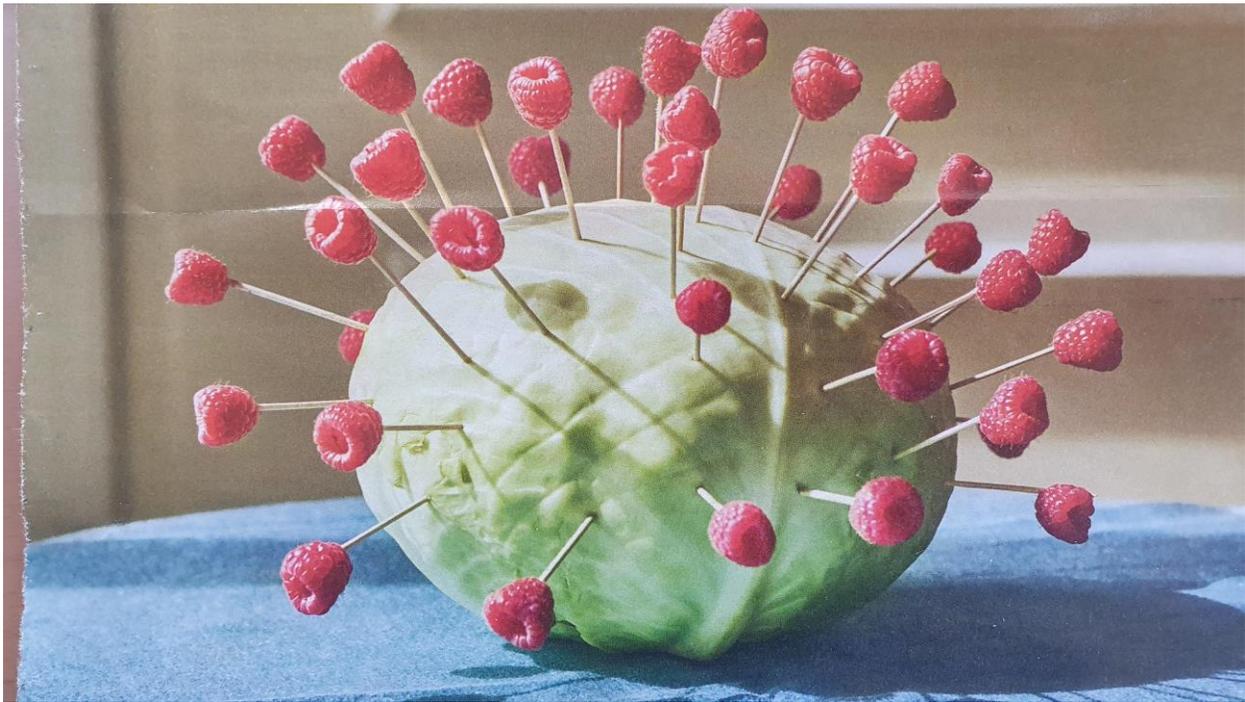


«In the Corona Crisis, the Golden Rule Counts even More»



**Prof. Dr Christoph Stückelberger,
President/Founder Globethics.net, Geneva/Switzerland***

Why is the voice of ethics needed in the current corona crisis?

The pandemic immediately raises the question of what we should do and orient ourselves as a society. The first answer comes from medicine, from virologists. But how should we deal with it? Whether you call it ethics or not, there are always questions of values, such as: What is health worth to us? Who should be protected? How are scarce resources to be distributed? The current crisis is particularly about balancing priorities: Which values are most important in which situation? In the early days of the pandemic, health was paramount and everything else had to take a back seat. After two three weeks, a second wave begins. The economy in terms of financial ability, jobs and purchasing power is now back. In the medium term, profitability is also a question of life and death - having nothing to eat means it can threaten life. The new debt crisis can cost millions of lives worldwide.

There are economists, but also virologists, who would prefer controlled infection to shut down. What do you say as an ethicist: is it important to save every life at all costs, even if it results in immense economic damage for the whole of society?

There is no doubt that we should try to save and preserve life extensively. At the same time, the protection of life cannot be weighed against the economy. Because economy should enable life. When the financial system collapses, the number of victims is even greater. Health and economy both play a major role; one has to weigh the relevant goods carefully. Unilaterally relying on measures of health or of economy means that additional victims are accepted or produced.

The decision about life and death suddenly seems omnipresent in this crisis. Doctors have to decide who should be ventilated and who should be let die.

Resources should be distributed fairly in order to preserve the lives of as many people as possible. This is how the ethical guidelines of the Swiss Society for Medical Sciences SAMS set it. Particularly important in the pandemic is the additional remark in the guidelines that a person's money, status or fame should not play a role in the distribution of resources. In practice, we constantly make decisions about life and death, not only in the extreme situation of the pandemic. How much development aid we provide and ultimately how much we pay for a mango from Ghana has a concrete impact on the viability and the life of others. So we are not suddenly confronted with a new question, but it is much more conscious and obvious because it directly affects us in the idea that we have to go to hospital and cannot expect to get to the machine. The access to and distribution of resources is the most important question of justice.

What do you mean?

I give an example. When my father, who was living a fulfilling life as a Reformed pastor, was in the elderly people's home, he suffered a lot from the question of justice. He had a guilty conscience because his nursing home cost a total of around ten thousand francs a month and that money could have cured a hundred blind children from their eye disease every month. But the life of a very old and or sick person is also valuable and meaningful.

The value of vulnerable life is in everyone's consciousness these days. We practice solidarity: everyone has to stay at home to protect old and weak people. Can that go well in the long-run?

It is impressive to see how solidarity is there and how it works. Through the threat, we rediscover virtues, exercise self-discipline and modesty. These are good signals. However, the question arises whether solidarity is deeply rooted in us or is only a pragmatic necessity. This would not last long. As soon as it becomes materially difficult, solidarity is exposed to an extreme burden - this is where the belief that solidarity is a life task comes into play. We are still comfortably on the move in Switzerland. Worldwide, for example in Africa, people are already at the limit of material possibilities. A picture comes to my mind that I received yesterday: someone is sitting on the corrugated iron roof of a hut and doing social distancing. Often ten people live on six square meters. In such situations, entirely different dimensions of solidarity are required.

In other words: as long as there is prosperity, solidarity is noticeable, when resources are running out, there is a risk of argument and even violent conflict?

Signs of de-solidarization can be seen even before we get into a fight. Conspiracy theories quickly emerge in the pandemic. You try to maintain solidarity by creating enemy images. For example, the Chinese are to blame for everything. Or: Why should we take patients from Alsace in nearby France with us in Basel when we may soon need the space ourselves?

In the solidarity question, one can go back to a simple ethical principle, the golden rule that applies in all world religions (Bible Mt 7:12): Treat the other as you want to be treated yourself. Whoever helps the other can also count on help. Helping is not only altruistic, but win-win.

You address conspiracy theories. In certain religious circles, the pandemic is seen as God's punishment. What do you think of it as a theologian?

The Bible has a different approach, especially the New Testament: "God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn people, but to save / heal them." (John 3:17). This is an important message that should be a priority for churches and believers. It is also the essence of the Easter message: We no longer need scapegoats, but once and for all Jesus has taken the cross upon himself and freed us from the constant mechanism of looking for guilty parties. God does not want to harm us, but to help us.

A related aspect: The belief that faith protects us from all evil is unfortunately widespread: the virus spread explosively in South Korea because a mass church continued to worship against warnings. We also experience this in Africa. Up to the Zurich auxiliary bishop, who wants to stick to the award of the host. This is negligent. It can become a crime as it can kill lives - and it is unchristian. I see it like John Calvin. The Geneva Reformer in the 16th century was in poor health and was often dependent on medicine. The believers in Geneva wanted to test him; they asked him to stop taking medication and instead trust in God. But he believed that medicine was sent by God. Doctors, nursing staff, medication and vaccinations are talents and instruments of God and not of the devil

What do you think: is the crisis causing a change in values?

Yes and no. We interpret the pandemic through the glasses of our worldview. A nationalist becomes even more a nationalist, one who is open to the world demands even more global solidarity. The pandemic can only have a positive impact if we are prepared for it from our inner order of values. Otherwise, there is a rapid relapse into the old patterns. At the same time, I'm sure that the exaggerated individualism of the past decades will be challenged. We recognize the value of community. We recognize how dependent we are on the smallest communities such as core families. I think there will be significant shifts in perception. Especially as a result of the economic collapse.

Global indebtedness will take on mass as it did in the 1980s. It will take enormous effort to overcome this and restore a reasonably functioning world economy. The digital technologies will increase in importance. The sustainability goals are more difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, I am confident. One will recognize the importance of multinational organizations and know that WHO plays an incredibly important, not only coordinating, but also predictive and helping role. We rely on international structures.

If we are on the chances of the crisis: Maybe the current recovery of nature through rigorous measures to renounce nourishes the hope that society and politics can actually do something about climate change?

It is good to see nature's relaxation as an encouragement. It shows, for example, that we can also live with limited flight options and can cope with larger restrictions in air or car traffic in order to get a reasonable last-minute solution for climate change. Now we have the experience that the effects are immediately visible, now we need the appropriate balance with the economic considerations, such as massively higher flight and gasoline prices. The pandemic shows that we have far more financial options than previously thought: we will also need trillions to achieve the climate goals.

www.globethics.net

www.christophstueckelberger.ch

The Text was first published in German in the Online Edition of the Church magazine 'reformiert' on 3 April 2020. <https://reformiert.info/de/recherche/ldie-goldene-regel-ist-jetzt-wichtiger-denn-jer-18750.html>