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THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS IN ETHICS: MORE LAUGHTER OF THE HOLY AND THE FOOLS, MORE COURAGE FOR ANGER AND TEARS

Christoph Stückelberger

More laughter of the Holy and the Fools

What[152] is the most outstanding distinguishing feature of Obiora Ike, my successor as Executive director of Globethics.net, a professor of ethics from Nigeria, a former refugee and a development practitioner[153]? Is it his intellect? His brilliant speeches? His courage? His charm? His management of development projects? His innovative energy? For me, it is his laugh! When I think about him, I hear it in my heart like music. It

[152] Article 13.2 was first published in Ogbunwezeh, Emmanuel Franklyne (Ed.), *Integral Development, Ethics, Governance and Human Rights in the African Context*. Festschrift in Honor of Prof. Dr. Obiora Ike on his 60th Birthday, Lagos April 2016, 67-79 (English and German). Second publication in Stückelberger, Ch. *Global Ethics Applied, Bioethics, Religion, Leadership*, Reader Series No. 4, Globethics.net, 2016, 316-23. © Globethics Publications, 2023 | DOI: 10.58863/20.500.12424/4293070 | CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International.

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is a very special laugh; it is strong and loud. Once it starts, it seems almost as if it will not stop. It comes from deep within, and has something supernatural, a kind of laughter from another world. It irritating but infectious to laugh with him. It has something comforting, joyful, energizing. It is the "laughter of the Holy and the fools"![154]

His laughter is not only personal, but also an element of education. During my visit to the large school in his parish in Enugu, he organized a little contest outdoors for primary school students. Those who could laugh most powerfully and who could smile the most convincingly received prizes.

Laughter can be spontaneous amusement over a joke; it can be mocking, hurtful laughter; it can be a smile due to a surprising encounter or recognition. The smile or smirk of the seated Buddha is the expression of overcoming the suffering and disengagement from the attachment to the world.

From the perspective of the Christian faith, laughter has a deep spiritual and eschatological dimension (Eschatology is the study of the final things); it is through laughter that the destructive energies of the world, called "death" and "sin", are overcome by the Risen. It is the deep inner certainty that life is stronger than death. It is the joy of the promise of great blessing from God. It is a fearless laugh, because the fear of the powers and mighty is overcome (even if the specific fear may still exist). It is "eschatological laughter"[155]. It is known in all Christian denominations. Even the reformers, who are often portrayed as joyless or austere, certainly had humor. Luther's Table Talk bore witness to Zwingli's subtle humor[156]. They embodied this eschatological world

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[154] Helmut Thielicke: *Das Lachen der Heiligen und Narren*, Freiburg im Breisgau, 1974.

[155] Ebd, 133f.

[156] Hans Conrad Zander: „Zwingli hatte einen feineren Humor als Luther", *Reformierte Presse* No 48, 27. Nov. 2015, 6-7.

overcome, which leads the world's commitment, each in their own way. However, Protestants can learn from Catholics regarding humor.

Christian laughter is the "*laughter of the Holy*": Holy are all those people - each and every one of us can be one - who have had a least for a moment, an experience of God; who have been affected by this immense grace, this faith and commitment. It is an eschatological laugh. The world appears in a new light; the future does not belong to evil, but to liberation and life.

It is a paschal laugh (*risus paschalis*) that certainly a tradition in church history. Easter is the feast of hearty laughter about the redemption of the world. Therefore, I hope that the Christian artists finally replace the grouchy, sad, suffering Jesus on the cross with the laughing Risen! In addition, the question of whether the meal after a funeral should be cheerful, or if it should remain serious out of respect for the dead is also answered; the funeral meal is in memory of the dead/deceased and demonstrates gratitude and joy over their new life. Reason enough to laugh. Moreover, I hope that in the future, in the massage rooms, saunas and oases, people will be greeted not only by the smiling Buddha, but by a smiling or even laughing and relaxed figure of Christ.

The Christian laughter is also the '*laughter of fools*'. The prophets in the Old and the New Testament and the prophets of our time had and have the courage, the power to tell the truth, to criticize injustice and to hold accountable and to show them ways of repentance and healing. They could and can do so because they are supported and strengthened by this eschatological certainty though faith. They were and are often regarded as fools and branded as "idealists", "dreamers", and as being "out of touch with reality". However, they do not listen to their laughter, because they know that their reality is stronger than what politicians, economists, lawyers, and analysts call "reality". It is not a superficial, palliative laugh, "laughing off" of misery. On the contrary, the Holy,

fools, and prophets know the depths of sorrow, fear, and despair. Precisely because of this purification is their laugh invincible.

Laughter is an expression of *joy*. Joy is the expression and fruit of faith, as expressed throughout the entire Bible, especially in the Psalms: "You show me the path of life. In you is the fullness of joy" (Ps 16:11.). "God has turned my mourning into dancing and... clothed me with joy." (Ps. 30.11). Mary's gratitude for her pregnancy and her song of praise is an expression of the joy that God provided the world with Jesus' birth from head to toe (Lk.14f). The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann not only wrote a theology of hope, but also a "*theology of joy*"[157]. He referred to it again in his last publication[158]. Moltmann, as a theologian who was affected by the horror of World War II and engaged in opposing the world's suffering, said through laughter and crying, joy and suffering, belong together in God: "The God who can rejoice, can also suffer, The God who experiences happiness and bliss also feels pain and grief. A God who cannot suffer cannot be a God of joy, either[159]." Therefore, Good Friday and Easter are one unit.

When I hear the laughter of Obiora Ike, then I hear this - purified in suffering - "laughter of saints and fools". Obiora has experienced hunger, flight and death threats. He is not a theoretical ethicist in an ivory tower, but an impacted by existence, clarified by theory, and shaped by faith ethicist. I experience his laughter as the sum of his existence and his faith. With his laughter, he encourages the weak and defy the strong. All - those who believe the same, those who believe something else, non-believers - he takes them along on the way through contagious joy and dedicated transformation of life and society, locally

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[157] Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology and Joy*, London: SCM, 1973. Deutsche Erstausgabe 1971.

[158] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Living God and the Fullness of Life*, Geneva: WCC, 2016, 87-102: "Life in the Wide Space of God's Joy".

[159] Ebd, 93.

and globally. The Global Ethics of Faith is expressed in laughter. The Easter laughter is the fuel - the energy source - for ethical action!

More courage for anger and tears

However, laughter is not the only important emotion for ethics. There is a time to laugh and a time to cry, a time for anger, and a time for patience, as the preacher in Ecclesiastes wrote in the Old Testament. The tears have many facets. There are tears of joy, and tears of pain and despair, and tears of anger. Here I will share a personal story of weeping, which is equally necessary for the transformation of the world as laughter. At the time, I was director of the Protestant aid organization "Bread for All" in Switzerland, which supports 400 development projects in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

I flew in a small propeller plane with four seats in area of steppe slopes, where pilots normally do not dare to land. It is the Kwango, a province in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 500 kilometers south of Kinshasa to the Angolan border, far from roads and cities. An area as big as Switzerland without electricity. I visited a small country hospital, with the sick outdoors under trees. In the delivery room - here come only the complicated cases, and after a few days' march, the others are born at home anyways - are two empty iron bedsteads, nothing else. They without mattresses, and are covered with only six crooked, brittle, bare wooden stick as a "lying area". The room is covered with a hot tin roof. The gasoline-powered refrigerator for medications that require refrigeration, is empty and out of service, because the gasoline is missing. I remain paralyzed before the bare bedsteads. Then I can do nothing but hastily leave the "delivery room" and cry, cry, cry. Even in front of my associates of the agency, I cannot and do not hide it. Then the anger over this damn injustice. At once, I want to take back the word 'damned', and dampen it with quotation marks. Is rude, ugly, gross, my education and academic education tells me. No. Not the word "damn" is

coarse, the reality is coarse, the wooden sticks damn pointy, unpleasant, birth complications prone, life threatening. The injustice cries to heaven! These feelings need more force than the dusty walk and the savannah heat. At the same time, it creates power to go on, go on fighting, to carry this certainty into the parishes, lecture halls, newspaper columns and Internet media, to shout out that development cooperation is worthwhile. I know for whom I work. No, I am a sober man, a normal man with restraints towards his feelings, an ethics professor with developed rationalization mechanisms. Yet I want to allow, express, and live emotions. They are the lifeblood, an expression of life energy.

Ethics and emotions are twins

Ethics begins not with theories, but with emotions; the scream, when a child dies; the wonder of the poignant, stunning beauty of a fish or a landscape; anger at the unjust distribution of wealth and poverty, the fear of survival in dyspnea in polluted air in big cities; and the sadness at the deathbed of a neighbor. In the history of ethics, emotions were often penalized. Yes, emotions can hurt, anger can be unjust, anger get out of control, and hypersensitivity can block action. Emotions can complicate reasonable, rational action. However, so-called rational action excluding emotions are not usually rational and reasonable.

The new ethic has rediscovered its meaning. Emotions are the foundation of motivation, and the power source for ethical orientation and ethical behavior. Emotion is a key foundation of values education. Intuition is a key element of value orientation. This banal though not trivial knowledge is gaining ground. A dissertation on emotions received an annual prize from the University of Zurich, “emotional competence” has been found in management training in recent years, and “success with emotions” promises economic advancement. At the same time, the functioning of the media world with its shock approach and its constant

spreading of seemingly intimate feelings aims to create skepticism and reasonable argumentative rationalists. So how do find the balance?

Empirical data collection, rational analysis, and ethical, rational reasoning about value orientations are indispensable tools for human action and emotions are an indispensable power source. The relationship between ethics and emotion is also an issue of gender ethics. The historic fatal dichotomy that reason is more masculine and for men, and emotions more feminine and for women, must be overcome. Emotion and reason are not exclusionary contradictions. They are twins, intrapersonal as interpersonal, within oneself as in the relationship.

The commitment to solidarity and justice, for freedom and human dignity, is the ability to empathize, to sympathize, and to be compassionate in advance. From the perspective of the Christian faith, emotions, like rationality, are a gift from God. You are not to suppress or overcome them as in certain philosophies (such as the Stoics) and religions, but should be made use of if possible. Correspondingly, the Judeo-Christian image of God; God's exuberant creative will with billions of galaxies is a rational elusive explosion of emotion for life, the zeal of God's expression of his unconditional commitment to justice, his compassion on the cross which expresses his powerless-powerful love, his spirit with reason coupled intuition, in the right place relative to the right people to do the right moment with the right tools, the right thing. This image of God expresses that the Christian faith is inextricably linked with emotion and reason in order to do the right thing. Therefore, the painful theodicy question of why God allows injustice is allowed, and not argumentatively solved; they can (only) be solved in an existential way as in poems, hymns, the biblical psalms and other holy texts. From action, from crying and anger in the face of the wooden bunks in the inhumane delivery room, the courage to use rational justice arises. From the weeping and the laughter, the boundless energy arises

for transformation. Ethics needs more courage to rage and cry and more laughter of the holy and the fools.

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