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On a Politician's Ethics

By Helmut Schmidt
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First, I would like to thank you, dear Hans Küng. I was very pleased to accept this invitation, as I have followed the Global Ethic Project most positively since the start of the 1990s. The words "Global Ethic" may seem too ambitious to some, but the goal, the task to be solved, is truly and, by necessity, very ambitious. Perhaps at this point I can mention that an array of former heads of state and government from all five continents have set themselves a common goal very similar to this one since 1987 as the InterAction Council; however, as yet our work has only had relatively little success. In contrast, the achievements of Hans Küng and his friends are outstanding.

I myself can thank a devout Muslim for first inspiring me to consider the moral laws common to the great religions. More than a quarter of a century has gone by since Anwar Al Sadat, then President of Egypt, explained the common roots of the three Abrahamic religions to me, as well as their many resemblances, and in particular their corresponding moral laws. He knew of their shared law on peace, for example in the psalms of the Jewish Old Testament, in the Christian Sermon on the Mount or in the fourth sura of the Moslem Koran. If only the people were also aware of this convergence, he believed; if only the people's political leaders, at least, were aware of this ethic correspondence between their religions, then long-lasting peace would be possible. He was firmly convinced of this. Some years later, as President of Egypt, he took political steps to match his conviction and visited the capital and parliament of the State of Israel, which had previously been his enemy in four wars, to offer and conclude peace.

At my advanced age one has experienced the deaths of one's own parents, siblings and many friends, but Sadat's assassination by religious fanatics shook me more severely than other losses. My friend Sadat was killed because he obeyed the law of peace.

I will return to the law of peace in a moment, but first a proviso: a single speech, especially one restricted in length to less than one hour, cannot come close to exhausting the topic of a politician's ethics. For this reason, today I have to concentrate

on a number of comments, namely the relationship between politics and religion, then the role of reason and conscience in politics, and finally the need to compromise, and the loss of stringency and consistency this inevitably entails.

I.

Now let us return to the law on peace. The maxim of peace is an essential element of the ethics or morals which must be required of a politician. It applies equally to domestic policy within a country and its society, and to foreign policy. Along with this, there are other laws and maxims. This naturally includes the "Golden Rule" taught and demanded in all world religions. Immanuel Kant merely reformulated it in his Categorical Imperative; it is popularly reduced to the phrase: "Do as you would be done by". This golden rule applies to everyone. I do not believe that different basic moral rules apply to politicians than to anybody else.

However, at a level below the key rules of universal morality, there are many special adaptations for specific occupations or situations. Just think of doctors' respected Hippocratic Oath of doctors, for example, or a judge's professional ethics; or think of the special ethic rules required of businesspeople, of moneylenders or bankers, of employers or of soldiers at war.

As I am neither a philosopher nor a theologian, I will not make any attempt to present you with a compendium or codex for the specific political ethic, and thus compete with Plato, Aristotle or Confucius. For more than two and a half millennia, great writers have brought together all kinds of elements or components of the political ethic, sometimes with highly controversial results. In modern Europe this extends from Machiavelli or Carl Schmitt to Hugo Grotius, Max Weber or Karl Popper. I, on the other hand, must restrict myself to presenting you with some of the insights I have gained myself during my life as a politician and a political publicist – for the most part in my home country, and, for the rest, in dealing with our neighbouring countries, both nearby and further away.

At this juncture I would also like to point to my experience that, whereas talk of God and Christianity has been far from rare in German domestic affairs, the same is not true in discussion or negotiation with other countries and their politicians. Recently, when referendums were held in France and the Netherlands on the draft European Union constitution, for many people there the lack of reference to God in the text of the constitution was a decisive motive for their rejection. A majority of politicians had chosen to refrain from invoking God in the text of the constitution. In the German constitution, the Basic Law, God does appear in the preamble: "Conscious of their responsibility before God …"; and later a second time in the wording of the oath of office in Article 56, where it finishes: "So help me God". However, immediately after, the Basic Law says: "The oath may also be taken without religious affirmation". In both places it is left up to the individual citizen to decide whether he means the God of the Catholics or of the Protestants, the God of the Jews or the Muslims.

In the case of the Basic Law, it was also a majority of politicians who formulated this text in 1948/49. In a democratic order, under the rule of law, politicians and their reason

play the decisive role in constitutional policy, rather than any specific religious confession or its scribes.

We recently experienced how, after centuries, the Holy See finally reversed the verdict against Galileo's reason, once rendered by power politics. Today, we experience every day how religious and political forces in the Middle East are locked in bloody battles for power over people's souls – and how reason, the rationality we all possess, repeatedly falls by the wayside. When, in 2001, some religious zealots took their own lives and those of three thousand people in New York, convinced they were serving their God, Socrates' death sentence – for godlessness! – was already two and a half thousand years in the past. Obviously, the perennial conflict between religion and politics and reason is a lasting element of the human condition.

II.

Perhaps I can add a personal experience here. I grew up during the Nazi period; at the start of 1933 I had only just turned fourteen. During my eight years of compulsory military service I had placed my hopes in the Christian churches for the time after the expected catastrophe. However, after 1945, I experienced how the churches were able neither to re-establish morality nor to re-establish democracy and a constitutional state. My own church was still struggling over Paul's Epistle to the Romans: "Be subject unto the higher powers."

Instead, at first some experienced politicians from the Weimar period played a significant part in the new beginning; Adenauer, Schumacher, Heuss and others. However, at the start of the Federal Republic it was less the old Weimarians, and far more the incredible economic success of Ludwig Erhard and the American Marshall aid which swung the Germans towards freedom and democracy and in favour of the constitutional state. There is no shame in this truth: after all, since Karl Marx we have known that economic reality influences political convictions. This conclusion may only comprise a half-truth, but the fact remains that every democracy is endangered if its governing authorities cannot keep industry and labour in adequate order.

As a result, I remained disappointed by the churches' sphere of influence, not only morally, but also politically and economically. In the quarter of a century since I was Chancellor, I have learned a lot of new things and have read a lot. In this process, I have learned a little more about other religions and a little more about philosophies I was previously not familiar with. This enrichment has strengthened my religious tolerance; at the same time, it has put me at a greater distance from Christianity. Nonetheless, I call myself a Christian and remain in the Church, as it counterbalances moral decline and offers many people support.

III.

To this day, what continues to disturb me about references to the Christian God – both among some churchpeople and some politicians – is the tendency towards excluding others which we come across in Christianity – and equally in other religious confessions, too: "You are wrong but I am enlightened; my convictions and aims are godly." It has long been clear to me that our different religions and ideologies must not be allowed to stop us from working for the good of all; after all, our moral values

actually resemble one another closely. It is possible for there to be peace among us, but we always need to recreate this peace and "establish" it, as Kant said.

It does not serve the aims of peace if a religion's believers and priests try to convert the believers of another religion and to proselytize to them. For this reason, my attitude towards the basic idea behind missions of faith is one of deep scepticism. My knowledge of history plays a special role in this – I am referring to the fact that, for centuries, both Christianity and Islam were spread by the sword, by conquest and subjugation, but not by commitment, conviction and understanding. The politicians of the Middle Ages; that is, the dukes and kings, the caliphs and the popes, appropriated religious missionary thoughts and turned them into an instrument to expand their might – and hundreds of thousands of believers willingly let themselves be used in this way.

In my eyes, for example, the Crusades in the name of Christ, where soldiers held their bibles in their left hand and their swords in their right, were really wars of conquest. In the modern age, the Spanish and the Portuguese, the English, the Dutch and French, and finally also the Germans used violence to take over most of the Americas, Africa and Asia. These foreign continents may have been colonised with a conviction of moral and religious superiority, but the establishment of the colonial empires had very little to do with Christianity. Instead, it was all about power and egocentric interest. Or take the *Reconquista* on the Iberian peninsula: it was not only about the victory of Christianity, but, at its heart, concerned the power of the Catholic monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella. When Hindus and Muslims fight today on Indian soil, or when Sunni and Shiite Muslims battle in the Middle East, time after time the crux of the matter is power and control – the religions and their priests are used to this end, as they can influence the masses.

Today it greatly concerns me that at the start of the 21st century a real danger has developed of a worldwide "clash of civilisations", religiously motivated or in religious guise. In some parts of the modern world, motives of power, under the guise of religion, are mixed with righteous anger about poverty and with envy at others' prosperity. Religious missionary motives are mixed with excessive motives of power. In this context it is hard for the balanced, restrained voices of reason to gain attention. In ecstatic, excited crowds, an appeal to individuals' reason can not be heard at all. The same is true today in places where Western ideologies and teachings on democracy and human rights, which are perfectly respectable, are forced with military might and almost religious fervour upon cultures which have developed in a totally different manner.

IV.

I myself have drawn a clear conclusion from all these experiences: mistrust any politician, any head of government or state, who turns his religion into the instrument of his quest for power. Stay clear of politicians who mingle their religion, oriented towards the next world, with their politics in this world.

This caution applies equally to politics at home and abroad. It applies equally to the citizens of a country and to its politicians. We must demand that politicians respect and tolerate believers from other religions. Anyone who is not capable of this as a political

leader must be seen as a risk to peace – to peace within our country as well as to peace with others.

It is a tragedy that, on all sides, the rabbis, the priests and pastors, the mullahs and ayatollahs have, to a great degree, kept all knowledge of other religions from us. Instead they have variously taught us to think of other religions disapprovingly and even to look down upon them. However, anyone who wants peace among the religions should preach religious tolerance and respect. Respect towards others requires a minimum amount of knowledge about them. I have long been convinced that – in addition to the three Abrahamic religions – Hinduism, Buddhism and Shintoism rightly demand equal respect and equal tolerance.

Because of this conviction, I welcomed the Chicago Declaration Toward a Global Ethic by the Parliament of the World's Religions, seeing it not only as desirable but also as urgently necessary. Based on the same fundamental position, ten years ago today the InterAction Council of former heads of state and government sent the Secretary-General of the United Nations a draft entitled "Universal Declaration of Humans Responsibilities" which we had developed on the initiative of Takeo Fukuda from Japan. Our text, written with help from representatives of all the great religions, contains the fundamental principles of humanity. At this point, I would particularly like to thank Hans Küng for his assistance. At the same time, I gratefully recall the contributions made by the late Franz Cardinal König of Vienna.

V.

However, I have also come to understand that, two and a half thousand years ago, some of humanity's seminal teachers, Socrates, Aristotle, Confucius and Mencius, had no need for religion, even though they paid lip service to it, as they were expected to, more on the margins of their work. Everything we know about them tells us that Socrates based his philosophy, and Confucius his ethics, on the application of reason alone; none of their teachings had religion as a basis. Yet both have come to lead the way, even today, for millions upon millions of people. Without Socrates there would have been no Plato – perhaps even no Immanuel Kant and no Karl Popper. Without Confucius and Confucianism, it is hard to imagine that the Chinese culture and the "Kingdom of Silk", whose lifespan and vitality are unique in world history, would have existed.

Here, one experience is important to me: clearly, it is also perfectly possible to produce outstanding insights, scientific achievements, and thus also ethical and political teachings even if their originator does not consider himself bound to a God, to a prophet, to a Holy Scripture or to a certain religion, but only feels bound by his reason. This applies equally to socio-economic and political achievements. However, it cost the American and European Enlightenment many centuries of struggle and battle before it was possible for this experience to make its breakthrough in our part of the world. Here the word "breakthrough" is justified with respect to science, technology and industry.

With respect to politics, on the other hand, the word "breakthrough" unfortunately only applies to the Enlightenment to a limited extent. Whether it is the example of Wilhelm II seeing himself as a monarch "by the grace of God", whether it is an American president invoking God or politicians today invoking Christian values with their

politics: they consider themselves bound religiously as Christians. Some plainly and clearly feel they have a position of Christian religious responsibility; others only perceive this responsibility relatively vaguely – just as most Germans probably also do today. Many Germans have, after all, now broken away from Christianity, many have left their church; some have also broken away from God – and yet are good people and good neighbours.

VI.

Today, the vast majority of Germans share some important, fundamental, binding political convictions. Above all, I mean they are bound to inalienable human rights and the principle of democracy. This inner commitment is evidently independent of their own belief or lack of belief, and also independent of the fact that neither principle is included in the Christian denomination.

Not only Christianity, but also the other world religions and their holy books, have mainly imposed laws and duties upon their believers, whereas the rights of the individual are hardly ever found in the holy books. On the other hand, in its first twenty articles, our Basic Law speaks almost entirely of the constitutional rights of individual citizens, whereas their responsibilities and duties are hardly mentioned. Our list of civil rights was a healthy reaction to the extreme suppression of the freedom of the individual under Nazi rule. It is not built upon Christian or other religious teachings, but entirely upon the only basic value expressed plainly and clearly in our constitution: "inviolable human dignity".

In the same breath, in the same Article 1, the legislature, the executive and the judiciary are bound by the basic rights as directly applicable law; this also means that all politicians are bound, whether they are law-makers, governing authorities or administrators; whether in the Federal Government, in the *Länder* or the municipalities. At the same time, politicians have a wide scope for action, as the Basic Law allows good or successful politics just as it does poor or unsuccessful politics. For this reason, we need not only the law-makers' and ruling parties' compliance with the constitution; not only, secondly, their regulation by the Constitutional Court, but also, thirdly and most importantly, the regulation of politics by the voters and their public opinion.

Of course politicians succumb to error; of course they make mistakes. After all, they are subject to the same human weaknesses as any other citizen, the same weaknesses as public opinion. From time to time, politicians are forced to make spontaneous decisions; mostly, however, they have enough time and sufficient opportunity to get advice from several sources, to weigh up the available options and their foreseeable consequences before they come to a decision. The more a politician allows himself to be led by a fixed theory or ideology, by his party's interests in power, the less he will weigh up all the discernible factors and all consequences of his decision in each individual case; the greater the danger of error, of mistakes and failure. This risk is particularly high when a decision has to be made spontaneously. In each case he is responsible for the consequences – and more often than not this responsibility can be a real burden. In many cases politicians do not find any help in making their decisions in the constitution, in their religion, in any philosophy or theory, but have to rely upon their reason and judgement alone.

This is why Max Weber was being rather too general when he spoke in his still readable speech of 1919 on "Politics as a Vocation" of a politician's "sense of proportion". He added that a politician must "give an account of the results of his action". In fact, I believe, not only the results in general, but also specifically the unintended or tolerated side effects must be justified; the aims of his actions must be morally justified, and his ways and means must, equally, be ethically justified. The "sense of proportion" must, then again, suffice for any unavoidable, necessary spontaneous decision. Yet if there is enough time to weigh things up, there must be careful analysis and deliberation. This maxim does not only apply to decisions made in extreme, dramatic cases, but also to normal, everyday legislation, such as in tax or labour policy; it applies just as much to decisions about new power stations or new motorways. It applies without constraint.

In other words: politicians cannot square their actions and the consequences of those actions with their conscience unless they have applied their reason. Good intentions or honourable convictions alone cannot relieve the burden of their responsibility. For this reason I have always seen Max Weber's words on the necessity of an ethic of responsibility, in contrast to an ethic of ultimate ends, as valid.

At the same time, however, we know that many people who enter politics are motivated by their convictions, not by reason. Equally, we must concede that some decisions, both on domestic and foreign affairs, are born of people's convictions – and not of rational deliberation. And hopefully we have no illusions about the fact that a large proportion of voters principally base their choices on who to vote for in politics on their convictions – and are stirred by their current mood.

Nonetheless, I have expressed the fundamental importance of the two elements of political decision-making – reason and conscience – in speech and in writing for many decades.

VII.

I must add something, however: as simple and unambiguous as this conclusion sounds or reads, it is not that simple in democratic reality. In a democratic system of government, it is actually the exception if one person alone makes a political decision. In the great majority of cases, it is not an individual who decides, but far more a majority of people. This is true for all legislation, for example, without exception.

In order to attain a legislative majority in parliament, several hundred people have to agree on a common text. A relatively unimportant matter can, at the same time, be complicated or hard to approach. In this kind of case, it is easy to rely upon the recognised experts or recognised leaders in one's own parliamentary party, but there are many cases, and there are important matters, where some members of parliament start off with different, well-founded opinions on one or several points. For them to agree, one has to accommodate them.

In other words: legislation and decision-making by parliamentary majority means all these individuals must have the ability and the will to compromise! Without compromise, a majority consensus cannot be formed. Anyone who, as a matter of

principle, cannot or does not want to compromise is of no use to democratic legislation. Admittedly, compromise often goes hand in hand with a loss of stringency and consistency in political actions, but a democratic member of parliament must be willing to accept losses of this kind.

VIII.
Compromises are likewise always necessary in foreign policy to keep peace between countries. A national sacro egoismo, such as that currently cultivated by the government of the USA, cannot work peacefully in the long term.

It is true that across thousands of years – from Alexander or Caesar, from Genghis Khan, Pizarro or Napoleon, all the way to Hitler and Stalin – the ideal of peace has only rarely played a decisive role in the implementation of foreign policy. It has equally rarely played a role in theoretical governmental ethics or the integration of philosophy into politics. On the contrary: for thousands of years, and even from Machiavelli to Clausewitz, war was almost taken for granted as an element of politics.

It was not until the European Enlightenment that a small number of writers – such as the Dutchman, Hugo Grotius, or the German, Immanuel Kant – elevated peace to its position as a desirable political ideal. Yet even throughout the entire nineteenth century, for the major European states, war remained a continuation of politics by different means – and so it went on in the twentieth century. The people had long seen war as one of humanity's cardinal evils, to be avoided; it was not until the appalling misery of the two World Wars that this view was also passed on to leading politicians in the West and the East. This can be seen from the attempt to create a League of Nations, and later the founding of the United Nations, still in force today; it can also be seen from the arms limitation treaties aimed at achieving a balance between the USA and the Soviet Union, as well as from the establishment of European integration since the 1950s, and from German *Ostpolitik* since the start of the 1970s.

Incidentally, Bonn's Ostpolitik towards Moscow, Warsaw and Prague was a notable example of a crucial element of any peace policy: a statesman wanting to act in the interests of peace must speak to the statesman on the other side (that is, the potential enemy!) and must listen to him! Speak, listen and, if possible, come to a compromise. Another example was the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Declaration) in 1975, which was a compromise in the interests of peace. The Soviet Union gained the Western statesmen's signatures under a declaration of the inviolability of Eastern European frontiers, and the West gained the Communist heads of state's signatures under the point on human rights (which was later to become famous as Basket Three of the Accords). The collapse of the Soviet Union one and a half decades later was, then, not the result of military force from outside – thank God! – but instead the internal implosion of a system which had far overstretched its power.

A converse, negative example is the wars and acts of violence perpetrated for decades between the State of Israel and its Palestine and Arabic neighbours. If neither side talks to the other, compromise and peace remain only an illusory hope.

Since 1945, international law, in the shape of the United Nations Charter, has forbidden any external interference in a state's affairs by means of force; only the Security Council may decide upon exceptions to this basic rule. It appears urgently necessary to me today to remind politicians of this basic rule. For example, the military intervention in Iraq, one based, moreover, on falsehoods, is unambiguously a violation of the principle of non-interference, a flagrant violation of the United Nations Charter. Politicians of many nations share the blame for this violation. Equally, politicians of many nations (including Germans) share the responsibility for interventions contradicting international law on humanitarian grounds. For example, for more than a decade, violent conflicts of interest in the Balkans have been disguised behind the cloak of humanitarianism on the part of the West (including the bombing of Belgrade).

IX.

However, I would like to leave this digression towards foreign policy and return to parliamentary compromise. The mass media, which, in our open society, shape public opinion to a great extent, sometimes speak of political compromise as "horse trading" or as "lazy" compromises, sometimes they are incensed by supposedly immoral party discipline. Although, on the one hand, it is good and useful if the media continue to critically examine the opinion-forming process, at the same time the theorem of the democratic necessity of compromise remains true. After all, a legislative body where the individual members all stuck unyieldingly to their individual opinions would throw the state into chaos. Similarly, a government would become unable to rule if the individual members all stuck unyieldingly to their individual judgements. Every governmental minister and every member of a parliamentary party knows this. All democratic politicians know they must compromise. Without the principle of compromise, there can be no principle of democracy.

In reality, however, there are also bad compromises – for example at the expense of third parties or at the expense of generations to come. There are inadequate compromises, which do not solve the problem at hand, but only give the impression that they solve it. In this way, then, the necessary virtue of compromise faces the temptation of mere opportunism. The temptation of opportunistic compromise with public opinion, or elements of public opinion, recurs daily! For this reason, politicians who are willing to compromise must rely on their personal conscience.

There are compromises a politician should not enter into, as it goes against his conscience. In this type of case, the only thing left open to him is public dissent; in some cases all that remains is resignation or the loss of his seat. Going against one's own conscience undermines one's honour and morals – and others' trust in one's personal integrity.

But then there is also the error of conscience. One's own reasoning can fail, and so can one's own conscience. In cases like this, moral reproach is not justified, yet terrible damage can be done. If, in cases like this, the politician later recognises his error, he faces the question of whether he should admit his error and tell the truth. In this kind of situation, politicians usually act in only too human a manner, just as all of us in this room: it is hard for any of us to admit our own errors of conscience and the truth about ourselves in public.

X.

The question of truth can sometimes contrast with the passion Max Weber identified as one of the three pre-eminent qualities of a politician. The question of truth can also contrast with the required rhetorical ability already seen as one of the most important arts two and a half thousand years ago in democratic Athens – and which, if anything, has become even more important in today's television society. Those wanting to be elected have to present voters with their intentions, their manifesto. In doing so they are in danger of promising more than they can later fulfil, especially if they want to appeal to a television audience. Every campaigner is vulnerable to the temptation of exaggeration. The competition for prestige, and above all to appeal to a television audience, has further intensified this temptation compared with the old newspaper-reading society.

Our modern mass democracy is, rather like Winston Churchill once said, truly by far the best form of government for us – compared with all those other forms we have tried from time to time – but it is by no means ideal. It is inevitably afflicted with great temptations, with errors and with deficiencies. What remains decisive is the positive fact that the electorate can change governments without violence or bloodshed, and that, for this reason, those elected and the parliamentary majority behind them must answer for their actions before the electorate.

XI.

As well as passion and a sense of proportion, Max Weber believed the third characteristic quality for a politician was a feeling of responsibility. The question remains: responsibility towards whom? For me, the electorate is not the final authority a politician has to answer to; voters often make only a very general, trend-following decision, often making a choice based on their feelings and whims. Nonetheless, their majority decision must command the politicians' obedience.

For me, the final authority remains my own conscience, although I realise that there are many theological and philosophical opinions about the conscience. The word was already used in the time of the Greeks and Romans. Later, Paul and other theologians used it to mean our awareness of God and God's ordained order, and, at the same time, our awareness that every violation of this order is a sin. Some Christians speak of the "voice of God in us". In the writings of my friend Richard Schröder I have read that our understanding of the conscience emerged from Biblical thought coming into contact with the world of Hellenism. On the other hand, his whole life long, Immanuel Kant never gave thought to the basic values of his conscience without religion playing a role in it. Kant described the conscience as "the awareness of an inner court of justice in man".

Whether one believes the conscience comes from people's reason or from God – whatever the case, there is little doubt in the existence of the human conscience. Whether a person is a Christian, a Muslim or a Jew, an agnostic or a freethinker, an adult human being has a conscience. I shall add rather quietly: all of us have gone against our own conscience more than once: we have all had to live "with a guilty conscience". Of course, this all too human weakness is shared by politicians, too.

XII.

I have tried to describe to you a few insights gained during three decades of experience acquired by a professional politician. Of course, these were only very limited extracts from a multifaceted reality. One final, double insight is very important to me. Firstly, that is, that our open society and our democracy suffer from many imperfections and deficiencies, and that all politicians still have all-too-human weaknesses. It would be a dangerous error to think of our real, existing democracy as a pure ideal. But, secondly, we Germans – due to our catastrophic history – nonetheless have every reason in the world to cling on to democracy with all our might, constantly revitalising it and constantly standing up bravely to its enemies. Only when we agree upon this will our national anthem, with its "Unity and Justice and Freedom", be justifiable.