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## ON A CULTURE OF LIFE IN THE DANGERS OF THIS TIME

I want to speak on what since some time concerns me most:

a culture of life  
stronger than the terror of death  
a love for life  
overcoming the destructive forces in our world today,

because I believe strongly:

“Wo aber Gefahr ist,  
wächst das Rettende auch”                      But where there is danger  
salvation also grows (Fr. Hölderlin).

I begin with some of the dangers of our time in Part I and answer in Part II with dimensions of a liveable world and the vitality of love.

### THE TERROR OF UNIVERSAL DEATH TODAY

1. Human life today is in danger. It is not in danger because it is mortal. This was always the case. It is in danger because it is no longer loved, affirmed and accepted. The French poet Albert Camus wrote after World War II: “This is the mystery of Europe: Life is no longer loved”. Whoever had suffered in that murderous war, knows what he meant. A life no longer loved is ready to kill and being killed.

Today a new religion of death is confronting us. I don't mean the religion of Islam but the ideology of terror, so typical of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: “Your young people love life”, said the Mullah Omar of the Taliban in Afghanistan, “our young people love death”. After the mass-murder in Madrid on March 11, 2004, we

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found letters with the same message: “You love life, we love death”. This seems to be the modern terrorist ideology of the suicide-assassins. I remember: We have had this in Europe as well some 60 years ago: “Viva la muerte”, cried an old fascist general in the Spanish civil war: Long live death! And you can’t deter a suicide-assassin, he has broken the fear of death, he doesn’t love life anymore, he wants to die with his victims.

2. Behind this terrorist surface a greater danger is hidden: Peace- and non-proliferation-treaties between nations have a silent presupposition: The will to survive, the will to life on both sides. But what happens if one partner doesn’t want to survive but is willing to die, if with his death he can destroy this whole, “wicked” or “godless” world? What happens when a nation possessing nuclear weapons becomes obsessed by this “religion of death” and turns out to be a collective suicide-assassin to the rest of the human world, because it is driven into a corner and gives up all hope? Deterrence functions only so long as all partners have the will to life and want to survive.

The attraction of destroying this world, seen as old, wicked or godless, can grow into a universal death-wish. One becomes willing to sacrifice one’s own life, that appears to be useless and meaningless, if one can destroy this whole hostile world. This apocalyptic “religion of death” is the real enemy of the will to live, the love for life and the affirmation of being.

3. Behind this present political dangers of the common life of the nations there is still an older threat lurking: The nuclear threat. The first atomic bomb on Hiroshima in August of 1945 brought World War II to an end, and was at the same time the beginning of the end-time for the whole of humankind. End-time is the age, in which the end of humankind is possible at any moment. No human being can survive the “nuclear winter” which will follow a great atomic war. Remember: Humankind was at the edge of such a great atomic war during the Cold War for more than forty years. It is true: since the end of the “Cold War” in 1990 a great atomic war is not very probable. We live in relative peace. But there are still so many atomic and hydrogen bombs stored up in the arsenals of the great nations (and some smaller ones as well), for the self-annihilation of humankind. Sacharov called it “collective suicide”: “Who fires first, dies as the second”: This was for more than forty years the so-called “mutual assured destruction”. Most of the people had forgotten this atomic threat until president Obama revived last year in Prague the old dream of a “world free of atomic bombs” and started new disarmament negotiations with Russia. Then many of us became suddenly again aware of this destiny hanging like a dark cloud over the nations. Strangely enough we feel the presence of the nuclear threat publicly in what American psychoanalysts call “the nuclear numbing”. We repress our anxiety, try

to forget this threat and live as if this danger were not there, but it is gnawing in our subconsciousness, impairing our love of life.

4. In difference to the nuclear threat the climate change is not only a threat but already an emerging reality everywhere. The people know it because everyone can see it, feel it and sometimes smell it. The destruction of the environment which we are causing through our present global economic system will undoubtedly seriously jeopardize the survival of humanity in the twenty-first century. Modern industrial society has thrown out of balance the equilibrium of the earth's organism, and is on the way to universal ecological death, unless we can change the way things are developing. Scientists have shown that carbon dioxide and methane emissions are destroying the ozone layer in the atmosphere, while the use of chemical fertilizers and a multitude of pesticides is making the soil infertile. They have proved that the global climate is already changing now, at the present day, so that we are experiencing an increasing number of 'natural' catastrophes, such as droughts and floods – catastrophes which are actually not only natural, but also man-made. The ice in the Arctic and Antarctic is melting, and in the coming century, the scientists tell us, coastal cities such as my hometown Hamburg, and coastal regions such as Bangladesh and many South Sea islands, are going to be flooded. All in all life on this earth itself is under threat.

This ecological crisis is in the first place a crisis brought about by Western scientific and technological civilization. That is true.

But it is mistaken to think that environmental problems are problems for the industrial countries of the West alone. On the contrary, the ecological catastrophes are intensifying still more the already existing economic and social problems of countries in the Third World. Indira Gandhi was right when she said that 'poverty is the worst pollution'.

We know all this but we are like paralysed. We don't do what we know is necessary to prevent the worst consequences. This paralysis may be called "ecological numbing". Nothing accelerates an imminent catastrophe so much as paralysed doing nothing.

We don't know whether humankind will survive its selfmade destiny. And this is good so. For if we would know that we would not survive, we would do nothing; if we would know that we shall survive, we would also do nothing. Only if the future is open for both we are forced to do today what is necessary to survive tomorrow. Because we can't know whether humankind will survive we must act today as if the future of life depends on us, and must trust at the same time that we and our children will win life and survive.

5. But must a human race exist, or are we just an accident of nature? There live today already more than 6 billion human beings on earth and our number will grow rapidly. The earth could be uninhabited as well. The earth lived without

human beings for millions of years and may survive perhaps for millions of years after the human race disappears. This raises the last and deepest question:

Are we human beings on earth only by chance, or is it part of the evolution of life that we human beings had to come? If nature would show a “strong anthropic principle” we could feel “at home in the universe” (Stuart Kauffman). If this cannot be proved, the universe gives no answer to this existential question of humankind. Neither the stars nor our genes say, whether a human being should be or not. But how can we love life and affirm our human being if humankind is only an accident of nature, as such superfluous and without relevance for the universe, perhaps only a mistake of nature? Is there a “duty to be”, as Hans Jonas told us? Is there any reason to love life and affirm the human being? If we find no answer every culture of life is uncertain in its fundamentals and built on shaky grounds.

## A CULTURE OF LIFE MUST BE A CULTURE OF COMMON LIFE IN THE HUMAN AND THE NATURAL WORLD

1. Can we “live with the bomb”? I think we can grow in wisdom, but how?

President Obama’s dream of a “world without atomic weapons” is an honorable dream, but only a dream. Humankind will never again become incapable of what can be done now. Whoever has learned the formula of atomic fission will never forget. Since Hiroshima 1945 humankind has lost its “atomic innocence”.

But the atomic end-time is also the first common age of the nations. All the nations are sitting in the same boat. We all share the same threat, everyone can become the victim. In this new situation humankind must organize itself as the subject of common survival. The foundation of the United Nations in 1946 was a first step, international security-partnership will save peace and give us time to live, and some day perhaps a transnational unification of humankind will keep the means of nuclear destruction under control. By science we learn to gain power over nature, by wisdom we learn to gain control of our power. The development of public and political wisdom is as important as the scientific progress.

The first lesson we learn is this: Deterrence doesn’t secure peace anymore. Only justice saves peace between the nations. There is no other way to peace in the world but just actions and harmonious balance of interests. Peace is not the absence of violence but the presence of justice. Peace is a process, not a property. Peace is a common way in reducing of violence and constructing of justice in the social and the global relationships of humankind.

Peace inside of our nations is a question of social justice. The alternative to poverty is not property; the alternative to poverty and property is community, and the spirit of community is solidarity and mutual help. This is in essence the moral teaching of the world religions.

## 2. The “reverence for Life”

If in a life-system, connecting a human society with the natural environment, a crisis in the dying of nature happens, a crisis of the whole life-system emerges as well. What we call today the “ecological crisis” is not only a crisis in our environment but a total crisis of our life-system, and can’t be solved by technological means only, it also demands a change in our life-style and a change in the leading values and convictions of our society. Modern industrial societies are no longer in harmony with the cycles and rhythms of the earth as it was the case in the premodern agrarian societies. Modern societies are programmed on progress and expansion of the projects of man. We reduce the nature of the earth to “our environment” and destroy the life-space of other forms of life. Year after year hundreds of life-forms die out. Nothing works so destructive as reducing nature to a human environment.

We need a change from the modern domination of nature to a “reverence for life”, as Albert Schweitzer and the Tao-te-king are teaching us. This is the respect for each single form of life and for our common life in the human and the natural world and for the great community of all the living. A postmodern biocentrism will replace the western and modern anthropocentrism. Of course, we can’t return to the cosmos-orientation of the old and premodern agrarian world, but we can begin with the necessary ecological transformation of the industrial society. For this we must, I think, change our concept of time: The linear concept of progress in production consumption and garbage must give way to the concept of the circular time of “renewable energy” and a “recycling economy”. Only the circulations of life can give stability to our world of progress. But the recycling economy is still the economy of the poor people.

The Earth-charter of the UNO of 1992 points into this direction:

“Mankind is part of nature.

Every form of life is unique, warranting respect

Regardless of its worth to man”.

We are “part of nature” and can therefore only survive by preserving the integrity of nature.

## 3. The life of love in times of danger

Human being is not only a gift of nature but also the task of being human. To accept this task of humanity in times of terror required a strong courage to live. Life must be affirmed against terror and threat. To say it simply: Life must be lived, and then the beloved life, the common life in the human and the natural world is stronger than the threat of universal annihilation. I see 3 major factors for this courage to be and the courage to live:

a) Human life must be affirmed, because it can also be denied. As we all know, a child can only grow in an atmosphere of trust. In an atmosphere of rejection the child will fade away in soul and body. The child learns to accept itself when it is

accepted. What is true for the child is true for human beings lifelong: Where we are accepted, appreciated and affirmed, we are motivated to live, where we feel a hostile world of contempt and rejection, we retire into ourselves and become defensive. We need a strong affirmation of life that can deal with such negations of life. Each YES to life is stronger than every negation of life, because it can create something new which negations cannot.

b) Human life is a participating and sharing life. We become alive where we feel the sympathy of others, and we stay alive where we share our life with others. As long as we are interested, we are alive. The counterproof is easy to make: Indifference leads to apathy. Total apathy is a completely un-lived life, it is the dying of the soul before the physical death.

c) Human life is alive in the pursuit of happiness. Human life gains its vitality from this inborn striving. "The pursuit of happiness" is since the American

Declaration of Independence one essential human right. To pursue one's happiness is not only a private human right but a public human right as well. We speak of the "good life" or the "meaningful life" and we mean a life that lives out its best potentials in the public life of a good and harmonious society as Confucius taught us.

When we take this "pursuit of happiness" seriously we are meeting the misfortune of the masses of poor people and begin to suffer with the unfortunates. The compassion by which we are drawn into their passion for life is the reverse side of the pursuit of happiness. The more we become capable of the happiness of life, the more we become also capable of sorrow and compassion. This is the great dialectics of human life.

"But where there is danger, salvations also grows". How is salvation growing? I have tried to show how the Being can take in the non-being, and life can overcome death through love and deadly contradictions can be changed into productive differences and higher forms of living and community, or as Prof. Tu Weiming said: "While harmony recognizes conflict and contradiction, it seeks to transform destructive tension into creative tension, so that a stressful relation can be energized to reach a higher synthesis".

I am reminded of a famous statement of the German philosopher Friedrich Hegel, a friend of Hölderlin since their student time at Tübingen university. Hegel wrote the first sentence of his dialectical thinking in his "Phenomenology of the Spirit" 1807:

"Not a life that shrinks away from death  
or remains untouched by devastations,  
but a life that endures death and  
holds its grounds in death  
is the life of the Spirit".

A life truly loved and lived is overcoming the contradictions of terror and threat. Every true religious spirituality reveals the great divine YES to life, YES to the earth and YES to the future in spite of dangers.

## KULTURA ŻYCIA WOBEC WSPÓŁCZESNYCH ZAGROŻEŃ

### Streszczenie

Jürgen Moltmann podejmuje temat szeroko pojętego zagrożenia cywilizacji życia we współczesnym świecie. Protestantcki teolog opisuje zagrożenia, jakie pojawiają się w obecnych czasach, szczególnie ubolewając nad coraz bardziej powszechnymi wystąpieniami przeciw miłości, a nawet życiu ludzkiemu. W pierwszej części swojego eseju autor podejmuje próbę wykazania, że problemy terroryzmu, zbrojeń nuklearnych, braku należytej troski o środowisko naturalne rodzą poczucie nieustannego braku pokoju, co z kolei przeciwstawia się miłości, afirmacji oraz tolerancji każdego życia ludzkiego. Na kanwie tych rozważań Moltmann usiłuje odpowiedzieć na pytanie o sens egzystencji rodzaju ludzkiego w świecie oraz wykazać, że człowiek jest kimś więcej aniżeli „przypadkiem” natury. W drugiej części swojego eseju niemiecki dogmatyk stawia tezę, że cywilizacja, aby mogła być uznana za życiodajną, musi być przestrzenią komunii międzyludzkiej oraz powinna postulować poszanowanie środowiska naturalnego. Ostatecznie tylko miłość może przewyciężyć strach i zagrożenie. Jest ona jednak w niebezpieczeństwie z uwagi na wspomniane wcześniej niebezpieczeństwa. Jednak tam, gdzie istnieje zło, wzrasta także zbawienie, a prawdziwa religia zawsze objawia swoje wielkie, boskie „tak” dla życia. Dlatego prawdziwa miłość jest w stanie przewyciężyć strach i niebezpieczeństwa poprzez twórcze i wysoko zorganizowane formy życia wspólnotowego.

(opr. Michał Kosche)