

## Preface

Ever since the publication of the *Theology of Hope* in 1964, an ethics of hope has been on my agenda. I had familiarized myself with bioethical questions at congresses with doctors and pharmaceutical concerns. The political and 'alternative' movements of the post-1968 years had provoked me to take up positions for which political and liberation theology provided the theological frameworks. In the ecumenical movement I came to know the north-south conflict and the theological struggles which went along with the antiracist programme. At the University of Tübingen, I regularly gave lectures on Christian ethics. So at the end of the 1970s, I wanted to write an *Ethics of Hope*. But instead, to the disappointment of my friends and colleagues, in 1980, with *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, I published a social doctrine of the Trinity instead. Why?

In discussions about questions of medical ethics, I became painfully aware of the limits of my knowledge. The need for an ecological ethics only grew from a perception of the limits of growth, which the Club of Rome made plain to us in 1973. But as yet I did not have an ecological doctrine of creation and could not make the individual specific decisions I had arrived at plausible in wider contexts. After 1968 the political circumstances of the time were so contradictory, and not just in West Germany, that decisions made one day were already obsolete by the next. In short, at the end of the 1970s, I was not yet ready. But the desire and the obligation have weighed on my theological conscience to the present day. So at the close of my contributions to theological discussions, I shall try to say what I mean by an ethics of hope, and how I have ethically perceived, judged and acted in line with that ethics. In what I have to say, I am also picking up ideas from the dissertations, essays and books which have come to the fore in this direction since the *Theology of Hope*, and as representative of many, should like to mention Timothy Harvie, *Jürgen Moltmann's Ethics of Hope: Eschatological Possibilities for Moral Action* (London, 2009).

This *Ethics of Hope* is not a textbook offering surveys and an introduction to ethical methods. Nor does it offer political advice such as is supplied in the memoranda of the German Protestant church, the EKD. I am turning to

Christians in order to make suggestions for action with hope as its horizon. This ethics is related to the ethos which has to do with endangered life, the threatened earth and the lack of justice and righteousness. It is not a discussion of timeless general principles; but in the face of these dangers, it focuses on what has to be done today and tomorrow with the courage of hope. I have therefore picked up specific statements of my own made about ecological and political ethics during the last forty years and have set these in a wider context. For me, this meant a critical revision of my ethical standpoints.

Ever since I became a member of the ecumenical Faith and Order Commission, I have taken my bearings from the ecumenical ethic which ever since the Fourth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Uppsala in 1968 has stood under the banner of transforming hope. That assembly's message ran: 'Trusting in God's renewing power, we call upon you to participate in the anticipation of God's kingdom and to allow now something of the new creation to become already visible which Christ will complete on his day.'

At that time ecumenical ethics served the renewal of the churches, not just—as today—their fellowship in 'reconciled difference'. I am therefore seeing the ecumenical dimension of this ethics of hope not as a collection and comparison of the ethical perspectives and positions of the different churches (although that would undoubtedly be desirable) but as an outline for a common answer by worldwide Christianity to the global dangers which threaten us all.

This ethics of hope is intended to be a *deliberately Christian ethics*. So at decisive points I have taken my bearings from the promises and the gospel of the Bible. Christians have no better answers to the questions about life, the earth and justice than secular people or people belonging to different religions; but Christians have to live in accordance with the divine hope and the claim of Christ. I have consequently described the great alternatives offered by the Anabaptists in the Reformation era to the *corpus Christianum*—Constantinian state Christianity—and have introduced these critically into the discussion about the Christian character of Christian ethics. In Europe and America, in the old countries of the *corpus Christianum*, we have entered into a post-Christian era, and for that era the ethical alternatives of the Anabaptists in their service for peace, in their experience of community and in the conduct of life are as important as is the ethos of the monastic orders for the ethics of the Catholic Church and as are the countercultural movements for the dominant culture of the Western world.

The principle behind this ethics of hope is:

- not to turn swords into Christian swords
- not to retreat from the swords to the ploughshares
- but to make ploughshares out of swords.

The hope for God's eschatological transformation of the world leads to a transformative ethics which tries to accord with this future in the inadequate material and with the feeble powers of the present and thus anticipates it.

As regards method, I have always started from theology in order to conceive and put forward an ethics of hope. That does not mean 'first the theory, then the practice', or that 'Christian ethics is part of the church's dogmatics', but it does mean that everything done and suffered must conform to what is believed, loved and hoped for. The relation between theory and practice is not a one-way affair. Theory is not in the vanguard, nor is practice. In the hope to which both are related, they share a dialectical relationship of reciprocal influence and correction.

I have preceded the ethics of life with a theological description of what 'life' is in the sense of the gospel. I have begun the ethics of the earth with the question of what the earth is according to the biblical message. I begin the political ethics with a discussion of concepts of justice. There is an ethics of ideas and definitions too. That immediately becomes obvious in bioethical questions, in the discussion about whether the embryo is assigned human status so that it shares the rights which life entails, or whether it is merely a preliminary stage to human life, or is simply human material. In ecological ethics too we don't know whether we ought to talk about the environment, the world we share, or nature. If an ethics allows its concepts to be predetermined by the dominant worldview, it cannot be innovative.

The ethics of terminological definitions of course raises the question about the right to interpretation. Who decides on the political correctness of the terms? Who lays down the rules for the way we speak? I reject authorities in thinking and speaking, and I claim the right to a democratization of terminological definitions. Communication can of course be nonviolent, but it cannot be free of interests and concerns. That means that the formation of theories is a field for ethics just as are directions for practice in conflicts of interest.

In introducing this outline of an ethics of hope, and in order to prevent disappointment, I must mention two deficits.

First, I have not included the development of Catholic social doctrine. My lectures on ethics at the University of Tübingen always went into the doctrine of natural law and the formative social encyclicals of the Catholic

church, with their principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. I entered in detail into the encyclicals *Gaudium et Spes* and *Populorum Progressio*, which resulted from the changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council. But what prevented me from going into Catholic social doctrine in detail were two things. Ever since the middle ages, traditional Catholic theology has thought in a pattern of 'nature and grace' and has seen hope together with faith and love as a 'supernatural virtue'. In this way of thinking, it is hardly possible to discern the birth of the Christian hope out of God's future. Catholic liberation theology has, on the other hand, taken as its point of orientation the eschatological opening-up of the history of liberation. But up to now no convincing fusion between Catholic social doctrine and liberation theology has come into my hands. And since in this book I have not aimed to provide surveys of the various ethical concepts held in the ecumenical community of the Christian churches, I have not included in detail the broad field of Catholic social doctrine. For this I would ask the indulgence of my Catholic colleagues and readers.

Second, in the present book I have not yet ventured to add a chapter on economic ethics. In my lectures I always discussed the ethics of work, property, the systems of democratic liberty and social justice. I hope too that the chapters in this book about the ethics of life, the earth and justice draw upon so many fundamentals of an economic ethics that they will be able to make my ideas about a democratization of the global economy plain. But in light of the present chaotic globalization, which is destabilizing all conditions, and because of the breakdown of the capitalist financial systems since 2008, I know what I hope for but not what must specifically be done in order to transform the present economic conditions of our lives, which seem to be leading to the global bankruptcy of humanity. The alternatives required if life is to be preserved and if God's expectations are to be fulfilled are probably much more radical, and for the present time more urgent, than we dare to think. A valuable prophetic word is the statement on the global financial and economic crisis issued in June 2009 by the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) entitled *Wie ein Riss in einer hohen Mauer* ('Like a Crack in a High Wall'). I may perhaps publish a comment on the matter at a later point.

With regard to the ecumenical discussions, I draw attention to Konrad Raiser's comprehensive and informative report 'Globalisierung in der ökumenisch-ethischen Diskussion',<sup>1</sup> as well as to Michael Haspel's excellent article in the same issue, 'Globalisierung—Theologisch-ethisch'.<sup>2</sup> On

the international level there are enough talented moral philosophers in the younger generation who are able to turn economics, that 'science of dismay', into a science of hope, provided that they do not remain caught up for too long in the fundamental problems of a formal ethics but go on to the practical freedoms and necessities of material ethics.

Finally, I should like to thank my former assistant Dr Claudia Rehberger, who read the chapter on the ethics of life and provided criticism and suggestions, and Dr Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, who read the whole manuscript and offered constructive questions and advice. In this book I have experienced particularly strongly the help of faithful companions and know how to value it. Nevertheless, I alone am responsible for all the judgments.

Anyone not interested in the specifically theological discussion about the correlation between eschatology and ethics can begin with the section on 'transformative eschatology', which is fundamental for these ethics, and can come back later to the alternatives I have put forward in chapter 1.

In this ethics I am turning to a wide public, and I have therefore dispensed as far as possible with technical terms in the interests of general comprehensibility. But because this is a consciously Christian ethics, I have been compelled to present the heart of Christian hope and of the Christian faith in as much detail as I have here.

I am dedicating this book to my old friend Johannes Rau, whose political development I accompanied as attentively and sympathetically as Rau accompanied my theological journeyings. As former president of the German Federal Republic, he unfortunately died early on 27 October 2006, but the warmth of his humanity and his natural confidence can still be felt and are unforgotten as a shining model of convincing Christian life in politics. His sermons and addresses at the church's lay assemblies (*Kirchentage*) were published in 2006 under the fine title *Wer hofft, kann handeln* — 'the one who hopes can act'.<sup>3</sup>