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Promoting dialogue competence in divided societies

Farewell lecture on 18.1.2017 at the Catholic University of North Rhine-Westphalia in Cologne

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Colleagues, dear students, dear cooperation partners of the Catholic University, dear friends, dear guests,

The dialog has always fascinated me personally and scientifically – in the form of an encounter between individual people, a group discussion and, in particular, an instrument in politics. The theme of this event is related to dialogue competences, which is based on the concept of competence that subsequently embraces an infamous Pestalozzi knowledge, skill and attitude.

I would like to pursue the issue, what importance the dialogue has in a society with growing tensions.

The Tagesspiegel in 2016 gave the title: "Trenches between Germans and German-Turks are growing deeper. The estrangement between parts of the population in Germany is growing. This is worrying - and threatening for all "(Keller 2016). The social scientist Naika Foroutan (2016) currently defines the main tension in Germany as a trench between those who work for a German society in diversity and foster the integration of immigrants and refugees and those who long for a homogeneous society without immigration.

A young Viennese colleague reported last November, just before the Austrian presidential elections, that he only had people in his Facebook community who supported the candidate van der Bellen. There was no Hofer sympathizer. He found his "Facebook bubble" in some way dubious. It probably also has to do with having the possibility to look for world-views in homogeneous niches when living in a city. In villages, on the other hand, it is still rather commonplace for neighborhoods to meet, where active supporters for refugees meet in the evening, drinking beer with people who are more likely to be Horst Seehofer-supporter or an AFD-supporter. How is such a life together? How do I react when someone says to me over a beer: "The Muslims do not belong here. They do not fit into a democracy. Let them go to the Gulf States." Can a dialogue be held?

However, certain divisions and dangerous tendencies in our society are too little addressed and tackled. The mirror formulated already in 1997: "Some are unemployed, others are at the stock market with top salaries raising their assets: the poor and the rich are drifting apart in Germany, and the middle class's fear of the crash grows - with dangerous consequences. How much inequality does democracy tolerate? " Since 1997, the gap between rich and poor has grown dramatically not only in Germany.

The challenges of a central division have not been dealt with enough, namely, the split between consumption and climate reduction. We allow ourselves a lifestyle that will bring dramatic climatic changes in our lives and we seem to be hardly able to make the necessary changes in our lifestyle, trade policy and economics.

It's not possible for me to directly discuss these key challenges to overcome the gap between rich and poor, as well as moving away from a climate-threatening policy and conduct.

However, I believe that in order to meet these challenges, we need a whole-society dialogue process. For this dialogue process, I want to name some requirements and add remarks.

Man - a dialogical being

The fact that man is a dialogical being is carried out in various scientific disciplines.

Martin Buber has developed his own dialogue philosophy and differentiates between two attitudes of man to live in the world, both of which, however, have different meanings and justifications. It is the encounter and the analysis. The analysis is necessary in human life, but the encounter is central. Buber places great significance on this idea: all real life is encounter (Buber 1983, 18).

The philosopher Emanuel Lévinas (2012), who emanates from the School of Phenomenology, radicalized this idea and accuses the European intellectual history of being too much influenced by the analysis and wants to have everything under control. The real means of good philosophizing, before all reflection, is astonishment. For Lévinas, the face of the person opposite of me reminds me of infinity. The transcendence, the infinity, leaves a trace in the countenance of the counterpart. Here Lévinas' Jewish background becomes obvious: The face of God is reflected in the face of man, and on which I shall direct my gaze.

Buber and Lévinas draw from their Jewish beliefs and their philosophical reflections on the dialogic structure of man, which remains important in political contexts. Even in the worst political circumstances, Martin Buber emphasizes on the fact that the political opponent always remains a person, whom I am to encounter as a human being. He had to give up his teaching profession in Frankfurt in 1938 and leave for exile to Palestine. After 1945, he was repeatedly invited to Germany for lectures. He refused to hold these lectures, because he could not stand the general anti-Semitic mood in Germany that opposed him. At the same time, however, he was ready to talk to individual people in Germany, even if he perceived anti-Semitic prejudice and racism among them. For him, the interlocutors with such discriminatory expressions also remained a person with whom he could engage in conversation and bring out their humanity.

Dialogical communication based on sensed equality

The conditions for dialogical communication is, moreover, an approach directed towards the good in relation to one another, rather than set apart from another in the sense that I am informed and my opposite ignorant, that I am good and my opposite bad. The Catholic peace activist Hildegard Goss-Mayr expressed the dividing line between good and evil is in everyone, not between people and groups (Goss-Mayr 1981, 88).

In listening to each other, we can feel that there are endearing and troublesome characteristics in every human being and every life story, and that this also makes the difference between my opposite and myself. We all have experienced love in our childhood - mostly from our parents - and have engaged in the power of love and can pass on love, but we have also experienced in our life behavior which has hurt us and which was marked by - perhaps unintended - lovelessness, from which we have not been unaffected. We also pass on experienced and acquired lovelessness. This human ambivalence influences us all and ultimately makes us the

same to the extent that no one should rise above another man and say: I am good and you are bad.

In the following, I refer again to Hildegard Goss-Mayr (1981). Hildegard Goss-Mayr was a member of the Reconciliation Union, which also included Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, and involved through her Christian motivation in the nonviolent peace movement throughout her life in various countries of the world. She sees the dialogue as a basic measure in every political action. It was always important for Hildegard Goss-Mayr and her deceased husband Jean Goss, to not divide people into good and evil in conversation, even with respect to political opponents. They spoke about uncompromising, openly unpleasant truths, also against defense ministers, cardinals or guerrilla fighters, but in such a way that the concerned did not feel personally condemned.

In a dialogic process, it is central to discover the truth of the opposite, even from the opponent. Every human being has their personal access to the truth, and the truth-seeking dialogue is to recognize and acknowledge the truth of the opposer. But what is truth? Truth is a reality that is not available to us, which no one possesses. What we possess are perspectives on this unavoidable truth, and so it is a basic requirement of the dialogue to recognize that there are several truths, that not one is correct and the other wrong. We only find truth in respect for each person and their values. "The opponent also has positive achievements, which we must recognize and appreciate" (Goss-Mayr 1981, 96).

"The truth," says Goss-Mayr, "is like a sword that penetrates into the conscience and heart of man (in mine and that of the adversary) and transforms it" (Goss-Mayr 1981, 96f).

Once I have recognized the truth of the counter-narrative and reflected it back, the next step is to name one's own predicament and own responsibility in the conflict. This can create a trusting atmosphere and make it clear that we are on the same level. We meet eye to eye when injustices and hierarchies are addressed. Sami Adwan and I once talked about the inequality of power that lay in our German-Palestinian exchange over the money coming from Germany, and he once said in a conflict with me: "You are treating me right now like a colonial lord. "An unpleasant truth, a partial truth, had been articulated, and through the utterance and the discussion the balance was restored. After that, we could continue to deal with the conflict and seek solutions.

Learning Dialogic Communication

Dialogic communication can be practiced, and learned. One form of exercise is nonviolent communication (Rosenberg 2012). The training on nonviolent communication, initiated by the American psychologist Marshall Rosenberg, aims to refrain from anything that could offend the interlocutor. Criticism of the person is avoided and instead their own perceptions, feelings, requests and wishes are formulated. This form of communication is not a superficial tactic to achieve one's own goals, but an expression of an attitude. We are often restricted in our communication by our own emotional blockages, in which aggression or fear hinders us from communicating openly. This is most striking in traumatized people who are blocked in their ability to act, for example if the sound of an aircraft reminds them of a life-threatening situation and subsequently can't think of anything else. The same happens in much less dramatic situations when the reaction of the counterpart "triggers" us and we are enraged by

certain keywords, which is often incomprehensible for others, but something triggered in the triggered person, which caused such a reaction.

Marshall Rosenberg himself is of Jewish origin and, in his book "Nonviolent Communication", he explains how he was teased and discriminated as a Jew in the schoolyard. He describes an event that took place in New York while sitting in the taxi on his way to a lecture. The taxi driver receives a message from the taxi center that he should pick up someone from the synagogue. The reaction of the taxi driver: "Now the Jews are already drawing money out of other people's pockets in the morning and I have to chauffeur him". When Marshall Rosenberg hears this from the taxis' back seat, his anger rises and he writes: "I could have strangled the man at this moment. What does he do instead? He breathes deeply, calms inwardly and then asks: "You have probably had bad experiences with Jews?" The taxi driver begins to tell him that he knows a Jew in the neighborhood who works at Wall street and earns his money from other people's money, while he has great trouble to pay the rent for his family. At the end of the trip, Marshall Rosenberg says, "I understood your situation and see how hard it is to finance and organize your life. But please do not blame all the Jews. I myself am of Jewish origin, and when you said that, it hurt me very much and it really made me angry. "

We have learned too little to deal with emotions. Often, we are emotional illiterates. The example of the encounter between Marshall Rosenberg and the taxi driver reveals how complex the process of perception is. Marshall Rosenberg perceives what has been said and he perceives the anti-Semitism of the taxi driver. He then perceives his own rage and anger. And what does he do then? He breathes deeply. Dialogue competency is achieved through physical exercise. Inhale deeply, look at your own feelings and then contact them carefully. Contemplation teachers recommend to all those who work with people, at least half an hour of self-meditative breathing during the day. This can help to not immediately perceive the annoying colleague or the insolent boss, but the person as a whole. To calm inwardly can be a walk, listening to music or even meditation and for religious people it can be a form of prayer. In the individualized and secular society, everyone should find out for themselves which rituals and exercises are appropriate them in order to attain an attitude of mindfulness. These exercises can then help to restore one's own hurt and concentrate on the truth of the counterpart, as Marshall Rosenberg did with the question: "You have probably had bad experiences with Jewish people?"

Additionally, what strengthens the capacity for dialogic competence is the regular dialogue with people who differ from me in their influence – social stratum, ideology, religion. Pope Francis, as archbishop of Buenos Aires, made a vow, a promise to God that he would visit a poor quarter at least once a week, and he did as best he could (Boff 2016).

For social work, it is important to learn how to engage in dialogue with people who are pushed to the edge of society. How can I talk with a drug-dependent person or with a person living on the street? Here, at the university, colleague Joachim Windolph introduced the study exercise on the street, where students go to places in Cologne they are internally driven to, especially encounter people who live on the fringe of society, on the street and learn to simply be there, to perceive and to make contact with people. Christian Herwartz (et al., 2016) has developed these street exercises, also as a form of religious experience. Spiritual exercises serve the Christians to self-discovery and reorientation in the relationship to God, and Christian Herwartz assumes that the street is also a place of divine reverence and that the

street can also replace the chapel during these exercises. If I meet a drug-dependent person with respect, when I see in him a human being, in whose face I see human dignity. Religiously speaking: in whose face I see the face of God, we meet each other as human beings – next to all the differences between professional roles and social hierarchies that can't be removed.

Last year, at our university, we set up a training program for Interreligious Dialogue Competence, which focuses on the dialogue between Christians and Muslims. The dialogue is rejected by certain Christian and Muslim circles, because it leads to a sell-out of the truth. The Catholic Pius Fraternity considers Islam to be a false religion and the recently forbidden Islamic group "The True Religion" considers Christianity a false religion. The interreligious dialogue adopts the outlook that each religion has a specific point of view on the one unavailable truth and that we should first learn the truth of the other faithful counterpart in dialogue; and this truth can enrich us. Subsequently, on the basis of mutual trust, we can also argue about the whole truth of which we know that none of us possesses it.

The public dialogue: its political dimension

In the following section of my lecture, I would like to consider whether the dialogue and the extent to which the dialogue is politically important, which role the dialogue plays in political change.

It would be naive to believe that the personal dialogue with political opponents could always lead to solutions.

If the personal dialogue does not lead to success, the matter has to be raised in a public dialogue. This can be done through rallies and demonstrations, or through mass media and social media activities. Hildegard Goss-Mayr sees in public actions "nothing else, but a shift of dialogue from the private level to the public" (Goss-Mayr 1981, 97).

Key is, firstly, to determine the subject of the dialogue, what is negotiable in conflicts and who is entitled to decide. A bishopric once wanted to turn an ecclesiastical house into a warm room for homeless people, the responsible vicar made clear that the residents and neighbors would not be involved in the question of how this warming room would be set up, but on how to manage it and what to look out for, in order to sustain social peace.

The setting, in how dialogues are led, is also important. At an event in Cologne's Domforum, after a lecture on the relationship between the Catholic Church and Islam, the assembly dispersed and it was announced that, "The speaker will be here at the standing table to conduct further conversations and you are also all encouraged to open discussions with each other at the tables." What had happened? The organizers did not want to offer a forum for racist remarks from some acquainted right-wing representatives of Pro Köln and Pro NRW. The decentralized setting, however, made it possible for people who had personal concerns and reservations about Islam to express this perhaps better in small groups.

Hildegard Goss-Mayr supported the nonviolent resistance in various countries. In the Philippines, she was engaged in the 1980s, when there were bloody conflicts and resistance towards the dictatorship. Hildegard Goss-Mayr and her husband Jean Goss conducted a nonviolent training with the Philippine bishop's conference. Afterwards, several Catholic

bishops went in their full vestment and sat in the first row of the grand demonstrations, which was very risky, because people had previously been killed in demonstrations. The courageous bishops and committed Christians had contributed significantly to the outcome of the fall of the government to remain mainly nonviolent. They call it in the Philippines the Rosary Revolution. The dialogue can be a risk in extreme situations. The dialogue upholds the dignity of the opponent. So Lévinas, who faces the other also knows that he can't kill, and he takes a risk, if killing is an option for the other.

Nonviolent behavior in different traditions

Consequently, dialogical nonviolent traditions exist in a wide-range of religious and non-religious traditions (Arnold 2011a). This will become my research subject in the future, to look at where such traditions exist, and how they can also be linked to one another in terms of religion and worldview. In 2015, the head of the Shiite minority in Saudi Arabia, the religious leader Nimr Baqr al-Nimr was executed. He had called for a nonviolent resistance against the injustices of the Saudi Arabian dictatorship. We know far too little about him and I'm presently researching about his persona.

I was very moved by the life of the Muslim composer, Mahatma Gandhi Abdul Gaffar Khan (2012). He organized the nonviolent resistance of the Muslim Indian population. When he was asked, whether sabotage was permitted on the railway rails of the British colonial empire to prevent colonial freight transports, he replied, "Yes, if you do this sabotage, then report to the British colonial police and tell them that you did it" (Khan 2012, 142). Dialogue remains the basic principle of action. Mainly it is easier to experience violence yourself, rather than hurting someone else. That such nonviolent traditions exist in Islam is far too little known. Hagen Berndt (1998) illustrated nonviolent traditions in world religions. On behalf of the Forum Civilian Peace Service in the spring of 2016, my wife and I were with Hagen Berndt at the University of Dohuk in northern Iraq for a project on conflict management. There we were confronted in the refugee camps not far from the IS-stronghold Mossul with the destructive power of religion. Mahatma Gandhi urged people to work for the self-purification of their own religion (Arnold 2011b, 55-91). I will continue to question this issue.

With people like Hildegard Goss-Mayr and Abdul Ghaffar Khan it is possible to see such self-purification power of religion. A clearly defined standpoint is required.

The seminar "Social Work with People of Different Cultures and Religions" held at our university focusses on inspirational Christian persons of social work. In this seminar, a student said last week: "I belong to the 'generation maybe', to the 'generation we'll see'. It is a good thing to orientate yourself to people who stand for something."

It is important to be able to articulate clearly what I stand for. That the study at this university supports this, and this is what I would like to offer you.

I also wish that in this university, teachers of various kinds contribute through a lively dialogue with the profile of the university - with their different world views, religions, individual and also sexual orientations. The Christian profile of this university is not encouraged by the exclusion of people and groups, but rather revealed. The Christian profile can only be empowered through dialogue.

I would like to thank all those who have allowed me to work here at the university. I thank my family, especially for their listening. I would like to thank all the colleagues, the staff of the administration and the library, the friends, cooperation partners, who have come here so many times, and I thank the former and current students. I will miss the dialogue with you, and with it comes a feeling of melancholy.

The possibility of dialogues has always fascinated me at this university. The 20 years I was allowed to work here, I have experienced as a gift and I am happy to stay in contact with the university – in a way that is suitable for retirees.

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