

# The Contribution of Christian Values to the Common Good

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**Abstract:** How, in a democracy, in an open, plural society, can decisions be reached that are defensible in terms of a global common good? This question is also challenging Christian churches to search for an answer while witnessing Christian faith and the Gospel. The main current and future tasks of the church will include enabling people to deal responsibly with freedom. Christianity continues to have major significance for Europe and the West.

**Keywords:** Catholic social doctrine; culture of freedom; responsible freedom; Centre for Cultural Witness

## 1. Introduction

How, in a complex, varied world with diverging interests, with partly contradictory needs, and with a variety of players, is it at all possible to reach viable, reliable, and sustainable decisions? How, in a democracy, in an open, plural society with divergent opinions and options, can decisions be reached that are defensible in terms not only of economic efficiency but also of the common good, or indeed the global common good, and that are so not only in the short term but also in the long run, taking the coming generations into account? These questions represent significant challenges.

We could easily deal with this in a few key words—for instance, responsibility, progress, sustainability, etc.—but this does not lead to a satisfactory resolution. The term responsibility, for example, becomes devoid of content and, in fact, degrades to become a mere key word if it is paraded in an undifferentiated, overly reckless manner. This ultimately promotes the opposite: Awareness of responsibility is eroded because it is always the others who did not meet their responsibility, for instance, by saying “I meant well, I made it possible, organized the funding, developed the idea, and so on, but other people spoiled my well-laid plans”. The constant call for responsibility can lead to a slow-moving process towards irresponsibility, and this would be the end of a free, complex, plural, global society that is able to reach decisions. This could be conceived of in many areas, be it the economic, political, or technical domains. It is therefore a matter of freedom and responsibility, institutions and virtues, Christianity and Western civilization. In this contribution I would like to approach the question in several points, without going into the far more comprehensive topic in detail (cf. [Marx 2013, 2020](#)).<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Freedom, Democracy, and the Common Good

“Die Luft der Freiheit weht—Videtis illam spirare libertatis auram” (Ulrich von Hutten) was suggested as the motto for Stanford University in the early 20th century, which in some respects has been discussed controversially (cf. [Casper 1995](#)). Ulrich von Hutten (1488–1523) was a German humanist and revolutionary, defending Martin Luther and criticizing the Catholic Church. It is often translated as “The wind of freedom blows”. There are many methods to the present day to interpret Ulrich von Hutten’s actions and publications, and he is by no means without controversy. It would nonetheless be interesting to critically re-examine this individual, not only because there are links with the Bishopric of Trier, where I was bishop before coming to Munich<sup>2</sup>, but also because in 2017, especially in Germany, we commemorated the beginning of the Reformation. This was not only a task for the Protestant church in Germany, but also presented a challenge for the Catholic Church.



**Citation:** Marx, Cardinal Reinhard. 2023. The Contribution of Christian Values to the Common Good. *Religions* 14: 591. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14050591>

Academic Editors: Christine Schliesser, Graham Tomlin, Ralph Kunz, Benjamin Schliesser and Stephen G. Parker

Received: 15 February 2023

Revised: 22 March 2023

Accepted: 25 April 2023

Published: 29 April 2023



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In fact, it is not a commemoration that can be separated along denominational lines, but imposes on us, as Christian churches, a joint responsibility to find the right relationship between faith and society and to give a joint Christian witness to our society.

What can this motto “The wind of freedom blows” mean if it is understood in the context in which Hutten wrote it? Von Hutten wanted to teach the unspiritual clergy a lesson and restrict their excessive power. There were certainly good reasons to wish to do this. As with Martin Luther, he was deeply rooted in the piety and mysticism of his time, which had already demonstrated church-critical potential before his time. Luther’s aim was not to split the church, but to use his reforms to point out unfortunate circumstances that cast a shadow on the message of the Gospel. We can thus also understand Hutten’s statement, after Martin Luther had been found guilty, as an unambiguous warning that the wind of freedom that had blown open doors in the Reformation would not subside as a result of the condemnation of Luther’s Theses; the forecast was for change and upheaval to come. To a certain degree, Hutten was also right: As painful as the separation of the churches is, it is also clear that we can no longer turn back from the Reformation questions and the impetus for change to which they led.

### *2.1. A Culture of Freedom*

What can an appeal for an unstoppable wind of freedom mean? Freedom is certainly one of the basic prerequisites for all academic activity and thought. Without freedom there is neither research nor progress, neither criticism nor preservation of tradition. Freedom is without a doubt a high individual and institutional value. We can certainly speak of a culture of freedom, and we may be grateful that we live in free, democratically legitimated societies.

The call for freedom has increasingly been linked in recent years to the call for responsibility, as well as to the call for ethics. Where does this come from? On the one hand, it is caused by the technological revolution in the broader sense, by the discovery that we are able to do and achieve more and more. The technological imperative would be: Anything we can do, we should do. Nothing that we can produce, do, and achieve technically should be prevented. There is a virtually infinite possibility as a result of technical feasibility. We are finding exponential growth, particularly in the digital economy, the bounds of which we are unable to foretell. The question thus also arises with this technological imperative: How is this progress to be guided in such a way that it does not do harm to humankind?

Added to this is an economic imperative. There have been heated discussions on this matter in recent years, particularly in the wake of the financial and economic crisis, but we have not concluded this process. The economic imperative can be considered as: What is profitable may not be prevented. This suggests, in effect, a pure shareholder value orientation. There is naturally also a call for responsibility here: Does this not have consequences that are damaging? This leads to a discussion of a primitive, overflowing capitalism that, in fact, does not serve humankind but is damaging to us.

We could say that these two imperatives have become linked: What is possible in technical terms is combined with the economic interests in the course of a global competitive aspect of a market that knows no bounds and no framework, and that has also become partly detached from economic realities. In particular, in a high-speed economy, there is a need to say in global terms: The one who first achieves technological progress and first makes the profits sets the pace, the direction, and the conditions. We should adapt ourselves and orient our societies towards this. It appears that this stipulates something fateful, since freedom is basically suspended.

In times past, one would perhaps have called this fate or tragedy. The decisive element of Greek tragedy is not the sad event, but the fact that, in a tragedy, those involved are no longer able to act any differently. It already becomes evident in the first act that people here have been placed in a dilemma from which they are powerless to free themselves. The situation progresses unstoppably towards disaster, and indeed cannot be changed.

This naturally profoundly contradicts our image of humankind and of our entire civilization. It is a matter of course that there are coercive situations, but regarding our own lives and social development as a fate hanging over us would mean taking leave of any kind of cultural mandate, all politics, all civilization—both nationally and globally. This process has always happened and will continue to happen. Thus, it is important to make it clear that this is not just something which has developed in a global world and to which we can only react. It is not a matter of wishing the world to be the way we would like to have it, but of seeing the world the way it is. This is true of the technical possibilities, the economic possibilities, even the political possibilities; we must see the world as something we can shape as we see fit. A complex process of coordination with many other players is needed because we are not alone in the world, neither as individuals in a country, nor as nations or companies, nor as religions.

If we wish to protect and promote the culture of freedom—and not only in a limited fashion for us here and now, but sustainably and globally—we need a critique of freedom. This quite literally means a distinction of freedom. We need to realize that freedom can only be protected if it limits itself and becomes responsible freedom that is obligated to the common good, not simply blindly following the technical and economic imperative.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, these questions became even more significant and important for all nations and societies around the world. In his message for the 56th World Day of Peace, [Pope Francis \(2023\)](#), reflecting on the last three years, which were marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, raises an essential question: What did we learn from this? His answer: “Certainly, after directly experiencing the fragility of our own lives and the world around us, we can say that the greatest lesson we learned from COVID-19 was the realization that we all need one another”. This is probably as true for interpersonal relations as it is for relations between states, economies, and social groups. The pandemic has revealed how ramified the global network is, how dependent all economic sectors and nations are on functioning supply chains, and how vulnerable these systems are. Not everything has proven to be effective; some things will have to be agreed upon anew, both globally and in bilateral treaties and agreements. It has also become clear that, far too often, those who do not sit at the nodes of the network are left out of the picture; this applies to states as well as individuals. The tendency towards isolation, including stronger nationalism and borders, also makes it clear that the decisive factor for the survival of humanity and, at the same time, for the active preservation of creation, is to be found in the common good. Especially as Christians, we must also say in retrospect of the COVID-19 pandemic that worldwide solidarity is needed more than ever. Pope Francis concludes, “[T]hat our greatest and yet most fragile treasure is our shared humanity as brothers and sisters, children of God. And that none of us can be saved alone. Consequently, we urgently need to join together in seeking and promoting the universal values that can guide the growth of this human fraternity” (ibid.). This also results in an agenda of all the tasks that we urgently need to actively address and continue: The list ranges from fostering peace and reliable health care to shaping climate change, promoting integration, protecting human rights, combating water shortages, hunger, and poverty worldwide, and to creating just global economic structures. There is much to do—and we can also do something as a church, now more than ever. The greatest source of change available to all people is humanity, which shows itself in responsibility and compassion.

## 2.2. Democracy as a “Precarious” Structure of the Community

Can freedom be guaranteed, and if so, how? Is for instance democracy a guarantor of freedom? We would presumably intuitively answer “Yes” to this question, but in fact the answer is not quite that simple. Democracy is not a natural value, derivable directly from the fact of being human. The bridge to it is built from freedom *and* responsibility.

There are at least two “Achilles heels” of the modern world and of free society. Pope Benedict XVI pointed to one in a speech before the German Bundestag in 2011: the *question of majority and truth* ([Pope Benedict XVI 2011](#)). We as a church believe that we invoke

natural law and hence that we can rapidly solve the question of truth because we, as “knowledgeable people”, only must make it understandable to others. However, natural law is not a sanctified collection of knowledge, but something which should be evident for all. We therefore need the mediation of the future. The relationship between majority and truth is a critical “Achilles heel” of the modern world. We must awaken a sense in our societies that not everything is subject to the democratic majority procedure. However, Benedict XVI, in his contribution, also stated that a majority decision is sufficient as a rule (ibid., p. 32). We should not consider his speech to consist of a fundamental criticism of democracy. He simply pointed out that there are certain points that cannot be subject to a majority decision. We also know this in constitutional law; for instance, in German law, fundamental rights may not be abolished by Parliament. There are elements that can be regulated by law by majority and those that cannot be regulated, which as stated in German constitutional law, have eternal value.

The second Achilles heel consists of the *freedom to make decisions*. Freedom achieves its goal if it has opted for what is good, as Pope John Paul II remarked. What, however, happens if people do not opt for what is good? This is a question that we cannot answer. This does not mean that freedom is taken away from us, but it means that we—also as churches—must do everything we can to show people that a decision based on what is good is not only the right way, but the way leading to a larger life and to greater happiness, enabling us to “have life and have it more abundantly” (Jn 10:10). It is therefore a special task to take up a position on current political and social issues, including showing an argumentative Christian justification, and in doing so not to disregard the ability to make compromises in a plural society.

### 2.3. The Two-Fold Meaning of the Common Good

In addition to “freedom” and “democracy”, “the common good” is the third term used to anchor the topic. The common good is a central term of Catholic social doctrine, although it is difficult to grasp and permits many different interpretations.

In the understanding of Catholic social doctrine, the common good is a “service value”, referring to “the sum of those conditions of social life” that allow for all people without exception “relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment”. This is stated in No. 26 of the Pastoral Constitution “*Gaudium et spes*”, an important document of the Second Vatican Council. It is therefore a matter of creating frameworks allowing individuals and various groups to pursue their goals in an open society whilst respecting human rights and human dignity.

The aim is specifically not the happiness of as many people as possible as understood in a utilitarian sense. The common good is understood, rather, “with regard to the possibilities which it creates for the individuals and sub-groups in a society to reach their personal goals” (Kerber 1986, p. 857). This means that the concrete manifestation and shape of the goals are not defined in advance but must be constantly redefined in the dialogue between individual and joint interests. The scholarly formulation of the definition of the common good therefore does not assume a more traditional Aristotelian–Thomistic view according to which “the good of each individual is fully contained in the common good as an ethical value according to the principle that ‘the whole is more than the sum of the parts’” (ibid., p. 858).

As an *individuum sociale*, people can only reach their goals in community with others. Individual interests and the interests of others must be equitably balanced; moreover, there are values that can only be striven for and achieved jointly.

The definition of the common good therefore reveals the entire tension between individual and social ethics. This is a tension that has fundamentally led to Catholic social doctrine existing at all, as the conviction spread that the judgment of individual acts and the evaluation of complex social action contexts belong to different levels.

When we speak of the common good, we mean first the fundamental conditions in which it is made possible for people to live with one another constructively. The content

version of a *bonum commune* would then be referred to in the strict sense as common property or as an inherent value, and hence should be placed within a social structure, a society, or even worldwide in the sense of human rights and human dignity. However, a tension also exists when it comes to common property, between what is stipulated by nature, creation, or religion and what depends on acceptance by the members of a social structure. It is important to note first and foremost that guaranteeing the common good as an organizational value is ultimately an administrative task in the broadest sense, whilst common property cannot be directly realized by these means (cf. Kerber 1986, p. 858).

While these tensions become more potent if we imagine the common good at global level, it is important to consider this scale. In 1987, more than 35 years ago, Pope John Paul II stated in “*Sollicitudo rei socialis*” that an orientation towards the common good can only function on a global scale (cf. *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (Pope John Paul II 1987, para. 39)). He primarily appealed here to the growing awareness of global solidarity and an orientation towards the poor. Pope Francis repeatedly emphasizes this concept in his words and deeds. He does not tire of recalling that all players must take as the criteria of their free, responsible decisions the consequences of their actions on a global scale and across generations. Pope Francis has made this perspective particularly clear in his encyclicals “*Laudato si*” (Pope Francis 2015) and “*Fratelli tutti*” (Pope Francis 2020).

### 3. The Contribution of the Churches

How can we as churches now help ensure that people freely choose what is good? This can be achieved primarily through upbringing, education, modelling, and keeping open the question of and the search for God through proclamation and liturgy. This also requires constant communication and translation of the Christian Gospel into contemporary issues. The “Centre for Cultural Witness” can make an important contribution to this.

The main current and future tasks of the churches will include enabling people to deal responsibly with freedom. We cannot expect our circumstances to become simpler. We will no longer experience closed cultures. If we want freedom, we will live in plurality; however, this requires enabling people to responsibly opt for what is good in complex circumstances and situations.

Learning responsible freedom is also the model for upbringing and education as well as for what we can pass on in Catholic social doctrine as a concept for a society. This is what the church should be proclaiming. We are fighting for responsible freedom, and we wish to help ensure in our educational facilities and initiatives that freedom can be enjoyed in a responsible fashion.

#### 3.1. Freedom as Responsible Freedom

Freedom and personality are at the heart of Catholic social doctrine. This concept is important because it not only considers humans per se, but also their relationships with others, thus understanding the person both as an individual and as a social being. Freedom is hence led by a perception of humankind in which freedom and social obligation, personal responsibility, and solidarity are inseparable.

The link between freedom and the Gospel is highly important for me personally. After being appointed bishop, I therefore selected for my motto a quote from the Second Letter of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians: “*Ubi spiritus domini ibi libertas*” (“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom”) (2 Cor 3:17). I wanted to use these words to make it clear that freedom is the main topic of our faith. Freedom in this sense does not mean that I can do or not do whatever I choose. From the outset, freedom corresponds with responsibility for my own acts and their impact on others and on society. Freedom is therefore of necessity connected with a striving towards justice.

Particularly because the freedom of the individual forms the basis for the Christian understanding of humankind, it is worrying that freedom is no longer appreciated to the degree it deserves. This is linked, first and foremost, with the frequent restriction of the definition of freedom to economic freedom only. In this process, the freedom thus



restricted is frequently decoupled from the responsibility that accompanies it. The low level of appreciation of freedom could, however, also be rooted in the lack of experience that freedom provides the individual in terms of opportunity to develop, and indeed to live at all.

A free, just society must offer adequate opportunities to everyone and must enable them to develop and live their lives in line with their talents and skills, whilst at the same time providing a safety net to protect them against social risks. It must offer opportunities for societal participation and advancement. To this end, all people must be enabled to contribute their gifts and hence to make their own unique, irreplaceable contribution. Everyone should be offered the chance to make personal use of the opportunities for freedom provided in our societies.

This leads to the concept of a society founded on equal opportunities, as the German bishops also put it in 2011 in their text entitled “*Chancengerechte Gesellschaft. Leitbild für eine freiheitliche Ordnung*” (Deutsche Bischofskonferenz 2011). All efforts to bring about a society founded on equal opportunities must center on concern for the individual. Their participation in social life must be safeguarded. It will only be possible to find answers to the challenges of our time with a human orientation. As is noted in “*Gaudium et spes*”, humankind is then the pivotal point and the central social-ethical standard for all political and economic actions (cf. *Gaudium et spes* [1966] 2008, para. 25). The personality and the concomitant unique value of each individual are founded in their being made in the image of God. Human freedom is the expression of this fact of having been made in the image of God.

The individual is not simply a product of social conditions or circumstances. However intensively people may interact with their social environment, they are nonetheless unique personalities. The individual and the social nature of the individual belong together: A human is both an individual being and a member of a community. This gives rise to a four-fold determination of the free responsibility of the person, which the German bishops also worked out in their above-mentioned document entitled “A society founded on equal opportunities” (Deutsche Bischofskonferenz 2011), and which I would like to outline very briefly here:

- Each person bears responsibility for their own life and for their individual development (subsidiarity principle).
- Each person also bears responsibility for others and for shaping the co-existence within society (solidarity principle).
- The state bears responsibility for the citizen, and there is a joint responsibility incumbent on the people who form a society for its members. A social order is to be measured by whether it serves people (justice principle).
- Society bears responsibility for itself. If the societal order is to serve the life opportunities of each of its members, the community must continually re-examine whether its rules and its institutions are geared towards achieving this goal (responsibility for the creation, sustainability principle).

The idea of responsible freedom also calls upon the individual and appeals to his or her virtues; however, this is by no means the be-all and end-all. The individual ethical requirement must not take a back seat to the institutional ethical requirement. The two must not be played off against one another.

### 3.2. The Co-Existence of the State, Society, and Churches

The German historian Heinrich August Winkler (2016) starts the first volume of his three-volume *Geschichte des Westens* with the following sentence: “Am Anfang war ein Glaube: der Glaube an einen Gott” (“In the beginning was a belief: belief in a God”) (p. 25). Winkler names as the main elements of the “normative project of the West” the rule of law, the separation of powers, democracy, and finally, the right to inalienable human rights. He particularly stresses the fact that the political culture of the West is a pluralistic one. There are certainly different manifestations within Europe and also between Europe and

the United States of America (USA). Finally, the shared features of the West are particularly noticeable in comparison with other societies and cultures.

The dualism of the state, or society, and the church, or religion, is a necessary condition of democracy that is aware that it lives on preconditions that it cannot itself guarantee (this is how the German lawyer Böckenförde (1992) put it, the so-called “Böckenförde-Diktum”). French philosopher Philippe Nemo shows in his book *What is the West?* (Nemo 2005) five steps in development that have led to the cultural formation of the West and to its rise. Nemo starts by mentioning the invention of the *polis*, freedom under the law, science, and school by the Greeks. He then goes on to discuss the invention of the law, of private property, of the ‘individual’ and of humanism by Rome. This is followed by the ethical and eschatological revolution brought about by the Bible. He regards biblical ethics as consisting essentially of a moral of empathy, sharpening the perception of human suffering. It leads to regarding as abnormal and insufferable those evils that humanity had previously regarded as constituting an unchangeable element of the eternal order of things. A decisive novelty is hence formed by mercy, which goes beyond justice. It would naturally be useless to take as our agenda the eradication of evil if one believed that the world of the future would be no different. In this regard, the eschatology opens up a future-oriented time, a time that begins with the Creation and advances towards the “end of all days”. A further factor for Philippe Nemo is the “Papal Revolution” from the 11th to the 13th centuries, which chose to use human reason in the shape of Greek learning and Roman law in order to permanently anchor biblical ethics and eschatology in history, and which hence brought about the first real, successful synthesis between Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem. Nemo finally mentions the promotion of freedom-based democracy by what is generally referred to as the “great democratic revolutions”.

We can therefore only understand our culture of freedom in the context of the major contribution made by Christianity. We can hardly understand the “West” and develop common visions for the future of Western societies without Christianity. This contribution needs to be repeated with vigor in practice and theory. The churches must therefore establish symbols of charity and take up a public position on topics related to politics and society. However, an indispensable prerequisite for sustainable cultural witness is also the credibility, connectivity, and readiness for dialogue of the Christian churches, including the Catholic Church.

### 3.3. The Framework of Freedom

The common good, and in turn the global common good, as an instrumental orientational framework can only be realized in political terms if this orientational framework can also be made understandable to the populations. The orientational framework is basically none other than a renewal of regulatory policy concepts at national, European, and global levels.

This is also the actual challenge for an orientation towards the global common good, given that what the state must be and is, as the guarantor of regulatory policy at the level of a society, can indeed perhaps not exist in this way at the global level. We nonetheless need a framework permitting peoples and individuals to develop and to live in a dignified fashion. It is a matter of enabling all peoples to have “fair access to the international market”, “based not on the unilateral principle of the exploitation of the natural resources of these countries but on the proper use of human resources” (Pope John Paul II 1991, *Centesimus annus*, para. 33). This demand, incidentally, is also valid for the digital economy and for information technologies, as it is for finding sustainable solutions to the climate crisis and re-achieving a world in peace. To quote Pope Francis (2023): “In order to do this, and to live better lives after the COVID-19 emergency, we cannot ignore one fundamental fact, namely that the many moral, social, political and economic crises we are experiencing are all interconnected, and what we see as isolated problems are actually causes and effects of one another”.

The debates on a new economic order and on the baseline of global economic ethics point to this problem, which is still in need of a solution. Without structures and without secure frameworks, the orientation towards the common good remains a “paper tiger”. It is therefore a matter of enforcing regulatory policy approaches on the various levels.

#### 4. The Project of the West—The Contribution Made by Christianity

I have already quoted the historian Heinrich August Winkler and the philosopher Philippe Nemo, who addressed in detail the question of what the “West” is and whether this category can actually still exist. They are far from being the only ones addressing this problem; in fact, there are many contributions towards the debate.

This discussion is also not new. Let us consider Francis Fukuyama (1992), who helped provoke these questions back in 1992 with *Das Ende der Geschichte* (Engl. *The End of History and the Last Man*), and simply remind ourselves of Samuel Huntington’s (counter)hypotheses on *Kampf der Kulturen* (Huntington 1998) (Engl. *Clash of Civilizations*).

As another representative in this debate, I would like to briefly mention the Scottish historian Niall Ferguson and his book entitled *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (Ferguson 2011). In this “history of the clash of civilizations”, Ferguson hypothesizes that the West rose above the other civilizations from 1500 onwards thanks to a number of innovations, which he refers to as “killer apps” (p. 12). He lists six parameters, which he neither weights nor places in a specific sequence: 1. competition, 2. the scientific revolution, 3. the rule of law, 4. the major progress made in medicine, 5. consumerism, 6. the work ethic. Ferguson therefore offers a further approach towards the term “the West”.

Regardless of our interpretation, each contributor shows the many sides of the phenomenon and the difficulty arising in covering it. At the same time, it is made clear how necessary it is to define the Western values. The discussion appears to me to be led, above all, by the following questions: What distinguishes the West? What are the values of the West? What is their relationship to the Christian perception of humankind? What is Christianity for the West and vice versa? Is Christianity a self-critical resource of the West? Is it possible to conceive of and wish for the West without Christianity? How uniform is the West? To what degree does the West perceive itself as being the West? Is there one understanding of the West in Europe and another in the USA? Do we need to advocate an understanding of the West against this background? Must the West develop stronger combined structures? Is the West falling? Or is the West able to assert its cultural, economic, and political predominance in the world—and what good will it do in the future?

##### *An Exemplary Concretization: The Economy—Thinking beyond Capitalism*

I would like to take the economy as an example and detail the relationship between Christianity and Western civilization, before underlining the significance attached to the church and the Christian faith.

With his encyclical “*Evangelii Gaudium*”, Pope Francis triggered in 2013 a rather contentious debate, particularly with the phrase: “Such an economy kills” (*Evangelii Gaudium* (Pope Francis 2013, para. 53). The debate on this phrase centers on the accusation that the church does not actually understand capitalism, and that capitalism has in fact made the world a better place. The church is said to despise the rich and ultimately do nothing to improve the situation in which the poor live, to only have a response of *caritas* for the social problems. However: Is this really the thread that can be followed from the Gospel, via the proclamation of the church, through to Catholic social doctrine?

The discussion of the crisis of capitalism was triggered because we have experienced an exacerbating development since the 90s towards financial capitalism, which has led to a crisis. Even economists have complained of the new “casino capitalism”. This type of capitalism destroys human lives and causes detriment to the common good. A phase of uninterrupted self-awareness of such accelerated capitalism, for which the very concept of the social market economy was a socialist aberration, was followed by the crisis; however, this has not seemed to lead to any real reorientation. Capitalism and the market economy



are not the same thing. The term “capitalism” is misleading, as are all “-isms” that claim to be able to define all of life from a specific point. What sort of view of the economy and of society takes capital as its starting point and reduces the actors on the world’s stage to mere marginal figures or cost factors? Those who reduce economic acts to capitalism have not only chosen a starting point that is morally wrong but have also taken the wrong economic path in the long term. This brings us to the core of the question: What is the West and what does it stand for?

Self-sufficient sub-systems such as the economy or the political arena defend themselves against external intervention. We have naturally become accustomed to making a distinction between the spheres of life that sociologists have described in the modern world. We nonetheless feel that if we wish to be a community, a people, as well as a planetary community of peoples, we cannot only start from our own interests and separate, distinct spheres of life, but must have regard for the whole picture. Furthermore, it then becomes clear that the distinction is not so far-fetched, since a new, integrated view has underhandedly developed in the Modern age, namely the economization of all spheres of life. Economization ultimately means making the rhythm of society comply with the interests of capital exploitation at a global level. This essentially makes capitalism the global, single standard, against the background of an unenlightened ideology that understands progress as an evolutionary process of this very capitalism, to which people, their cultures, and lifestyles must conform. Capitalism is ultimately regarded as an intrinsic stream of events, and the task of people and of policymakers is one of adjustment. The shaping of markets, the political correction of market results, and the regulation and ordering of capital markets is seen as a disturbance or as a necessary evil.

However, the idea that there are pure markets somewhere, which then bring forth what is good in free competition, is an ideology in itself. Another important aspect of thinking about market, money, and morality, which cannot be elaborated here, is described by Michael J. Sandel in his work *What Money Can’t Buy* (Sandel 2012). Capitalism may not become the model for society, since, ultimately, it has no regard for the fate of the individual, for the weak, or for the poor. In particular, because we have freedom and responsibility as our starting point in the Christian perception, we may not provide a space for such ideas. This has nothing to do with a rejection of the market economy, which is necessary and sensible, but has to do with serving people. The writings of the church’s social doctrine speak of this; the spiritual foundations of the social market economy are characterized by Ordoliberalism, which in turn was largely inspired by Christian models.

These ideas have not, however, played a major role in the major, worldwide economic debate. That markets are “products of civilization”, that they are meant for shaping, that the economy is to serve the common good, that the material foundations are a prerequisite but cannot stipulate the goal of human co-existence—these are all discussions that are necessary, important, and helpful, particularly today.

Pope Francis (2013) writes: “The dignity of each human person and the pursuit of the common good are concerns which ought to shape all economic policies. At times, however, they seem to be a mere addendum imported from without in order to fill out a political discourse lacking in perspectives or plans for true and integral development” (Evangeliū Gaudium para. 203). This makes it our task as bishops, and also as laity, to call for politics to be given an ethical foundation and to make our church’s contribution to politics. Nowadays we need to re-think capitalism, to even think beyond capitalism.

## 5. Conclusions: Evangelization and Renewal: Renaissance, Not Restoration

As Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger stated, Christianity in Europe is still in its infancy; its heyday lies before us (cf. Lustiger 1990). But most people in Europe have the impression that the heyday of Christianity is *behind* us and that we should be defending the last bastions in house-to-house fighting. This is, however, not my vision, nor is it the vision and idea of the “Centre for Cultural Witness”. The Gospel has yet to have the final word, both

for society and for our lives. One element is to proclaim and live a responsible freedom, including within the church.

From the beginning, the Bible presents freedom as a gift and a task, as a charisma and a mission. God wants us to be free in the sense of a responsible freedom. This is a powerful message for our time. The question of God is linked to the concept of responsible freedom. In the crises of our present time (e.g., climate crisis, post-COVID, inequality, migration, war in Ukraine), we can draw from a rich spiritual Christian treasure and bear witness to it in our societies. This is and shall be one of the main tasks of the “Centre for Cultural Witness”.

I believe that Christians have major significance for Europe and the West. The future of Europe requires much more than the defense of prosperity or a reduction in the logic of capitalism, as the current tensions and crises also show.

We must also address economic questions in the context of the future idea of Europe. And should this future idea not also encompass a common orientation of the West? This is precisely where we as Christians should be involved. Where are these ideas to come from if not from the spirit of the Gospel? In this respect, the questions of Christianity, and of all religions, are also about the future viability of the “Western model”.

The Gospel is the most important enlightenment in the history of Europe. This enlightenment is by no means complete; some have not yet heard it, including among our own. The potential of this Gospel remains powerful.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Basic ideas of this paper have been presented several times, e.g., at the Roger W. Heyns Lecture on Religion and Society at Stanford University, 2015.
- <sup>2</sup> Hutten joined Franz von Sickingen, who in the “War against Trier” besieged the then Archbishop of Trier and Elector Richard von Greiffenklau, and failed.

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