



Conference of European Churches • Conférence des Églises Européennes • Konferenz Europäischer Kirchen • Конференция Европейских Церквей

Values – Identity - Religion
Brussels, 12-13 December 2006

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Biblical Text (Ezekiel 37:24-27)

My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. They shall live in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, in which your ancestors lived; they, their children, and their children's children shall live there forever; and my servant David shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Sermon
Conviction and Responsibility

Significant editorial interest currently surrounds the German sociologist Max Weber. Weber, who lived from 1864 to 1920, has his place in modern history as the founding father of social science. For a long time, he has exercised a great influence on some very diverse European minds. It is, however, striking to note the extent to which the numerous concepts of Weberian origin overflow the university research framework. They have come to permeate political and even theological rhetoric.

Let us cite as an example the famous notion of “disillusionment with the world”, which has become more and more popular. Weber introduced it in the second edition of “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism”, dating from 1920. Faced with the process of secularisation, a lot of politicians call, for example, to “re illusion” politics. There are still another couple of concepts whose use is flourishing in public debate. This is the famous Weberian distinction between the “ethic of conviction” (Gesinnungsethik) and the “ethic of responsibility” (Verantwortungsethik). Weber developed this in 1919, at the time that defeated Germany was ravaged by intense revolutionary upheavals. This apparently contrasts the “politician”, who is concerned to adapt the means used to the ends which he has in view, with the “revolutionary”, for whom the principles alone matter.

Thus, we have, on the one hand, an ethic of responsibility and, on the other hand, an ethic of conviction. But Weber himself does not set these two terms in opposition. He rather envisages two

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modes of orientating the action. One could, in spite of the usual practice, substitute for “ethic of conviction”, the expression “ethic of the inner disposition”. Therefore, conviction and responsibility complement each other. It is only together that, according to Weber, they constitute the authentic man.

With today’s biblical texts in mind, I propose to reflect on this intriguing pair that Max Weber has put forward. I propose as the theme of this sermon “Conviction and Responsibility”. Christ is the Light of the World. That is certainly our deep *conviction*. And we are his witnesses. There lies our *responsibility*.

Speaking of the coming of Christ, the light in the world, I cannot do otherwise than think also, of what follows: the image which we find in the Gospel of Matthew and which we read in the week before Easter. I am speaking of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem: the image of his welcome and the reception of his message in this world. Matthew constructs this account of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem like building a cathedral, particularly emphasising the allusions and the contrasts. Jesus reveals that he is the Messiah and appears as king, the long-awaited son of David. We hear resonating in the background the prophetic words of Ezekiel: “My servant David shall be king over them; I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them.”

The messianic character of this entry into Jerusalem is indisputable. Compared with Mark, Matthew strongly emphasises the distinctiveness of the kingship of Jesus. He underlines the role of the donkey, quoting Zechariah 9:9, and its debonair nature, explicitly using the term “gentle”. Thus, Matthew puts the understanding of the kingship of Jesus in keeping with the traditions of the suffering servant in the book of Isaiah.

The portrait is that of a righteous man caught up in torment and indwelt by an unshakeable confidence in his God. His itinerary leads him by stages, inexorably to the depth of distress. But it is neither fatality, nor absurd sacrifice, nor tragic self-destruction. The suffering righteous man advances in God’s strength, on a road where he is certain of God’s help, towards the glory that God prepares for him. Jesus is King, but in his account of the passion, Matthew picks up again the emphasis on a Jesus who is mocked, scourged and condemned to death. He also clearly underlines the double dimension of his kingship, which is not understood by those who acclaim him. Of course, I am making a theological amalgam but, nevertheless, I dare to do it also with reference to the prologue of the Gospel of St. John: “He who is the Word was already in the world, since the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him”. Their messianic hope remains confined to the expectation of a politico-historical event.

It appears that Jesus forsook the political institutions and social structures. He turned towards those who were not interested in great political changes, but who needed someone who shared their suffering. The one, who is the Word, became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth!

The biblical account underlines in these two passages, from Lent and from Advent, precisely the simultaneousness of the messianic, royal dignity and the humiliation in suffering.

It was Augustine who first asked the question as to whether this doctrine of the suffering Christ is compatible with the morals of the city, which I would like to translate by the word “society”. If a society takes the Gospel literally, will it not inevitably go bankrupt? Does not the doctrine of the Christ leave the last word to the violent, abandoning the weak without defence and sending them home with only a word of faith and confidence without any real commitment? For in spite of everything, Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey, but in this account, he does nothing to destroy in

practice the violence and misery! In the account of his entry into Jerusalem, he presents a symbolic act and the symbolic, of course, has its place in society but can society live solely from symbolic acts? That is the question raised by these accounts, which have greatly occupied theologians in the past.

Augustine notes that to follow the Christ does not only mean to follow him in his humility but also in his struggle. This idea emanates from one of his contemporaries, Volusianus. In a letter written in the 4th century, Volusianus sets out a series of objections against the Christ. Augustine responds to him by another letter, which is a veritable treaty on Christology. But Volusianus comes back to the charge, by means of a friend of Augustine, Marcellinus. Marcellinus claims that the doctrine of the Christ is not applicable to the affairs of society (the city):

Because – and I quote – do not repay anyone evil for evil (Romans 12:17); but if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile (Matthew 5:39). All these things commanded by Christian precepts are contrary to the morals of a society. Who would indeed allow an enemy to steal something? Who, in accordance with the right of war, would not repay evil for evil to someone who would devastate a Roman province [.]? A lot of evil has been caused to the Republic by Christian emperors who wanted to observe, to a large extent, the maxims of the Christian religion.

Are we in society constrained to choose between our convictions and our responsibilities in the name of political realism? Augustine asks himself this question with the problem of war in mind. He does not allow himself to be confined by this dilemma. He replies in two phases. Firstly, by emphasising that what is first of all required of the Christ is the change of morals. Then, he shows that the Gospel, far from excluding all violence, in spite of everything, acknowledges its legitimacy. First of all, we have to try to overcome evil by good, put in another way, to change the morals. What is the Gospel aiming at? The “non-violence” – and Jesus displayed it well in this model account of the entry into Jerusalem and John repeats it in his prologue - the “non-violence” is a more effective method than taking up arms. A society has every advantage in practising forgiveness rather than revenge.

According to Augustine, it is however appropriate to listen carefully to the Scripture. “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also”. This suggestion is not, according to him, to be understood in the literal sense. It is rather an invitation to prefer patience to revenge. And Augustine quotes an example: the Christ struck on the face (John 18:23), did not offer the other cheek. It appears that consequently, Jesus Christ did not follow his own precept, because he did not present the other cheek to him who struck him, but rather he prevented him from doing it again. In the same way, Saint Paul, struck on the face, protested, “in violation of the law you order me to be struck”. But neither the Christ nor Paul have, according to Augustine, given in to violence. He emphasises also that John the Baptist did not require the soldiers come to question him to “throw away their arms”. What he asked them was “do violence to no man neither accuse any falsely”. With such soldiers, who do neither violence nor wrong to anyone, instead of being weakened, society has everything to gain.

Let us return to Max Weber. His grounds for complaint are the same as those of Volusianus, with increased virulence. In teaching us not to resist evil, the Christ gives us a good example throughout his words and his actions. But there is still another side to the coin: “resist evil, if not you carry a part of the responsibility if it wins the day”. It is in this context that Weber introduces his famous distinction, which forms the theme of this service: “conviction and responsibility”. The ethic of

conviction, such as Weber encountered it in 1919 among the unconditional pacifists of his time, or, in their Christian version, in the Sermon on the Mount on the one side; and the ethic of responsibility, which guides the man on the other side. The one intends to protect evangelical values, no matter what happens. The other looks at the consequences of his actions and does not hesitate to strike back at evil, resorting to violence if necessary.

It is said: “You should not resist evil with violence”. But according to Weber – we are thinking of Auschwitz! – the opposite is also true: You should resist evil with violence, failing which; you are responsible for its propagation.

Are we, in our societies, obliged to choose between an ethic of conviction, at the risk of being accused of cowardice, and an ethic of responsibility, even if it uses dubious means? I think not. We must not allow ourselves to be confined to this alternative. Without renouncing our convictions, the Christian place in society is also one of responsibility. It should be possible to combine the ethic of conviction with the ethic of responsibility.

The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is told to us in parallel with the prologue of St. John. Will we follow him in his choice for the poor and despised, step-by-step, on his way? And how to take on this commitment without giving free rein to the escalation of violence and contempt, in our heart, in our relationships or in our society? It is a dilemma, which should, each day afresh, receive a response in practical life. I do not think that there is a very clear answer. Life is not confined to abstract precepts. But between conviction and responsibility, the Christian finds himself sometimes in the situation of Martin Luther, who faced with the Diet of Worms, declared in April 1521: “Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise.” And then the Apostle Paul writes:

The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve (Romans 14:22)

Amen