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On the Necessity to Re-define what is Human

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For me personally, mankind's most important problem on its way into the future is *the definition of what is human*. This has to be dealt with in a new way, due to developments on two different levels.

1. Processes of transformation in eroding borderlines

On the one hand – due to the increasing global network – the cultural, religious plurality in the interpretations of what is human can be experienced in a new way, which gives rise to the problem as to whether and how this plurality has to be safeguarded, what form will have to be given to unity and plurality.¹

On the other hand – due to the rapid development of biotechnology – the distinction between man and machine, life and death, animate or inanimate, is called into question, whereby the problem arises, as to whether and how the inviolable dignity of man is to be safeguarded. When embryos and 'the brain dead' are considered as being material, when genetic research claims to decode the mystery of life, to be able and indeed obliged to prevent diseases by means of gene manipulations and to calculate and evaluate the duration of life, when, as regards the body, through gene patents proprietary rights are established, the 'old' borderline has been transgressed for some time past: the human body's inviolability is being undermined from within.

Despite all diachronicness and opposing trends, both developments result in a transformation of every society. For the first time, through the network, a space for global communication has come into being, where information – also about biotechnological 'progress' – is exchanged. However, not everyone by far can make use of it. The injustice of the growing gap between rich and poor becomes more and more obvious.

¹ A topic that was extensively dealt with at the 2nd Vienna Dialogue Conference, published in: A. Bsteh (ed.), *One World for All. Foundations of a Socio-Political and Cultural Pluralism from Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, New Delhi 1999.

These processes affect every society, 'Western' and 'non-Western', '(later)modern' as well as 'not (yet) modern', if such differentiations make sense or if it still makes any sense at all to speak of 'societies'. 'States' certainly still exist, but all societies have long ago been 'thrown open', and every attempt at closing oneself off and excluding oneself from these developments seems doomed to fail. Whereas the outlines of a more and more uniform 'world culture' can already be recognized, at the same time the resistance is growing to these tendencies towards homogeneity.

When the parameters of the social structures as well as of the positions taken up by individuals are called fundamentally into question, there is the danger that the rich achieve the power to define the newly developing parameters and that injustices become entrenched.

2. Setting up safeguards – yet how?

In order to safeguard the dignity of the individual, mutual justice and peace for all², the demand for the establishment of inter- or supranational institutions is justified. However, the norms forming the basis of these institutions should be clarified, because these will always have to contain statements regarding what makes a human being a human being, how what is human is defined – and what norms for humanity shall be valid, how humanity is defined.

For the sake of justice and peace, a consensus in dialogue on this subject is necessary.

Yet, is this at all possible? Postmodern theorists are sceptical about concepts in dialogue. They have doubts about the liberating effects of human reason and the possibility, as acting individuals to reach an understanding and to be able to influence the norms that determine life. They therefore try in various ways to conceive of the subject as being free and at the same time as being subjugated, i. e. not based on the possibilities (to be capable of reasoning and of acting), but on the limitations.

Their criticism carries much weight and should be taken into account in efforts made to master the problems of humanity:

² Cf. Vienna Declaration 1993, Point I.2 – published in: A. Bsteh (ed.), *Peace for Humanity. Principles, Problems and Perspectives of the Future as Seen by Muslims and Christians*, New Delhi 1998, p. 278.

2.1 Opening up the horizon of mutual understanding by dialogue

Firstly: It is important to take the power of discourse into account and to ensure that in mutual understanding by dialogue the horizon of what is regarded as negotiable is not too narrow.³ Thus it can be observed in the international Human Rights discourse that priority is constantly given to a specific interpretation of being human. It is hard to formulate human rights in such a way that the opposing drafts (presented later)⁴ whose common denominator is the criticism of the individualistic orientation of human rights⁵ have the same weight as the *Universal Declaration* of 1948. The efforts (also) to take into account the 'social nature' of man by complementing the 'Declaration of Human Rights' by a 'Declaration of Human Duties' is bound to fail, because after protecting the individual against interference by others – in the first place by the state – this unconditional protection cannot be made dependent on conditions (e. g. on fulfilling one's duties towards others). Hence, another definition of being human has to be sought, in which individuality and collectivity are equally taken into account.

Secondly: The issue is to define a human being not only by capacities and possibilities (as regards autonomy), but much more clearly by the necessities and limitations of the individual (as regards heteronomy).

2.2 Normative orientations to be developed on the basis of the religions

During the last conference, some participants required that anthropocentric humanism would have to be superceded: in reality, human beings could not find any norm, except in the religions.

There are some philosophers who also require the same, however in the opposite direction: neither the religions nor humanism have succeeded in taming 'what is wild' in man, this would now have to be achieved by means of a programme of genetic breeding. Resistance is still mounting against such proposals, in practice however, it has for a long time been obvious that efforts towards selection have been made, sperm and ova markets have for a long time proved the will to breed of those who can afford the attempt to determine their own offspring's gender, skin colour, and

³ Cf. *Nasira Iqbal's* demanding an effective methodology, in: *N. Iqbal*, Juridical Structures and Political Guarantees of a Pluralism on the National and International Level. A Discussion Paper, in: *A. Bsteh* (ed.), op. cit. (fn. 1) p. 166.

⁴ Meant are: African Charter (1981), Cairo Declaration (1990), Bangkok Declaration (1993).

⁵ Cf. *Seyed M. Khamene'i's* criticism of individualism: *id.*, The Claims of Religious Truth and Socio-Political Pluralism, in: *A. Bsteh* (ed.), op. cit. (fn. 1) p. 120.

'intelligence'. For consideration is the limitation of these efforts to optimize and to perfect, not only because – if they 'succeeded' – it would result in an increased exclusion of the 'non-optimized', above all because at this point selfdefinition translates into the presumption to control others, namely future human beings. Today therefore the norms of humanness have to be linked more clearly than ever before to the temporal dimension and in formulating them it is not only one generation that has to be taken into account.

And what is to be the basis for developing these norms? As scarcely as they are to be found in reality, just as scarcely are they to be found in cultures. For cultures are freely moving systems where meanings are continuously changing. Religions also change, they however have a hard core of inviolable positions, which come into effect independently of the (non-)belief of the individual subject. Perhaps this is why the religions are to be considered the scaffolding or the 'soul' of the cultures.⁶ In any case, it is necessary (though difficult), to form a 'set' where all religions merge and on this basis to design norms of humaneness that surmount all religions.

2.3 Proceeding from the fact that man is bound

In relation to our efforts this means searching for ways of defining the meaning of being human, which are rooted in Christianity and in Islam, and thereby to consider religion not only as a possibility for the subject to give an explanation for its selfinterpretation, but as a regulating system, which defines the relation of the subject to others: religion is binding, it binds the subject to a higher power and to others. Above all it reminds us that we are all creatures of our creator.

However, being reminded of this fact is no longer binding for 'non-believers' and for those who have declared that their faith/their religion is a private matter.

How then can the subject's state of being bound be formulated?

In the perspective of the two religions (in the Christian formulation: on the basis of what is excluded, in the Islamic formulation: on the basis of the limitations), a claim must be made to extend the modern concept of the subject. Alongside the capacity for selfdefinition, the relationship with others must be accentuated, and this horizontally as well as vertically.

⁶ Cf. *H. Schneider*, Legal Structures and Political Guarantees of a Pluralism on National and International Levels, in: *A. Bştéh* (ed.), op. cit. (fn. 1) pp. 191–258, here: p. 192.

If "I think, therefore I exist" is the fundament from which the modern subject draws its capacity to act and its self-awareness, because it is its capacity to reason that enables it to think and to make decisions, then one has to criticize the self-relatedness of the subject contained in this definition, the disregard of the enabling ground for the subject to become a subject. In need of being corrected is not only the disregard of the transcendental dimension, but also the disregard of history, of the dimension of the human life-span, of the fact that the subject was born and will die.

There is no I without a You⁷, nor would it exist without those from whom the I (as well as the You) has come.

Therefore one has to proceed from the fact that man was born. First and foremost, everything else, being human means being born.

In my opinion it is not sufficient to make the acknowledgment of the You a moral obligation, because this is either fulfilled by the I or not. Founding an education towards peace on the respect of others is too short-sighted as well, because a moral obligation is too weak to express the way in which the I is in need of the others.

2.4 The emphasis on being born in freedom *and* in bonds

Proceeding from the fact that man was born, brings up the question as to whether a definition of what is human is possible without referring to the gender of the human beings, without raising the problem of the equality or difference as between man and woman: so far all human beings were born of a woman. From this to derive specific gender rights ('mother rights') – or even to define women's rights via the capacity to give birth – would exclude some women from such rights and result in a differentiation of rights, which is precisely what is to be avoided in a universal declaration. In addition the claim for women's rights is based on the assumption of 'natural' capacities and duties, specific to women, which are different from those of the standard male human being (*l'homme*).

If the two-gender-system automatically results in discriminating against women, because in every binary coding one term has priority, if this system is rooted in both religions, even though it is given different emphasis, then this discrimination can neither be compensated by claiming equal ranking nor by asserting differences. It is all the more important to take

⁷ M. Talbi, Cultural Identity and the Problem of a Global Culture, in: A. Bsteh (ed.), op. cit. (fn.1) p. 283.

care that the definitions of what is human and what is humane are not systematically formulated in a way that discriminates against women.

Here too, considerations have to be based on the limits: being born not only constitutes conditions of freedom, but also of relationships. Bonds are negatively connoted, as long as the subject's relations and bonds are assessed as opposing freedom, as long as the subject's development is defined above all as detaching and severing itself, as freeing itself from dependencies. Just as from caring for someone no claim of possession can be deduced, no dependencies should be constructed on the basis of needs. Freedom and bonds are not contradictions, which the subject would have to balance against each other, they condition each other. It is necessary to think – and to live – in terms of bonded freedom as well as freed bondage. Both are rooted in both religions. And at this point the religions should be given the chance to unfold their ethical power.

Questions and Interventions

can being human be defined as being born?

OTT When the American computer "Deep Blue" defeated world chess champion *Garri Kasparov*, which at that time was a great sensation, the computer was obviously in a certain respect more intelligent than its human counterpart or at least his equal. I am convinced that to *Kasparov* his defeat was a painful experience, and I am equally sure that the computer "Deep Blue" did not enjoy its victory. This shows the difference between being human and being a robot: it is the capacity of man, not only to combine and to operate in a quasi-rational way, but beyond this to feel pain or joy, and also hope or fear, delight, disappointment, and many other states of mind that are truly *human*. So far this has been sufficient for me as a *criterion* for the *proprium* of what is human, which was indeed above all the issue in the very concentrated lecture of Dr. Mihçiyazgan. What does the fact that man is *born* now add to being human?

intercultural and bioethical levels should be linked

MIHÇIYAZGAN First a preliminary remark: in my lecture I was concerned with linking two discourses – with the interreligious, intercultural discourse in the globalized world with the many dialogistic concepts and attempts at communication on the one hand, and with the so-called bioethical discourse that is utterly distant from the former on the other. Both discourses should not take place independently of each other, but linked with each other, as for instance in the question of cerebral death or of pre-natal diagnosis, which is for instance in India very topical, because (disfavouring girls) it entails a selection among unborn children. These and similar questions are of fundamental importance for all societies and should therefore not be taken up and discussed by the specialists immediately concerned, but also in the context of their cultural and religious implications. This linking of the two levels of the discourse was in fact my main concern.

'being born' in the sense of the UN Human Rights Declaration

Another question, which Professor Ott raised, is the question concerning the conscious, the materiality or immateriality of the conscious. The question whether the computer too can feel joy or not is after all no longer so easy to answer, since neurobiologists and related specialists simultaneously explain to us that our brain also works like a computer, that we for instance feel joy only because the brain receives the corresponding signals from the body.

The fact that in my deliberations on the question of what is human and its being threatened in the present development of humanity my focus on man's being born has something to do with the fundamental definition of human nature as expressed in the United Nations Human Rights Declaration. Here, in view of gene-technology, embryo-research, or the possibility of cloning, the fact that humans are born is alone important. However this soon raises the question of women's rights and the self-definition of women.

making definite limits understandable also to non-religious people? KHOURY In Dr. Mihçiyazgan's exposition the issue was, amongst others, to take up the fact that certain limits, the overstepping of which would not be allowed in the perspective of our religions and which would have to be presented in an understandable language also to people who think differently. In this context above all secular people and even non-believers were mentioned, who would agree to accept these limits as well. My question would now be what kind of limits are these. If it is to be possible to make them understandable to people as well who have no religious faith, are there then in fact limits that are acceptable to all?

is not here the issue above all arguments? Following from this: would the issue here really be no more than the proper language, the search for adequate formulations, or is it not much more the logical basis, and thus arguments, as to why these limitations are apt to legitimize the inviolable dignity of man and to guarantee it in the midst of all those threats, which today strongly cast doubt on such arguments?

'vertical' as connecting the preceding and the oncoming world? Finally, in Dr. Mihçiyazgan's lecture a vertical and a horizontal dimension was mentioned. If a secular vertical dimension is to be understood as a linking with the preceding and the oncoming world, for me the question arises as to whether this could not be misleading linguistically if one says that the religious element could be included in these categories. In the sense of our understanding of religion, the vertical dimension after all means a linking with the transcendent world, more closely with God, but not with the preceding and the oncoming world.

definition of man sought that is acceptable also for non-religious people MIHÇIYAZGAN One can in fact call this a 'confidence trick', for in fact the dimension of transcendence is something very different from the historical, temporal dimension. Yet, the difficulty remains, if one maintains the target of searching for a definition of what is human, where we, seeing it in our religious perspective, have

to give up nothing, but which for others is nevertheless acceptable. In this search I am now getting to the point of insisting on man's being born. For: faith in God the Creator entails for man the fundamental definition of being created by God and for me this implies the question as to how this can be translated into a world of secular thinking.

do religions not have for the world a message of their very own?

KHOURY Do religions always have to find adequate answers to the questions of the secular world? In decisive questions, do they not have a message that is indeed not in keeping with what fits in with the secular world's categories of thinking? Does the message of religions not open up to man a radically different, new dimension, which is more appropriate for protecting him? Is the issue really that we have constantly to take cognizance of the questions with which the world that understands itself as secular is preoccupied at a particular time and then try to give an answer taken from the treasures of our religions? Sometimes the offensiveness of the message is in fact the message itself, in order to motivate the world to consider whether its problems give rise to the right questions.

a bridge of understanding to other religions and to the secular world?

MIHÇIYAZGAN Nevertheless, for me the central challenge remains, how we confront the secular world, where legal regulations, which concern the forms given in society to the fact of our being human, are formulated in secular terms. Thus, in the Charter of Human Rights, we have a document that is formulated entirely in secular terms, despite the aspects of its Christian origin, and which, disregarding all interpretations, different as they may be, claims universal validity. If now this universal validity of human rights is called into question, if not in theoretical discourse, then ultimately in practice, by acts that are not in keeping with its terms, we have to face up to this. How can we, outside our own two religions, do justice to other religions also, and: how can we on the other hand formulate definitions of man in such a way that they are not from the outset rejected by people who think in a secular way, because these definitions are grounded on transcendence and in no way acceptable to the state, because they are conceived by religion and therefore independently of the state?

The issue is of course that we as believers stand by our conviction that our religion in addition to any secular content gives us something very different, and that this is important for all peoples. My problem starts where one

tries to transfer this religious content to the level where legal norms are established. Historically we have already overcome such transfers or after all criticized them in many respects. It is therefore so important for me to lay down the religiously relevant content in binding documents, without others feeling themselves pinned down to a transcendent dimension.

Christian origin of human rights – for others problematic

S. MAHMOOD The fact that every covenant concerning human rights basically originates in Christian traditions has of course made them questionable in the eyes of different cultures, including the Islamic world. This applies to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as to the Human Rights Covenants of the United Nations.

there are always human duties that correspond to human rights

If I understood Dr. Mihçiyazgan correctly, she proceeds from the fact that on the one hand it is necessary to formulate human rights and to agree on their binding nature, that obligations cannot be established in the same way however, because the rights of man must not be made dependent on the fulfillment of obligations. Certain standards, which one finds generally accepted worldwide, are seen as a possible way to promulgate certain human rights, however the possibility to pass a generally binding declaration of human duties is considered doubtful. Yet, in my view it is not possible to claim rights without obligations. A declaration of human duties would indeed be a necessary complement to the Declaration of Human Rights, since the rights of a person always imply obligations for others. In a vacuum there can be no accumulation of rights. I see both, rights and duties, as being inseparably tied to one another. This should also be taken into consideration by the United Nations agencies and its various charters, which at present concentrate entirely on human rights and overlook the concept of human duties. How should one for instance be able to speak of the rights of children, without at the same time speaking also of their obligations towards themselves, towards society, towards their own family? Thus it is high time to take these facts into account and to begin developing a declaration of human obligations comparable to the Declaration of Human Rights.

being human even without being born of a woman?

Finally: when it is said that every human being was born of a woman, we should not forget that in our world there are men and women who, as regards the question of children, completely free themselves from dependence on the opposite sex, although they know

that in this respect they will become dependent on very new technology. How do we confront such a prospect for the future?

being human
implies rights and
duties all in one

MIHÇIYAZGAN The fact that rights can never be thought of without duties made me start with a definition of human nature and not with human rights. Claims and obligations towards others and towards our Creator are indeed likewise linked with being human. In this close linking between being created and having-relations-with-others I tried to resolve this before-afterwards of 'first' rights 'and then' duties. Perhaps one should even conceive of this relation in a reverse order, because otherwise we no longer succeed in assessing rights and duties simultaneously; otherwise duties always lag behind rights, whereas, from the very beginning, rights demand thinking in terms of claims. However this may be, I was concerned with these close links between rights and duties on the one hand and with linking them to the relation between freedom and binding on the other. If, as it were, I rank binding higher and not only credit freedom highly, I can conceive of duties differently and not as limits to my freedom.

extra-uterine
pregnancy –
at the price of
humanity

The question raised before by Dr. Saleha Mahmood is for me precisely one of the reasons why I am so intensively concerned with these topics: extra-uterine pregnancy as an option for men, as liberation for women – at the price of humanity. In terms of religion, a contradiction in the sight of the One who created us. As a Christian woman, I want to protest against it from a religious perspective, I would however like to include everyone in this determinant claim, those who do not think religiously as well.

S. MAHMOOD On this question we Muslims completely agree with you.

preserving what
is human –
what is our over-
all concern?

BSTEH Now, at the end of the discussion, I would like to underline how much the topic, which Dr. Mihçiyazgan chose for her lecture, impressed me. These problems exist already today and they are going to affect us even more. When the struggle to safeguard what is human comes up for discussion, does this not address the problem that is basic to all the problems with which humanity sees itself confronted on its way into the future?