



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
holds 14th Global Ethics Lecture
Tübingen
15 October 2019**

Within these sacred portals,
revenge is unknown,
and if a man has fallen,
love guides him to his duty ...

Within these sacred walls,
where man loves fellow man,
no traitor can lurk,
because enemies are forgiven.
He who is not gladdened by such teachings
does not deserve to be a man.

“Sacred portals” obviously does not refer to the Festsaal of the University of Tübingen, and also not to its lecture halls or seminar rooms. Yet it is not that far off the mark. It would not be entirely amiss to establish a link between the humane utopia that moves listeners time and again in this aria sung by Sarastro from “The Magic Flute”, a link between the singer and what was first conceived and thought about here in Tübingen, namely the concept of the global ethic.

The global ethic – is it still worth talking about this? Is this, when it comes down to it, nothing but a dream from the realm of poetic and musical art? In this world that is so divided, or even only in our own German society, is it still possible, or is it promising, to agree on a common ethic, a common basis of values for our coexistence? Is resignation not already now the order of the day in many quarters?

Jürgen Habermas, the doyen of German philosophy now in his 91st year, is set to publish a new book next month comprising a staggering 1800 pages, which is entitled “This Too a History of Philosophy”. This formidable work deals, to put it briefly, with the history, stretching back well over a thousand years, of the relationship

between faith and knowledge, between religion and enlightened thought; and not only that, but also how they influence one another as well as the confrontation between them. It is also – and I was able to look at an advance copy of the book – driven by the question as to which “motivational resources” we still have for mustering the strength for autonomous action, so that in “the face of inescapable problems we both trust and expect ourselves and each other to exercise the spontaneity of reasonable freedom”.

Habermas states in this regard that a principal problem is a severe, indeed destructive, lack of public discourse on the foundations of coexistence. Or, if you would like to hear this in his words: “The dried-out national public spheres that are no longer reached by many relevant issues are transformed into arenas of distraction and disenchantment and, to an increasing extent, also nationalist resentment.”

It is striking that Jürgen Habermas, in raising this concern and flagging up this problem, also addresses questions raised by the concept of a global ethic initiated by Hans Küng. So there is unanimity, at least in identifying the problem at hand, among arguably the two best-known German-speaking scholars alive today who did not go on to become the Pope.

The following modest thoughts about political ethics and living together in the world of today are inspired by this place here, Tübingen, and I would therefore like to take Tübingen’s history, events and, of course, people as my point of departure.

Permit me therefore to start by extending my best regards to Hans Küng, without whom neither the concept of the global ethic, nor the foundation of the same name nor this annual global ethic speech would exist.

I gladly accepted the invitation to give this speech this year, especially out of respect for and to honour Hans Küng, the great scholar who – while a Swiss citizen to this day – has strengthened Germany’s reputation around the world as a hub of theology and university scholarship over the course of many decades.

The University of Tübingen and the German humanities as a whole have every reason to be grateful to Hans Küng. He has not only championed his subject, Catholic and ecumenical theology, in a way that is comprehensible to a wide audience, as evidenced by the large print runs and translations of his works into so many world languages, but he has also consistently observed political and spiritual life through a critical and constructive lens as a committed citizen.

With his Swiss straightforwardness – and also with his Swiss stubbornness – he has not shied away from any dispute or confrontation and is an enduring example of a university teacher who

is also an attuned political observer and a committed citizen. Such people are role models; such attitudes to life, by themselves, embody an ethos that is an example to follow. Allow me therefore to take this opportunity to thank you sincerely for all that you have done, Hans Küng. Although physical frailty prevents you being here today, you are with us all the more with your idea and your acuity of mind.

To my mind, the World Assembly of Religions for Peace which I had the honour of opening in Lindau in August was another reflection of Hans Küng's commitment to peace and to understanding among religions. A piece of Tübingen in Lindau. It was the same spirit from the concept of the global ethic that inspired the participants at that assembly. "No world peace without peace among the religions" – Küng and the Global Ethic Foundation have time and again emphasised this maxim and reaffirmed it as an important part of their core beliefs, making it the subject of many events there.

This formula has been made tangible and plausible in an effective manner for an international audience through scientific and journalistic activities. Let us all hope that this seed continues to grow. The extent to which this necessary became unmistakably clear in Lindau. I was also able to feel how well this can succeed and how this can be sustained by the will of so many. Cooperation between religions with a view to promoting the global ethic – this is something the necessity of which has also been acknowledged by diplomacy and foreign policy and to which I myself am committed out of great conviction.

Religion is certainly a powerful factor in the daily lives of many societies. And in terms of tangible international politics, it is becoming ever clearer that religions play a role that cannot be overestimated. This is why anyone who endeavours to reach a consensus on common ethical principles and the ethos of coexistence must study the actual form of religions today with respect to their cultural impact. This cannot, as Hans Küng was quicker to establish than others, be emphasised enough.

How did Hans Küng arrive at this question, and how did he formulate it? Just as there are places that have a paradigmatic meaning for the idea of our democracy, places that stand for the revolution for freedom and a parliamentary new beginning, there are also special places that stand for a way of thinking which embraces the world. Hans Küng's academic life would be inconceivable without Tübingen, that small, big city of which Walter Jens reportedly once said "Cologne *has* a university, Hamburg *treats itself to* a university – Tübingen *is* a university."

It is probably no coincidence that such a concept as that of the global ethic was born here of all places. Goethe once made the following pronouncement about Weimar: "From thence proceed avenues to all quarters of the globe." He wanted to show his assistant

Eckermann that there is nothing of relevance in the wide world that did not wind up in little Weimar, where it could be pondered critically and assessed intellectually and politically. I believe that what was true of Weimar is especially true of Tübingen.

Indeed, this forms the basis of the idea of the universal applicability of values, the awareness of the global ethic, of world responsibility: that everything reaches us, that everything that reaches us through our analogue or digital avenues from all corners of the globe matters to us.

Those who today and with faces distorted with rage promise the new nationalism or fundamentalism, also conjecture that gates and paths can be closed, that global connections can be severed. The opposite is the case, however. Global connections, dependencies, problems and proximities are continuing to grow. They are technical and economic, environmental and, above all, ideological and cultural in nature. Things that were once far removed are coming closer to us. I am thinking here not only of displacement and migration, but also of the sphere of digital communication, which plays out every emotionally stirring event, every idea, every appeal, every ideology before our eyes and in our senses. As a result, closeness means irritation, imposition, expectation. To the extent that this has become and is continuing to become the modern *conditio humana*, we need a normative understanding all the more.

We are in contact with each other. We are in the world – and the world is with us.

Normative understanding therefore means both constantly working on the capacity for peace of our mutual international relations *and* at the same time on the inner peace of our own societies.

This is what we are reflecting on in Tübingen today. The *genius loci* of Tübingen was often and repeatedly shaped by the spirit of conversation, scholarly disputation, and peaceful debates between great minds. The famous triad of students from the Tübinger Stift, Hölderlin, Schelling and Hegel, are exemplary of this.

One of them, Friedrich Hölderlin, penned some of the most wonderful poems in the German language, before spending the second half of his life in what they call mental derangement here in Tübingen. In his poem "Friedensfeier" (Celebration of Peace), there is the following line: "For we are a conversation, and we can listen" –

"For we are a conversation" – this appears to me to be an appropriate and also impressive guiding principle for the possibility and reality of a global ethic.

"For we are a conversation, and we can listen" – this is how a civil, peace-loving kind of debate is described in most noble and modest terms, a conversation of "reasonable freedom", as

Jürgen Habermas puts it. A conversation between people with the most diverse backgrounds, convictions and attitudes.

I cannot even begin to imagine who was to be found here in the 1960s at one and the same university – and at one and the same time: the Marxist Ernst Bloch, who had just written “Atheism in Christianity”, and Joseph Ratzinger, the later Pope, who published his bestselling “Introduction to Christianity” – to mention but two examples.

Embodying foreign and almost contradictory worlds – and yet in dialogue with each other and with not everyone remaining in their safe space, the confines of their bubble... And there is Bloch’s concise, great maxim that “thinking means transgressing”, which is on his gravestone here in Tübingen. Part and parcel of this is transgressing your own, always limited world, in order to allow others to show you a different piece of the world, a different perspective.

Quoting Habermas, we can take this to a political and sociological level: “By adopting one another’s perspective, each party will symmetrically discover new aspects of the respective other. The aim is not one-sided inclusion of the other within one’s own horizon; rather, both parties must discover which yet-to-be-constructed horizon of behavioural expectations they wish to jointly inhabit.” In other words, true encounter transforms those who have met – both sides – and this change offers the possibility of true connection. Or even more to the point, the differences that remain are an opportunity to discover what one has in common.

A shared ethos – which should be the foundation for how we live together, both in our society and around the world – is a prerequisite for, and urgently requires, such conversation and listening to one another.

“For we are a conversation” – Life at German universities was not always peaceful back in the 1960s and 70s. In October 1977, a terrorist movement that claimed to be putting into radical action the aims of the revolutionary youth reached its pinnacle in what was called the German Autumn. I mention that time because it was precisely the days between the kidnapping of Hanns-Martin Schleyer and the hijacking of the “Landshut” airplane when, right here, the celebration of the University of Tübingen’s 500th anniversary took place.

Three speeches that were delivered on that occasion bear impressive testimony to the equally level-headed and decisive attitude that the speakers adopted in response to the heated times and severe threats faced by the community and its shared ethical values.

In the first speech, Federal President Walter Scheel adopted a tone that I consider important because it was highly self critical; the entire speech sounds like an offer to engage in a conversation with the rebellious students. He tried to address their real concerns. He spoke

of the danger that our country faced due to, as he put it, "being split into two hostile camps". He talks of entire groups that "have nothing good to say about this state" and instead "mock its government, parliament, unions, courts and authorities". He pointed out that they even revile the state institutions, calling them "enemies of the people". Does that not sound alarmingly familiar? In many of our Western societies, including here in this country, we are currently confronted with developments that are similar in structure. In those days, Scheel coined the now famous term *critical sympathy* that ought to inform the relationship between citizens and their state.

For there to be critical sympathy, there must first be serious conversation. I think, today, too, this is key: one must be self-confident enough to remain calm and collected, engage in conversation wherever possible, debunk as mean and hypocritical defamatory talk about "enemies of the people", and openly and credibly listen to the complaints of those who believe they are not being heard or understood.

The second speech, too, appeals for prudence, based on the ethos of conversation and communication. It is the anniversary speech that was given by Hans Küng on the same day. It was, I should mention, quite a sensation that Hans Küng, a Catholic, was invited to deliver an anniversary speech at this university, which was traditionally very Protestant. This decision drew lots of attention – also because it exemplified the irenic spirit of the university's directors. He spoke about the tense relationship between faith and rational science. Each on its own, he claimed, could lead to dangerous hubris. Pure science that gives no thought to ethical or transcendental views can develop misguided delusions of omnipotence. Just as religion that does not face up to reason may grow blind to reality and become extremely dogmatic, with terrible consequences – possibly one of the most cataclysmic perils of a common ethos. This, too, is on full display these days, unfortunately in many parts of the world.

Conversation always requires patience – at least if the aim is to truly understand, and communicate with, one another. This holds true, as I said earlier, within the state, but even more so in foreign policy and diplomacy; it applies when negotiating agreements, and when carefully, respectfully and steadfastly engaging in dialogue to achieve solutions. This was impressed upon me through one of the most significant experiences of my political career – the twelve-year-long negotiations that led to the nuclear agreement with Iran.

Twelve years of sustaining a conversation, of renewing it time and again when it was cut off or interrupted – until the breakthrough was achieved. I will not say here who was right – the six Foreign Ministers who achieved a negotiated outcome or the individual who

brought it down a little over a year later. That will be up to the historians to decide.

However, time and again, when the talks stalled, I had to think of the religious painting that is unique in art history and that hangs in Augsburg – a painting that Thomas Sternberg pointed out to me – namely of Mary in heaven, the undoer of knots. In her hands, she holds an apparently hopelessly tangled knot that she is untying with endless – one could say heavenly – patience.

Is the political ethos of responsible politicians not equivalent to the humble and patient undoing of knots, with steadfast determination? To me, undoing knots is an ethical principle of political engagement, especially in our day and age.

Yet what can we do if offers to engage in conversation fall on deaf ears? The third Tübingen anniversary speech addresses precisely this problem. I am speaking of the sermon that was delivered by the Protestant theologian Eberhard Jüngel the following day. In it, he describes how lies and half-truths can destroy, or even nip in the bud, every reasonable conversation. How part of a conversation is also to not spare others uncomfortable truths, to not take it too easy on your interlocutor or opponent. In this context, he addressed the terrorists directly, saying: "Turn around – not before, but because it is already far too late It is only by facing up to the hard and inexorable truth – that is, not only have you made yourselves enemies of society, but you also have no worse enemies than yourselves – that you can find reprieve. Only this truth can liberate you – from yourself."

Can you therefore, or should you, speak with, or at least address those who are being unreasonable in a reasonable manner? Part of the ethos of conversation is free and decisive speech – especially when there is little likelihood that you will still be heard. Yet speaking with those who are being unreasonable must not mean stooping to their level. Addressing those who are being unreasonable in a reasonable way, telling them what they do not want to hear – that is precisely how you can stay true to your own ethical principles. It means expecting someone to, and having confidence that they can, discover or rediscover common ethical principles. It means demonstrating in a clear and unmistakable way that no one is exempt from our common ethical principles, and that no one can shirk our shared ethical responsibilities.

The frictions that we are witnessing in Western societies – including the frictions that are coming to the fore in the international community – make what I have admittedly described only in brief appear like a Sisyphean task. It is work that can also be tiring. From time to time, it can make us feel helpless or distraught. But is there an alternative? An alternative to approaching everything from a friend-or-foe perspective, and to implacable hatred? Considering that this can

lead, and has historically for the most part also led, to friend-or-foe action – that is, violent strife, civil war and war?

No, the concept of the global ethic has by no means become obsolete; on the contrary, it is today, from a historical perspective, more urgent than ever. However, the global ethic, or an ethic in general, is not born with writing on paper. In it lies a categorical imperative that all good-willed people, that all of us, are bound by. We are all bound to steadfastly, arduously, and with great purpose, work towards understanding and peace – even if the advances we make are only incremental. As we set about undoing the most difficult knots. Listening to one another. Remaining engaged in patient conversation.

But what do we do – as you will say – when time is running out? If there simply appears to be no more time to remain engaged in patient conversation, endless rounds of negotiation, careful consideration, or weighing options, making arguments and counterarguments? What do we do if the young generation is not yet able to decide on and execute policies that it sees as absolutely necessary, and if it is already seeing the consequences of doing nothing? If an older generation keeps putting off, from one year to the next, action that cannot wait – a generation too old to suffer the terrible consequences?

Are we, and our consciences, not to some extent rightly haunted by the “How dare you?” that we recently heard in New York – regardless of how we felt about the extreme pathos of this young girl? And does the question of the responsibility of each generation for the next and all subsequent ones raise entirely new questions about what a global ethic should be, and how it can be translated into action?

Also, in view of the loss of biodiversity – year by year, month by month, and every single day, more species are dying out – should we not consider the entirely new ethical dimensions and challenges that were recently termed a “rights revolution for nature”?

Every day, we witness the effects of climate change. The causes, which are at least largely due to man, can no longer be disputed by any reasonable person. Does this not call for us to take decisions that will have immediate consequences?

Peter Graf von Kielmannsegg recently wrote a thought-provoking essay in which he raises the question of whether democracy in its present state and with its current procedures and the endless raising of objections is still suited to putting much-needed decisions into practice – or whether we can only be saved by something along the lines of an ecological dictatorship. Without a doubt, the global issues associated with climate and biodiversity pose new political questions and raise issues of political theory – questions that are also tied to the theory and practice of the global ethic.

It is my firm conviction that especially today, and especially in view of the urgent ecological issues we face, we should not belittle the ways that democracy can help tackle the not only looming, even apocalyptic, challenge that we face. We should take care not to pit one group against another in democracy, for example the passion and resolute action of young people who take to the streets against the supposed fixation with procedure and overly sober, staid attitude of democratic institutions. Rather, now of all times, we must take advantage of what democracy as a form of government is uniquely suited to give us: a space in which we can jointly work on undoing knots. Passion and resolute action are as welcome in this space as are willingness to engage in conversation and the power of reason. Democrats must be both – radically willing to engage in communication and passionately reasonable, in the words of Carsten Brosda. From the fusion of these two elements, we can and must find the courage to make decisions.

Here, I will again quote Walter Scheel's Tübingen speech: "As a politician, and I know this from personal experience, you often need incredible courage to make even a single decision in this highly complex, amazingly intricate, society of ours that a single person can no longer grasp." He spoke those words in 1977! If democracy is the system of government of the brave, as I have said on occasion, then courage, courage to make a decision, must be part of a politician's ethos.

However, courage to make a decision does not mean – as the current revival of authoritarian worldviews would have us believe – taking a sharp sword to the proverbial Gordian knot on a daily basis and with the pathos of a strongman. Because, when this is done, it usually damages much more than just the knot. No. What counts is decisively, steadfastly and consistently working on undoing the knot – and including those who have gotten the short end of the stick. This is also true when decisions need to be taken and implemented swiftly.

At the end of his new book, Jürgen Habermas encourages us to trust in the power of freedom grounded in reason. Most important, he says, is that "the political class that takes action must not capitulate". It must not "allow itself to be intimidated by apparent systemic and excessive complexity".

No, we will not allow ourselves to be intimidated. Not by supposedly excessively complex problems, and not by those terrible people who oversimplify the world, looking to divide it into friend and foe, who know all of the answers before they have even fully understood the problems.

We know that there is no heaven on earth. And all those who have attempted to create one in the past – along with a new human race – have brought nothing but ruin. We know that the utopia of the

magic flute is a poetic dream, one that we have a deep yearning for, but that we as human beings cannot make a reality.

Yet this realisation does not mean leaving the world as it is. We can make it better, little by little. We can set about undoing one knot after another. Setting about this work with patience, we can be guided by an aspiration that is again, I believe, best described by a famous University of Tübingen professor – Ernst Bloch, the teacher of hope – namely, that “there arises in the world something which shines into the childhood of all and in which no one has yet been: a homeland.”

Thank you very much.