

Bishop Dieser of Aachen: Europe must defend its secular culture

Bishop Dieser of Aachen examines our sixth principle, "Respect the believer but not necessarily the content of the belief".



Homily by Bishop Dr. Helmut Dieser on Ascension Day, 25 May 2017

in Aachen Cathedral

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before Presentation of the Charlemagne Prize to Professor Timothy Garton Ash

Lectionary Year A: 1stLesson: Acts 1:1-11, 2ndLesson: Ephesians 1: 17-23;

Gospel: Matthew 28: 16-20

Dear Sisters and Brothers in faith,

dear guests from all of Europe,

dear Charlemagne Prize Laureate in 2017, Professor Ash,

Last year, this year's recipients of the Charlemagne Prize formulated "Ten principles of free speech in a digital world".

The six of these principles is: "Respect the believer but not necessarily the content of the belief".

In a connected world all the contents of belief of every religion can be made available to everyone. Everyone should be free to express their religious police wherever they like. Freedom of religion is also human rights and digital means.

What is new in the digital world, though, is that the contents of belief can become much further divorce from those who promote them than it has been the case in the past.

People can broadcast their convictions much more quickly and much more widely through the Internet than ever imaginable before – without being identified as a believer.

In this situation the principal raises a caveat: Respect the believer, but examine critically – and perhaps even reject – what he is advocating.

But is there a vicious circle here? In order to be able to examine the belief critically and possibly reject it, I need convictions of my own views which are based on these convictions.

Indeed I have to be a believer myself in order to develop my own critical views in relation to someone else's beliefs.

Or I at least have to be conditioned by a generally accepted belief system which leads me to a position of my own since I am able to protect it with discernment and defend it against any threats. In short: if Europe no longer wanted to internalise will be conditioned by belief system, it would be unable to maintain a critical stance towards any belief.

Today, on the feast of Ascension, I would like to subject the belief symbolised by this feast day to

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Professor Ash's question: Why can we accord it a respect?

In doing so, I would like to show that it has made Europe what it is today.

"May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory,

give you a Spirit of wisdom and revelation...

May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened,...

in accord with the exercise of his great might,

which he worked in Christ, raising him from

the dead and seating him at this right hand in the heavens, far above every principality,

authority, power, and dominion, and every name that is named not only in this age but also in the one to come."

This is how the Apostle sums up the mystery of faith in the letter to the Ephesians.

God's almighty power, one could say, all the power which belief in God contains, has only become perfectly true in this world in *one* person, in Christ.

But Christ is also at one and the same time the person who suffered in the flesh or the power wielded by *humankind*.

And this power has always been liable to be turned against the very man who especially liked to call himself the *Son of Man* and became the man on the cross.

And no God prevented this!

No God used his power and might either take revenge on his behalf or to suppress this belief: that the One who has been God's Son since the beginning of eternity was actually crucified. And everywhere in Europe and far beyond, the cross became a visible symbol of faith in the crucified one, whose power is different from greater than all the violence and oppression, to which he and those who believe in him subjected.

He *was taken up into heaven*, that is: the future world, the world of freedom, truth, and power, which works for people rather than against them, already begins in him.

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It is not a utopia.

So neither believers nor atheists have to work for its realisation, let alone throw away their small lives as cannon-fodder.

No one has to die for Christ!

but if this happens, it is because they are subjected to the same violence that he faced. And yet this violence runs into the ground as a result of Christian martyrdom.

It is the little ones, the oppressed, the losers, whose death is of no interest to anyone, who are closest to him, who are the first to whom he gives his victory.

In the *future world*, the last will be first.

Christ, the new man, the man who is capable of being divine, is *taken up into heaven*. *The future world* begins in him.

So, in the eyes of those who believe in him, this world is not heading towards a bright human-made future. On the contrary, the ultimate goal of the whole world and all of history, which is already been attained, pushes out of the future into the present: the angels tell the apostles: "*This Jesus here is been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.*" By saying this, they cause the apostles to look away from heaven and back down to earth.

In the letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle describes how the One Has become perfect penetrates the present: "*May the eyes of your heart be enlightened, that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call.*"

There is no *Kingdom of God* and no Republic of God which can be built from the bottom up.

Rather there is a clear distinction between *powers* and *principalities* in this world and the power which only the Risen One possesses, and not his disciples. He himself says: "*To me is given all the power in heaven and on earth.*" But in those who believe in him the power is expressed in the strength and power of *hope* which comes from above and fills them.

This is why they should *give to Caesar what is due to Caesar*: taxes and obedience to the law, so that the state can ensure the common good.

They should give God all the desires of their hearts, or their hunger for perfection, although seeking

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after truth, all the strength which enables them to do good to other people and to the whole of creation, so that they become *witnesses* to the goal, whose *times and seasons* only God knows.

Is it possible to respect this belief?

I would assert that it is through this belief that Europe became what it is and can continue to be itself.

And I include here the idea which is rooted in the Gospel that the state and the rule of God are two entirely different things.

Hence the independent power to criticise the state freely without having to set up a rival state; and hence the concept of the dignity of every person, because Christ died for them and gives them eternal life; hence the power of forgiveness and mercy, because the power of the Risen One comes from love and taking the place of all of us without seeking revenge; hence the idea of social action which, as a practical expression of love for one's neighbour, find strength through faith; hence violence is restricted to such an extent that the state has a monopoly of violence, which only may used to maintain security, defend the weak, and uphold the law, but never the protection and enforcement of deism; and, finally: the emergence of secular, and therefore liberal, art and culture, and all the beginnings of the Enlightenment which find their origins in the Holy Scriptures. These enable us to understand that faith and reason are two equally powerful and irrepressible strengths of humankind. And they need not be regarded as being in conflict with one another or one being subordinate to the other. It is only through their working together in harmony that humanity may be fully revealed.

Because of all of this, Europe has no need for an ideology of its own, either in order to justify itself or to use violence to achieve its own ends.

Europe is not a new empire!

All this gives you the power to reject such disastrous ideas as romantic notion of the nature of the state, ideological bolstering of the nation state, and even idolising the status of theocracy. Europe does not need and cannot tolerate any of that!

Humanities longing for certainty, security, and even perfection is profoundly satisfied by the belief associated with today's feast today: Christ, who is in heaven and *with us every day until the end of the world*, as the guarantor of our completion.

This has the power to set believers free from their own striving towards perfection in this world and therefore also from the risk of exhorting the state too highly.

Nowadays, Europe is willing and able to be secular, to provide such a culture, and to make it

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available to everyone who wants to live in it.

But, according to Professor Ash's sixth principle, Europe must reject all the police which seek to oppose and destroy this secular culture.

But in order to do so your needs more than just the narrative of the past: the history of its foundation after the Second World War and the Nazi crimes which our country perpetrated against so many millions of people.

Europe has to grasp again and again the concept of its liberal and secular nature has its *own belief*, the value this and internalise it, because it arises out of the Gospel of Him, who had been *taken up into heaven*.

That is why omits the idea of re-evangelising Europe also promotes Europe's own self-understanding and promotes Europe as a space for the secular, for freedom of opinion, freedom of speech, the separation of powers, and the religious neutrality of the state.

Because all these European achievements in no way contradict the one who says: *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations."*

Amen

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