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In the last year of the 2010s, due to the retirement of Professor Ingeborg G. Gabriel, Director of the Institute of Social Ethics at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Vienna, with whom I had the honour of collaborating on several CEEPUS projects, as well as in the Association for Social Ethics in Central and Eastern Europe (*Vereinigung für Sozialethik in Mitteleuropa*) two publications appeared: a *Festschrift*¹ and another book of almost 300 pages by Professor Gabriel herself, entitled *Ethik des Politischen. Grundlagen-Prinzipien-Konkretionen*².

In the introduction, Gabriel asks Hannah Arendt's questions about whether there are goals in the political field by which we can reliably orient ourselves, and, even if they do exist, are they at all universal and communicable. That is, to put it bluntly, are there universal moral principles in politics? The author answers in the affirmative and believes in social reconciliation, peace in general, social cohesion, a good standard of living, and a possible high degree of justice as timeless and geographically independent goods (p. 13).

In the first chapter, Gabriel gradually explains the idea of human rights, first interdisciplinarily, then from the perspective of the Catholic Church and then from

¹ Irene Klissenbauer, Franz Gassner, Petra Steinmair-Pösel, Peter G. Kirchschräger. 2020. *Menschenrechte und Gerechtigkeit als bleibende Aufgaben. Beiträge aus Religion, Theologie, Ethik, Recht und Wirtschaft. Festschrift für Ingeborg G. Gabriel*. Göttingen – Wien: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Unipress – Vienna University Press.

² Ingeborg G. Gabriel. 2021. *Ethik des Politischen. Grundlagen – Prinzipien – Konkretionen*. Würzburg: Echter Verlag.

the relationship to other religions. Next, she focuses on democracy today, as well as on the importance of the nation and the dangers of nationalism. She then deals with the approach to the “Hypothecation” of communism in the European context and then with the relationship between religion and politics, especially in the new geopolitical conditions. In the last part of this chapter, Gabriel discusses the return of religion to politics and tries to redefine the relationship between these two areas. The theory of human rights, its development and the problem of its acceptance (p. 38) helps her to emphasise the importance of this topic today, especially in terms of its acceptance by other religions and cultural traditions (p. 42). In this section, there is a very important comment about morality and law, namely the view that law has its foundation in the morality of the citizens of a political community and that justice is understood as a continuous and individual *praxis*, i.e. virtue (p. 45). With regard to social rights, her position is extremely critical, and she emphasises their abandonment by the responsible institutions with the fall of the communist regime in favour of participatory rights and the free rights of the individual (p. 48). According to her, in order to respect fundamental human rights, it will be necessary to change this policy to make it more convincing (p. 50).

Surprisingly, in the sub-chapter on human rights and the Catholic Church, the author only traces the modern history of the Church’s relationship and, in particular, the French Revolution and the rejection of the 19th century popes towards such an interpretation of human rights (without any mention of Bartolomé Las Casas and the famous Valladolid dispute). It seems to us, at this point, that Gabriel is inclined to very subjective interpretations of this part of history (e.g. after Langner). We miss the more objective view of Pope Leo XIII, especially an emphasis on his ground-breaking encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. From an ecumenical point of view, the book also lacks a discussion of the same processes in the Protestant churches³. However, there is a very solid interpretation of the theological anchoring of human rights (p. 59). The last part of this sub-chapter also offers very inspiring suggestions for the potential of the Church in the struggle for human rights (pp. 63–65).

The following sub-chapter, which deals in particular with the process of acceptance of the doctrine of human rights by churches and religions, also offers a clear explanation of the possibilities of theological and ethical justification for appropriate interreligious dialogue and religious ethics as such (pp. 70–79). In describing this *ethos*, Gabriel emphasizes that moral goods and rights are deeply intertwined

³ For example, see Peter Gbiorczyk. 2011. Christentum und Menschenrechte in Geschichte und Gegenwart. In *Die nahe Not, die fremde Nähe. Diakonische Flüchtlingshilfe im Main-Kinzig-Kreis 1990–2010*, 118–127. Erlensee.

with a particular place, and through internalization become practiced virtues, norms, and values. But today's clash of civilizations is also a struggle over the universality and validity of human rights (pp. 68–69). For the ethics of religions is also an ethics of action that looks not only to this world but also to the final judgment of man (p. 72). Gabriel adds that social human rights in particular can create a “common ground” between the secular culture of human rights and all monotheistic religions in the form of an important ethos of justice (p. 75). The opportunity for intercultural and interreligious contact today lies in rethinking our own religion-based rules. In this sense, human rights as a powerful legal idea of modernity represent a benchmark for religious legal cultures. Understanding them as a critical issue of one's own ethical and legal ideas is a challenge for all religions (p. 77). At the same time, Gabriel proposes a secular (religiously neutral) state as the best way of conducting public affairs and the right to freedom of religion (p. 79).

Another important theme in Gabriel's political ethics is democracy. In light of many recent revolutions, she notes that undemocratic regimes are considered not only repressive, but also violate human dignity (p. 80). Nevertheless, the number of democratic states in the world is declining because they are unable to realise the often utopian desires of their citizens. However, it is precisely the weakness of democracy as a tyranny of the majority (Alexis de Tocqueville) that can be overcome by constitutionally enshrined human rights as fundamental rights that bind both the rulers and the governed (p. 82). However, in order to strengthen democracy, it will be necessary to be convinced that this system actually helps to develop its citizens. Gabriel is also looking for an economically suitable system for democracy that would help social rights, and she also looks at world government democracy for the possibility of avoiding only nationally oriented programs (p. 94). Finally, the author draws attention to the development of the relationship between Christianity and democracy. Gabriel sees the positive relationship between democracy and the protection of human rights and the possibility of continually re-presenting laws more suitable to Christianity (p. 96).

In the next sub-chapter, our author discusses the notion of nation and nationalism. She is concerned with the rise of nationalism in the cradles of democracy. For Gabriel, the nation as an institution is defined in a rather particular way, but ethically it should be oriented towards universality (p. 99). Gabriel focuses on negative nationalism rather than patriotism (p. 106), but it is here that we see a narrowing of possibilities: either we are dealing with chimeras to strengthen national consciousness, or we end up with a multinational society that is also alien to many. Nevertheless, Gabriel argues for the future of the nation, but is zealous for a supranational state that better protects the citizens of so-called dis-

advantaged states (p. 110). This ethical reasoning is impressive, despite its utopian premises.

The sixth sub-chapter is very interesting, especially for those coming from the former Soviet bloc. Finding answers to the harms of communism and at the same time the place of this system in European modernity is very important for mutual understanding and also for teaching new generations about social ethics. However, the idea that communism also had its advantages in the development of Eastern European society (p. 120) is not easily digestible for all those who not only lived under this system but also suffered and today have to deal with its consequences in the nature and character of a post-communist society that has little interest in deeper reflection or thought, but rather in trying to get rich quick at any cost, and is also characterised by hatred for Christianity and its place in European civilisation.

In the last sub-chapter of the first part, Gabriel tries to take a position on the return of religions to the political sphere. She strongly opposes the idea that religions alone have led to wars and points to the many more victims of the secular wars of the French Revolution than the wars of the 20th century (p. 132). However, in looking for the right amount of secular society, she also mentions the importance of looking for common characteristics of religions for peace building (p. 134). On the other hand, her view of the coexistence of religions and politics in a secular society seems very one-sided. At the same time, however, we agree that the right to religious freedom is a touchstone of the relationship between religion and politics (p. 139).

In the second part of her book, Gabriel discusses socio-ethical principles as a political measure. First of all, she outlines the principle of the person above all from the point of view of freedom. The acting person must be the centre of all ethics and especially of political ethics (p. 147). Gradually, Gabriel moves towards free will and freedom of action and sees mainly the problems of Marxist ideology, which denies freedom as such. The negative side of freedom, in turn, points to the term of Catholic social teaching, which is called “Structures of Sin” (p. 151). According to Gabriel, the rights of freedom as well as the political freedom of the community are, last but not least, of a character that allows personal freedom, even as a counter-position to slavery (p. 153).

In the second sub-chapter our author deals with solidarity, which she sees as the basis for social and political cohesion in society. All modern systems must strike a balance between freedom and solidarity (p. 155). She herself changes one of the important slogans of the French Revolution with “fraternity” for “solidarity” and shows its fundamental importance for socialist and social democratic movements.

These shifts semantically from the anchoring of the individual to the social order to the ordered non-scholastic social ethic where solidarity achieves the metaphysical meaning of the ontological alliance of all persons (p. 157). Gabriel stresses the importance of the Polish Solidarity movement, where the communist regime clearly failed in not combining solidarity with freedom. However, solidarity also has a strong religious overtone and Gabriel defends the term “mercy” in ethical discourse (p. 160). In the political space, Gabriel advocates a culture of solidarity and the rapid implementation of the European Social Charter. For this endeavour, she calls for the strengthening of national and international civil society institutions, as well as churches and religious societies, which should create sources of solidarity, a global awareness of solidarity and justice, and take up the defence of the socially weak (p. 163).

In the following subchapter, Gabriel deals with the common good by citing Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato si’* (p. 164). Historically, she goes through the discrediting of this term by totalitarian systems, until its revival by the “old European” ethic of Catholic social ethics. According to Gabriel, without the notion of the common good, one cannot speak of a political place and function of the place and function of the political (p. 168). The realisation of the common good therefore presupposes common ideas, as always indeterminate, of what is right (p. 171). The common good is also an important prerequisite for peace (p. 174). Gabriel also emphasises the sustainability of societal development with the term ecological justice (p. 178). With regard to natural resources, she also talks about the finiteness of the world, which, as a philosophical and theological term as a question of the environment, takes on new importance (p. 180). She then speaks of the “ecological sin” (LS 51) of the countries of the northern hemisphere in relation to the southern hemisphere. The new way of reconstructing industrial production requires a new adaptation to the eco-social system through a new valorisation of the common good, which also includes the environment (p. 183). Moreover, the privatisation of basic natural resources is for her absolutely unacceptable (p. 186).

The last sub-chapter of the second part of the book deals with reconciliation, especially in the context of the fall of the Berlin Wall. She notes that the modern era rejects remembrance and reconciliation because of its view of history as progress. However, thanks to J. B. Metz, opinions began to change (p. 191). Nationalism, in turn, worked with a theory of retribution and thus the continuation of conflicts, so selective memory was not foreign to it. Even religious societies, according to Gabriel, were unwilling to work on memory and reconciliation (p. 192). Thus, until today, there is a gap in the political understanding of reconciliation and remembrance from a theological point of view (p. 193). Gabriel immediately addresses the con-

cept of forgiveness. In the political space, this refers to “crimes against humanity”. However, the question remains between law and forgiveness (p. 194). Churches and civil society organisations are assigned an important ethical role in supporting reconciliation between nations (p. 196).

In the third and last chapter, entitled *Konkretionen*, Gabriel tries to present the practical possibilities of social ethics. She starts with the phenomenon of migration as a political challenge between human rights, democracy and nation-states as among the central political institutions of modernity, but without clear ethical answers (p. 203). Gabriel points out a certain asymmetry, as there is no right to accept migrants in a given country (p. 204). She follows the theory of *Laudato si'* as a common home (LS 93–95; p. 207). She also cites theories in which, in addition to social and property rights, she emphasises the nation’s right to autonomy, which allows for the non-admission of migrants who are not in an emergency situation (p. 209). However, her assumption that migrants mainly go to countries that respect law and order is very idealistic. Interestingly, Gabriel notes that migration has not proven to be an effective form of poverty reduction (p. 214). On the other hand, her view of the so-called historical guilt of developed nations is, in my opinion, very problematic (p. 215). At the end of the subchapter, Gabriel returns to the term transnational politics, which, although it seems very utopian, is necessary from a socio-ethical point of view (p. 219).

In the second subchapter of this last part, Gabriel addresses the issue of the war on terror. However, the question of a just war is now increasingly being replaced by another one about the transformation of the war of nations into a war of individuals or groups. We still have no concept of protection against such a war. Gabriel points to the modern theological understanding of conflict as a radical rejection of violence (p. 227). Many actions against terrorism on the territory of foreign states were illegal and unethical and little comment was made about these actions (p. 228). On the other hand, different visions, such as the jihadists’ “justifications” or interpretations, are, in my opinion, as utopian as their convictions. In any case, these considerations are important for further discussion.

In the last article, Gabriel deals with the world food programme and its ethical significance, especially in areas where basic foods are very unavailable (p. 237). Especially in agricultural areas, our author sees a problem, because most of the aid is channelled to large centres (p. 239). At the same time, it is impossible for a local farmer to compete with global food companies, which still pollute the air, because they have to transport food over long distances (p. 242). However, according to Gabriel, these goals can only be achieved through a national and international policy oriented towards the common good (p. 244). Church organisations and charities can

do much against unethical practice. World nutrition as an issue of justice (bread for all) must also look at individual over-consumption in developed countries, which contributes to a society that simply wastes a lot of products and thus damages the human dignity of those who have less and those who have more (p. 247). In practice, however, there is a virtue that depends on fair trade to answer the question of how to feed the hungry (p. 248). The answer could be the rediscovery of fasting, including fasting from meat products (p. 249).

It is admirable how many authors and opinions the publication offers. On the whole, however, we see an important anti-communist (anti-totalitarian) rhetoric, supported by a just effort to redistribute the commons, but which has difficulty in finding the necessary resources. In my opinion, reading this publication, which has been both profound and challenging, is an important contribution to understanding the development of post-conciliar social ethics and will certainly help many experts in their further research⁴.

⁴ This effort was brought by Professor Gabriel in the post-Christmas 2020 period to a vehement controversy with the Swiss professor also emeritus Martin Rhonheimer. See: *Was ist christlich-sozial? Debatte um Rhonheimer-Position geht weiter* (What is a Christian social? Debatte um Rhonheimer-Position geht weiter), <https://kath.net/news/74063> and reaction: M. Rhonheimer, *Offener Brief von Martin Rhonheimer an Ingeborg Gabriel: ‚Unkenntnis und Fehlinterpretationen‘* (Letter offered by Martin Rhonheimer to Ingeborg Gabriel: ‚Unkenntnis und Fehlinterpretationen‘), <https://austrian-institute.org/de/blog/offener-brief-von-martin-rhonheimer-an-ingeborg-gabriel-unkenntnis-und-fehlinterpretationen>.

