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We need each other – more than ever before

German observations on the current American situation

There is a new focal point for the well-known phenomenon of “German Angst.” It is not the fear of a nuclear war or a terrorist attack, not the migration crisis or the uncertainty of future old-age pensions. The new object of “German Angst” is Donald Trump. Sixty-nine percent of Germans nowadays are concerned that the irrationality of American politics under Trump endangers global security and undermines international cooperation. His return to the slogan “America first,” his criticism of free trade, his special attacks on Germany and the European Union, his disrespect for equal human dignity irritate not only large parts of the American society but also the German public. Many people in my country fear that this may lead to an end of transatlantic partnership as a central element of global stability. The fear that under this pressure NATO may collapse disturbs even more Germans than the doubts about whether our politicians may find appropriate ways to handle the refugee crisis and the related social, cultural and political tensions. Trump’s egocentric way of doing politics, his flitting character, his lack of self-control are frequent topics in public or private exchange. The American situation is often mentioned in everyday conversations, but mostly concentrated on one person: the president of the USA.

The tragic events in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017 together with the disconcerting reactions of President Trump symbolize the moral, cultural and religious dimensions of the deep rift that seems to divide American society. In the understanding of many Germans, these events represent a violent atmosphere in which the idea of “white supremacy” gains broad recognition with the help of the first citizen of his country, namely the president. Hatred against African Americans, Jews and Muslims and other forms of group-related enmity can flourish in an atmosphere in which they seem to be legitimated by the highest political authority. This encourages racism and political extremism in other countries, including Germany. Possibly that will be one of the continuous effects of this presidency on the international political atmosphere. What a dismal perspective!

The American situation was always a controversial issue in the German public. Gratitude and criticism were always intertwined. The inner polarization of the American society was reflected in the German stance to America, the super-power, the land of dreams, the flagship of capitalism, the pioneer of new cultural and religious developments. But the decisive reference point was always the fact that America paved—at least for the western part of Germany—the way to democracy after the liberation from Nazi rule and favored German unity after the end of communist regimes in the east of the European continent. For the post-war generations, the transatlantic partnership was a cornerstone of their collective identity.

That is true also for the life stories of many German individuals. It is also my personal experience. One of the most important role models of my youth was Hans Simons, my mother's oldest brother. When Hitler came to power in 1933, my uncle left Germany at the age of 40. Quite different from the rest of his family, he had no illusions about the outcome of the Nazi regime: terror, violence, war. His way into exile was difficult, but fortunately enough, his wandering around ended up in the United States of America. He benefitted from the idea of a "University in Exile" and became a faculty member of the New School for Social Research in New York. After 1945 he decided to hold on to his American citizenship, which had been kindly granted to him as a refugee from Hitler's dictatorship, and to serve the country that had saved him. During the 1950s he even served the New School for Social Research at New York as its president. But he returned to Germany from time to time. Whenever he was in the country I had the chance to meet him and to learn from his political experience and his worldview. He died in 1972 at the age of 78. For nearly half of his life he was an American citizen. But he was, as his biographer Philipp Hess rightly puts it, a "German American" and, even more, a "cosmopolitan democrat."

I mention him because even today my perspective on America is determined by his example. He and his wife Eva opened my eyes to the political culture of the United States of America. I learned about the tension between American isolationism on the one hand and international responsibility on the other hand. I understood why the famous theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, together with other intellectuals—among them Hans Simons—during World War II strongly opposed the idea of "America first," which meant in those days not to be involved with military means to overcome Nazism. But I understood also why liberal Americans ten years later opposed McCarthyism in the name of freedom, defending the spirit of an open society. We understood that it is not anti-American to criticize American politics, in those years, for instance, the denial of civil rights to African Americans or the cruelties of the Vietnam war. Then we learned this kind of criticism from the open debate in the US itself.

The way from dictatorship to freedom was the way of my uncle. It was at the same time the background present in Hannah Arendt's political philosophy, based on the "right to have rights" and on the "freedom to be free." America represented since my youth the political form of the idea formulated in the Virginia Bill of Rights of 1776 as well as in the Declaration of Independence of 1776 in clear and simple words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." This same idea was put into a global context by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." The American example encouraged Christians in Europe to fight for human rights after a long time of Christian resistance against this seemingly "modern" idea. Christians and churches began to contribute to a culture of human rights, emphasizing that the equal dignity of every human person is founded in the conviction that all humans are equally created in the image of God.

When the civil rights movement succeeded in the US or when President Jimmy Carter put a new emphasis on human rights as the basis for the international commitment of his country, many of us felt encouraged to develop comparable ideas as citizens of the slowly emerging European Union. When, finally, the wall in Berlin came down and the division of Europe vanished, many people around the world nurtured the hope that after a period of cold war and deterrence by mutually assured destruction, a new time of just and durable peace could begin.

That turned out to be as unrealistic as Francis Fukuyama's vision of an "end of history." September 11, 2001, became a symbol for a new realism. But even in the years of collective disappointment by new wars and by the emergence of a new kind of religiously impregnated terrorism, no one would have dared to predict that we would find ourselves nearly thirty years after the dangerous period of a global confrontation between east and west in a situation in which technological euphoria coincides with political depression.

The growing wave of populism around the world is nothing other than an expression of disappointment, fear and anger. This combination governs not only the American political scenery but also the atmosphere in many European countries. For Christians this is a decisive challenge because for Christian faith, nothing is more characteristic than the conviction that the fears of this world do not deserve the last word. In Jesus' words, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Therefore it is a central task of Christians to speak frankly about our doubts, our anxieties, our xenophobia. Only in addressing those feelings do we have the chance to develop a realistic picture of our situation. Only if we learn to express our fears can we develop hope. Only if we address the reasons for mutual distrust can we develop trust. To develop the strength for such an approach we need each other. We need each other even more than ever before. Our understanding of the human person created into the image of God is at stake. Only together can we contribute to a lived and viable democracy.

Again and again we are confronted with terrible acts of brutal violence, lastly in the murderous attacks on human lives in the Pittsburgh Tree of Life Synagogue. It is horrifying to realize the growing amount of anti-Semitic terror also in Germany. We are surrounded by dreadful atrocities which may undermine the idea of a peaceful living together. But fatalism is not a way out. The enforcement of the legal order, including the political duty to prohibit the use of weapons in private hands, is of obvious importance. But even more necessary is the renewal of hope, trust and empathy.

On both sides of the Atlantic we need realism in confronting the polarization of our societies. But this realism has to be guided by courage and confidence. This is a time to renew our faith in God and the love for our fellow humans. The American society gives numerous examples of that. Many churches and grassroots Christian communities witness in impressive forms the "Creator who created all human beings equal and endowed them with unalienable rights." Many media oppose the president's efforts to discourage the freedom and the independence of the press with rousing statements of affirmation for a free press and an open society.

In churches and faith communities as well as in other areas of civil society we should, on both sides of the Atlantic, put an end to the concentration on the president and open our eyes and hearts to all signs of solidarity and of living together in peace. We are not alone in our resistance against the destruction of social coherence. Many stay for decency and respect, in the US as well as in Europe. And they stand up and become present in public. There is not any more time to lose. It is now the time – to use words of the German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer – “to pray, to do justice and to wait for God’s own time.”