

## *Fourth Global Ethic Lecture*

### **Why should others concern us?**

*By the President of the Federal Republic of Germany Horst Köhler  
at the University of Tübingen on December 1, 2004*

I.

On 26 August 1789 – just over a month after the storming of the Bastille – the French National Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. This Declaration has since become a point of reference for many freedom movements as well as for those who longed to see human rights prevail throughout the world. It became a beacon of hope – far beyond the borders of France and Europe.

Soon, however, the very same National Assembly questioned whether these rights should really apply to all people, even to the Black slaves and so-called "mulattoes" in the French colonies overseas. In all probability, the end of slavery would have meant the end of the plantations, while impinging on economic interests – including those of members of the National Assembly.

In the end, the Assembly shame-facedly allowed everything in the colonies to remain as it was, effectively acting against the very declaration of universal human rights it had just drafted.

Moral inconsistencies and double standards still burden us today. On the one hand, there is the general moral conviction that all human beings have the right to a decent life, freedom and self-determination. On the other hand, we often allow ourselves to be obstructed by both political and economic interests in our efforts to attain this ideal or at least come closer to it.

We in the Western democracies, in particular, frequently lay ourselves open to accusations of hypocrisy – and sometimes no doubt rightly so. We may take pleasure in holding high the banner of freedom and democracy, but, in reality, are often only acting with a view to defending our own interests.

An entirely different accusation is often brought forward in other cultural circles, where people sometimes say that the call to respect human rights is, in this form, foreign to their culture, speaking of "cultural imperialism" or even "human rights imperialism" in this connection and referring to "Western values" with the intention of questioning their universal validity.

For me, one thing is certain: no culture can justify arrogance or superiority. Everyone must have respect for other cultures and the dignity of other people in their diversity. Respecting other cultures, however, does not mean condoning oppression, despotism and poverty.

Some even advise against interfering in the affairs of others anymore at all. In their opinion, all countries and cultures must cope with the challenges of poverty and injustice in their own way. They say that all help – no matter how well-intentioned – usually only brings greater chaos and even greater injustice and deepens divisions in the world. In short, according to these voices, people should look out for themselves.

This sort of attitude is, in my opinion, not only morally questionable, but also politically fatal. In our interconnected world, we cannot simply avoid one another, and we cannot close our eyes to the fate of others.

There is, I believe, a moral obligation to take care above all of those who are worse off. This is a moral imperative that goes beyond what is termed enlightened self-interest. It is of this moral impetus that I would like to speak.

I would like to thank you, Professor Küng, and the Global Ethic Foundation for giving me the opportunity to do so here today. Mr. Küng, you have made many valuable contributions in the past decades to promoting dialogue among religions and cultures. It has become painfully evident to all of us today just how important this dialogue is for securing world peace.

Nevertheless, I also believe that, especially with a view to this intercultural dialogue, we must first understand our own foundations and roots. When involved in a dialogue, we undoubtedly want to listen, but we also must have something to say ourselves. In order to be able to do this, we must know who we are and where we come from.

II.

Why should others concern us? This is a central ethical question. "Others" means those who, at first glance, do not belong with us, who are not part of our family or our circle of friends, with whom we have little in common, and who are foreign to us.

What could move us to concern ourselves with strangers such as these? How is it that we feel a moral impetus to help, even when it concerns people that we do not know at all and of whose life we know nothing except that they are in distress and require assistance?

Historically speaking, this is by no means self-evident. While even the highly developed ancient cultures of Greece or the Roman Empire knew what it meant to have sympathy

for those to whom fate has been unkind, they felt no obligation to ensure the welfare of the poor and the needy.

With the advent of Christianity in the antique world, the moral obligation to help and care for others assumed an urgency that did not exist previously anywhere else. The commandment to "love thy neighbour" was associated directly with the relationship to God. Your "neighbour" could potentially be any other person, in particular the most poverty-stricken. As it says in the New Testament: "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me."

In fact, what the first Christians did was to put into practice something that certain antique philosophers had already called for. This is what allowed Christianity to become such a powerful force in shaping society. The daily practice of the first Christians to care for the sick and the poor, the widows and orphans was the visible side of a new relationship to other people who now mattered. It was here that a historically new solidarity emerged which did not exclude strangers. This applied solidarity and the spirit from which it stems have deeply shaped and civilized Europe and contributed to its making.

Naturally, it took a long time for a civilizing and humanizing process of this type to truly penetrate society all the way down to the individual mentalities. Naturally, there has been what you might call a "clash of civilizations" from time to time – for example, when the Christian message of brotherly love, which also applies to strangers, clashed with the Germanic culture of feuding and revenge.

This example just goes to show that not every aspect of a culture deserves respect. Today, we take it for granted that the tradition of collective punishment and blood feuds has disappeared from our culture – and this is something we can be happy about. In the same way, girls and women in Africa are bound to be equally happy when the cultural tradition of female genital mutilation no longer finds respect and is finally done away with.

The long process of civilization has not been without terrible relapses into violence and barbarism, not least in the name of Christianity. But the commandment to "love thy neighbour", which includes strangers and is directed, in particular, toward those who are poorest – this has not disappeared. It is and remains the conscience of Europe.

If, today, we consider "failure to give assistance" as a punishable crime, then this is yet another distant consequence of the parable of the Good Samaritan. This applied brotherly love, which does not ask how close the other person is to me, is one of Europe's core values, notwithstanding all the crimes that have been committed against it.

It is no coincidence – and it is something that has left a deep mark on our mentality – that since the days of our childhood we have been familiar with such figures as Saint Martin, who shares his coat with the beggar, or Saint Nicolas, who brings the poor what they need. Our concern for the fate of strangers, the poor and the starving – this is part of the European soul; this is European tradition.

Once again: all of this has not stopped Europe – and Germany in particular – from relapsing time and again into cruel barbarity and inhumanity – and, in the Thirty Years' War, even for religious reasons. It has not prevented us in Europe from waging war against other nations and subjugating them. And in two world wars, Europe came terribly close to extinguishing itself. Due to our history, we as Germans, in particular, are responsible for ensuring that something like this never happens again.

Time and again, however, Europe brought forth individuals or groups of people who condemned suppression, tyranny and war and offered resistance to inhumanity. Again and again, they have stirred our conscience and reminded us of our invaluable heritage from which European civilization has grown. Whether Francis of Assisi from Umbria, Albert Schweitzer from the Alsace region, Albanian-born Mother Teresa or Dietrich Bonhoeffer from Breslau: time and again, Europe has reminded itself where its good roots lie.

Will this ethical impetus remain alive? Will this continue to be something we are able to contribute to the dialogue among civilizations? Will we retain our credibility in the eyes of the world?

I sometimes have the impression that Europe has become tired – that it is on its way to losing its identity and has forgotten about its own roots. These roots include unquestionably the Enlightenment, human rights and various emancipation movements – but also Christianity and Christian ethics.

III.

More and more people are coming to us who have different roots and different cultural origins. Living together is not easy and can lead to conflicts.

Considering the experiences we have had with cultural and confessional conflicts in our history, we must be adamant about civilized standards being adhered to among us, standards as set forth, for instance, in our Basic Law. Without a common basis, coexistence is not possible. No group of people may be excluded from society, but also no group of people may exclude itself.

Tolerance is, for this reason, not to be confused with indifference and also not with ignorance. Tolerance demands that I respect people who are different from me, but it

also demands that others respect *my* attitudes and way of living. This is the only way that tolerance can prove itself as a civilizing strength, and not as a weakness.

Our experience shows that deeply held values and beliefs can only be acted upon without hurting others if people deal with one another in a civilized way. This is one of Europe's most valuable and vital experiences.

IV.

In five days, I will be travelling to Africa for the first time as President. What I said in my inaugural address, I will repeat here once more: In my view, the humanity of our world can be measured against the fate of Africa. And I stress once again that it is a question of Europe's self-respect, especially with a view to our own principles and values, for us to play an honest and generous role in Africa.

By travelling to Africa, I would like to increase awareness – especially here in Germany – of the fact that Africa is something that concerns us. What do we think of when we hear the word "Africa"? Isn't it usually a continent beset by catastrophes? The continent of starvation, of failing states and dysfunctional nations, of civil wars and child soldiers, the continent that is dependent on development aid like a patient on medicine, yet never seems to get better?

There is no question about it: great problems and deep distress exist in Africa. But this is only part of the picture. I have also witnessed – in the midst of all this misery and distress – happiness, courage and pride that make certain attitudes in Europe seem shamefully apprehensive. I have seen a host of projects and initiatives in which Africans demonstrate unequalled creativity.

Most of all, I have been impressed by the many initiatives started by women. Time and again, hopeful and promising things are accomplished – both with and without the assistance of others. For example, I will be visiting a women's cooperative in Ethiopia. There, women cured of leprosy have, with a mere 3,000 euros, launched an agricultural project that creates jobs and gives people hope.

It is time we finally realized that we live in *one* world, and not in a first, second or third world! This is also in our own interest: for we in the so-called "developed countries" will not be able to maintain our prosperity, security or peace if we do not view ourselves as partners of the poor. Africa, a continent that is often virtually forgotten, must take its rightful place in this one world – as a partner among partners.

## V.

If we take someone seriously as a partner, it is someone who not only takes, but also has something to give. When I think of Africa in this connection, the first thing that comes to mind is not mineral resources or agricultural products. I am thinking of Africa as the cradle of human culture and history, as the continent where humans learned to walk erect.

I am thinking of the wonderful African music whose rhythm ultimately forms the basis of all modern music, in particular jazz and rock music. Today, African musicians such as Miriam Makeba or Youssou N'Dour have become world-famous. I am thinking of African dance and its many forms of expression and of the colours worn by the dancers.

I am thinking of old and new African art. The traditional art of Africa was discovered by artists such as Braque and Picasso at the beginning of the last century and has influenced European art in many ways.

I am also thinking of the wisdom and human greatness of figures such as Bishop Tutu, Leopold Senghor, Wole Soyinka and Nelson Mandela. Indeed, more than one demonstration took place here in Tübingen calling for Mandela's release.

Finally, I am also thinking of the wonderful African landscape, the Mediterranean coastal regions, the majestic Sahara, the snow on Kilimanjaro and the savannas and mountains of South Africa. Africa's culture and landscape have continued to fascinate Europe throughout history – from Hemingway to Tanja Blixen: "I once had a farm in Africa ...".

Awareness of the responsibility that we as Germans and Europeans have can also grow from fascination. Africa has been abused and exploited. Its people have been sold as slaves. Colonialism has left terrible scars. Proxy wars in the East-West conflict have contributed to further devastating societies and nations. Africa is suffering in many ways – independence alone has not alleviated this suffering and, indeed, has often increased it.

## VI.

I frequently encounter deep pessimism. People ask directly or indirectly whether it makes any sense at all to commit oneself to helping Africa. My answer to this question is a resounding "yes", and I am convinced that, together, we can make a difference.

One thing must be clear to all of us: if Africa is to have a future, it will require assistance. Internationally, some things have actually been accomplished: all heads of state and government of the United Nations have reached an agreement on the *Millennium Development Goals*, whose main intention is to cut extreme poverty in half by 2015 and

provide all children in the world with the chance of receiving an adequate education. These are good and important goals.

And there is broad international agreement on how these goals can be reached: the responsibility of the developing countries is required, but also the broad, swift and continual assistance of the developed nations. When I spoke with Kofi Annan about my upcoming trip, he reaffirmed that we know what needs to be done. Success in the fight against poverty can be seen, especially in Asia. In Africa as well, life expectancy, for example, has increased, more people have access to clean water and more children are attending school.

But one thing is also true: many African countries are simply not making much headway in overcoming poverty – the central and most crucial task of all. This, when Africa has raw materials and mineral resources in abundance. The problem here is that too little of this wealth benefits the people and too little is being invested in the development of the countries. Too often, bloody civil wars are still being fought over diamonds, oil and other raw materials, conflicts that are frequently fuelled by foreign profiteers. In situations like this, Africa's abundance of raw materials often becomes a curse.

This situation has to change. And there are ways to do it: for example, 43 nations have already joined forces in what is known as the Kimberley Initiative, which uses a certification system to stop illegal trading in diamonds.

Another example: billions of dollars earned in oil production end up in foreign accounts. Here, I have great hopes for the "*publish what you pay*" initiative which aims to make earnings from oil production more transparent. This originally private initiative is supported by the World Bank and other international partners. I hope that many countries will join it.

## VII.

In many African countries, the government is too weak. The French declaration of human rights that I mentioned at the beginning is a declaration of the rights of human beings and of citizens: *de l'homme et du citoyen*. That makes all the difference. People can invoke their rights in court only where they are actually citizens. A company or a warlord cannot ensure people their human rights; only a strong and functional state under the rule of law can do this.

Africa has become aware of this fact, too. In NEPAD, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, a joint development concept drafted by Africans themselves, Africans have declared their commitment to the central task of assuring good governance. And now more than 20 African nations have agreed to participate in a process referred to as the "*African Peer Review Process*". They are willing to allow their policies to be

examined critically by each other. This is an important step towards recognizing their own problems in time as well as learning from other African success stories.

In fact, democratic processes have been initiated in most African nations. The international community must now focus on providing assistance to build effective government institutions. Competent administrations, trained security forces and independent courts are required to impose justice and order. Only governments that are functioning to some degree are able to combat corruption, crime and AIDS – the three great maladies of Africa.

When I ponder Africa's perspectives, I am hopeful, because here a new generation of responsible reformers has risen. It was only last month, for example, that I met Gyode Bryant, interim president of Liberia. In a country ravaged by civil war, he is fighting for the restoration of order and the reconstruction of the nation. For his part, he is calling upon wealthy countries to show political courage, asking them not to wait until Liberia has attained the level of order of a country like, say, Switzerland before supporting his efforts.

Just how effective political commitment and courage can be is shown by developments in Sierra Leone, one of the poorest countries in the world and the country to which I will be travelling first on my tour of Africa.

After a civil war lasting ten years, a peace process was initiated there after the military operation carried out by Great Britain and the United Nations had cleared the way. First, fighters were made to surrender their weapons. Now, the goal is to ensure that as many children as possible are able to return to school or learn a trade. During my stay, we will visit a centre where former child soldiers are trained in a trade or profession, allowing them to return to a more or less normal life.

I am also interested in seeing how the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up in Sierra Leone operates. It is in Africa, in particular, that we repeatedly encounter an aspect of the local attitude and society that other cultures have a rather difficult time dealing with – the art of forgiving.

The example of Sierra Leone is proof that you must give up or write off a country as lost. We should simply take our bearings from Winston Churchill's three central pieces of advice: never, never, never give up!

VIII.

A fact I also find encouraging is the emergence of civil societies in African nations. People are not content just to live with things as they are. Farmers pool their resources to buy seed or build a well. Citizens' groups uncover corruption and keep an eye on the

government's actions. Women take the initiative to build schools and AIDS stations, or they bring attention to the importance of microcredits, in particular for combating poverty in rural areas.

It is a good thing that major international organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank and IMF have now made participation of civil society groups an important part of their work – no initiative and no programme without an input from civil society. Involving as many people as possible in what is happening in their country – this will increase stability and freedom in African societies.

IX.

When a country is engulfed in unrest and armed conflict, however, even the best commitment is in danger of being crushed in its initial stages. The events in Ivory Coast and Darfur show us just how quickly development can be destroyed and hopes clashed by power struggles, violence and African forms of racism.

For this reason, I welcome the fact that the African Union has abandoned the principle of non-interference for its continent in cases concerning war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity. Within the United Nations, efforts must now be made to accelerate the discussion of when courageous intervention from outside is politically necessary and legitimate, and when it is not. In the Founding Act of the African Union, the question of whether humanitarian intervention is permitted was answered with a decisive "yes". In doing so, the African Union has given important impetus to the international legal discussion about the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention.

And I warmly welcome the fact that the European Union has now also begun to consider this issue in concrete terms, that is, with regard to the financial and military consequences.

X.

Trade is the best way to help people help themselves, and, for this reason, ensuring fair trading conditions remains the most important contribution the international community can make to combating poverty in Africa. The Doha round of the World Trade Organization has set itself the goal of becoming a true development round – now, it must live up to that ambitious goal. This includes, among other things, a major reduction of trade-distorting subsidies. Why? Here is just one example: during my tour of Africa, I will visit Benin, where cotton makes up 70% of all exports. Benin has no money to subsidize its cotton. Because of this, the high subsidies paid to cotton producers in industrial countries massively undermine the possibilities for development in this small country.

To reach the *Millennium Development Goals*, however, more financial support is needed. For this reason, I repeat my appeal to the industrial countries – to Germany as well – to allocate 0.7 percent of their gross national product to development aid. This is something to which they had already committed themselves 30 years ago. Almost US\$ 100 billion per year is needed to bridge the gap between what has been promised and the reality of the situation worldwide. This money is necessary to implement the *Millennium Development Goals*.

Since the Monterrey development conference in Mexico, there have been some positive developments in this area. Nevertheless, more must be done to move closer step-by-step towards this goal each year. As far as Germany is concerned, we must not put the entire burden exclusively on the Minister of Finance. This is a question that concerns each and every one of us.

XI.

Commitment to Africa is not only a matter for world leaders. Humanitarian commitment to Africa has a long tradition in Germany – a tradition that is represented not only by the name of Albert Schweitzer. Tens of thousands of development helpers have done their best under difficult conditions to relieve people's poverty and misery. Many teachers, doctors and church men from civil society have done a great deal of good.

In Germany today, numerous initiatives and organizations keep the awareness alive that Africa concerns us – and they are moving things: they build sympathetic attitudes and raise funds, and they support concrete projects. They sell products obtained in fair trade with developing countries. Thirty years ago, I myself founded a third-world store, as it was called back then, together with my wife in Herrenberg. This afternoon, we will be going there to meet with both old and new friends who are dedicated to the cause. Today, I would like to express my recognition for the civil commitment of groups and initiatives like these, whose work gives hope to many people in Africa and here at home.

XII.

Does my speech here today have anything to do with global ethics? I wanted to ask both you and myself a very simple question: why should others concern us? And I wanted to ask this question specifically with a view to Africa, a continent that many have forgotten or simply written off.

I have spoken much about politics, but at the end of the day, it is the attitude of every one of us that matters. No policy and no government institution will ever be able to replace the spontaneous willingness to help. "But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. So he went to him and

bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him."

In the townships of Soweto in the seventies, the song of the South African freedom and anti-apartheid movement was born. It is now the South African national anthem. It begins with the following words, with which I would like to conclude: "Nkosi sikilele i Afrika": "God bless Africa".