theological images of God and the understanding of trinity and its role for ecumenical ethics. An example: The protestant theologian Emil Brunner in his family ethics was nearer to some Orthodox positions than some of today's Protestant positions[22]. Why? His ethics is mainly based on the protological part of trinity. God as creator created an eternal world order which includes marriage and family as an eternal "institution". A christological or pneumatological approach in ethics makes a difference, in family ethics as well as in ecological ethics or bio-ethics. An ecumenical consultation on "Trinity and Ethics" therefore could be a fruitful next step.

Notes

[1] See e.g.: Stückelberger, Christoph: Global Trade Ethics, WCC Geneva 2003; Umwelt und Entwicklung. Eine sozialethische Orientierung, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 1997, Vermittlung und Parteinahme. Der Versöhnungsauftrag der Kirchen in gesellschaftlichen Konflikten, TVZ, Zürich 1988. List on the homepage www.christophstueckelberger.ch

[2] Schweizer Bischofskonferenz SBK/Schweizerischer Evangelischer Kirchenbund SEK: Miteinander in die Zukunft. Ökumenische Konsultation zur sozialen und wirtschaftlichen Zukunft der Schweiz, Bern/Freiburg 2001; L'avenir ensemble. Consultation oecuménique sur l'avenir social et économique de la Suisse, Berne/Fribourg 2001 ; idem : Welche Zukunft wollen wir ? Auswertungsbericht (Evaluation Report, Bern/Freiburg 2000.

[21] See the short overview of Martin Robra: Methodology in Approaching Moral and Ethical Issues, in: Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC. Methodology in Approaching Social and Ethical Issues. Background Material, WCC Geneva 2003, 35-39.

[22] Brunner, Emil: Das Gebot und die Ordnungen. Entwurf einer protestantisch-theologischen Ethik, Tübingen 1932, 324-368.

[3] Miteinander in die Zukunft, p. 31-42. The FSPC published various other studies on family issues, such as: Freiheit und Verantwortung in Partnerschaft, Ehe und Familie, ISE, Studien und Berichte 34, Bern 1984; Familie. Sieben Beiträge, ISE Studien und Berichte 46, Bern 1994; Ehe und Familie für homosexuelle Paare? Rechtliche und ethische Aspekte, ISE Studien und Berichte 49, Bern 1995.
[4] Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church, in: Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC. Methodology in Approaching Social and Ethical Issues. Background Material, WCC Geneva 2003, 69-126.
[5] Ibid., 99-105.
[6] See also, as another example of Orthodox family ethics: Sister Magdalen: Orthodox Tradition and Family Life, in: Living Orthodoxy in the Modern World, eds. By Andrew Walker and Costa Carras, New York 2000, 50-63.
[7] Stückelberger, Christoph: Global Trade Ethics, Geneva 2003, 38.
[8] See the short overview of Martin Robra: Methodology in Approaching Moral and Ethical Issues, in: Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC. Methodology in Approaching Social and Ethical Issues. Background Material, WCC Geneva 2003, 35-39.
[9] Brunner, Emil: Das Gebot und die Ordnungen. Entwurf einer protestantisch-theologischen Ethik, Tübingen 1932, 324-368.