Values of the Gospel: The Values Discourse in the Global Ecumenical Movement

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ABSTRACT: The concept of "values" emerged in contrast to religion. However, churches refer to "Christian values." Examining the use of values-language in the Global Ecumenical Movement, especially by the World Council of Churches, the article shows how the term is adopted in order to speak into a secular society and to suggest a Christian vision of society that is oriented by the Kingdom of God. The concept is not only used to build a bridge between society's challenges and church, but also to express the Christian task in a globalized and secular world.

I.   Introduction

At present, Christianity and cultures strongly influenced by Christianity are often associated with "Christian values." This became clear, for example, in the German refugee crisis in 2015, where it was discussed whom "Christian values" actually address: the own population or the refugees.[1] However, values are not only invoked in a cultural context, but also by political parties. Within this context, "Christian values" or "Judeo-Christian values" can be policy guidelines and identity markers of political parties.[2] These few examples show that the term is used in the socio-political context primarily to describe Christian tradition and Western culture and not to name concrete values. But of what values could "Christian values" exactly comprise? Christian values can be faith, hope and love as well as charity, mercy, justice, freedom and peace or even family values. This wide semantic range of the term "Christian values" stresses that the use of values-language within Christianity is not self-evident. The concept "Christian values" is not distinct and clear as it can refer to the tradition of divine virtues as well as to Christian ethical implication. On the contrary, referring to "values," the expression remains abstract: It indicates high validity for something that is not qualified except for "Christian."

In fact, for an extended period of time, the term "values" was reserved for secular spheres. Originally, the term was used during the 18th century in national economics and addressed the value of goods that were exchanged.[3] From this starting point, the term infiltrated other disciplines, such as philosophy and sociology. The term itself became especially prominent *in contrast* to religion, as German philosophers such as Max Scheler searched for reasons for moral action that were not based on religious ideas of God.[4] Value-philosophy was interested in the objectivity of values in order to describe ethical reasons that could guide human behav-

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1   Cf. Hidalgo 2019.
2   Cf. for example European People's Party 2022.
3   Cf. Law 1720; Smith 1776 (1974); Marx 1890 (1962).
4   Cf. Scheler 1954.

ior. Moreover, in Sociology, the concept of "values" arose in the context of action theory.[5] In the 1960s, Clyde Kluckhohn defined values as a "conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection of available modes, means and ends of action."[6] As such, values are essential in order to address the moral basis of both the individual and society.[7]

This very short and incomplete sketch of the conceptual history of the concept of "value" already indicates the varied background of the term and its roots outside theology and religion. Nonetheless, churches speak of values in public debates.[8] How can values-language be part of religious speech when the concept itself was used to describe paradigms and principles in order to replace God's relevance for human action? In order to examine the use of values-language in Christianity, I will consider its usage within the World Council of Churches. The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches seeking ways of visible unity in one faith fellowship confessing Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the biblical Scriptures.[9] In so doing, the World Council of Churches links different churches from all over the world and can be seen as a discussion board for societal and theological issues that impact the worldwide Christian community. As a global actor attempting to link different cultures and regions, the World Council of Churches' changing involvement within the world and the worldwide Christian Churches can show how the use of values-language became relevant and integrated within Christian speech. Thus, after a short introduction to the development of the World Council of Churches from a Western dominated to a globalized institution, I will show how the concept of "values" is increasingly integrated into ecclesial speech.

II. The "glocalization" of the World Council of Churches

The World Council of Churches emerged out of the 19th century ecumenical movement, when, during European expansion and Christian mission, the different Christian confessions hindered each other in their work and thus the question of practical cooperation arose.[10] Starting in this context, the ecumenical movement was Western dominated and asked how the churches could bring Jesus Christ to the people.[11] This question led to the World Mission Conference in Edinburgh in 1910. Here, the common aim took shape in two leading movements: the movement "Faith and Order" which focused on defining general aspects of a common faith amidst denominational differences into an applicable church constitution, and the movement "Life and Work" that focused on the relationship between the world and the Kingdom of God.[12]

In 1948, the two movements "Faith and Order" and "Life and Work" merged to become the World Council of Churches. At the foundation assembly in Amsterdam 1948, delegates from different Christian Churches[13] from all over the world came together. However, from 146 churches represented, 75% came from the Western world and only 9% from Africa, 17% from Asia and 2% from Latin America.[14] At its beginning, the movement was dominated by the Western Churches and their cultural background.

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5   Parsons and Shils 1962.
6   Kluckhohn 1962, 395.
7   For a critical debate of the concept of "values" see Schmitt, Jüngel, and Schelz 1979.
8   Cf. for example Hartmann 2019 or Pohl 2014.
9   Cf. World Council of Churches 2021.
10   Ernesti 2007, 22.
11   Cf. Oestreicher 2008, 15.
12   Oestreicher 2008, 15f.
13   Cf. Lüpsen 1948, 273–78. Reformed, Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian and Episcopal Churches, as well as delegates from the Coptic and the Ethiopian Church came together.
14   Cf. the appendix in Kunter and Schilling 2014b, 337.

The influence of North American and European delegates can be observed in the image of a "responsible society" that was presented as an answer to the disorder of society caused by the power of capitalism and the totalitarianism of communism, as well as by new technological developments.[15] Against human oppression by these forces, the World Council of Churches demanded a "responsible society" that was orientated by freedom of religion, openness, freedom and democracy — all typical Western values.[16] Thus, the "responsible society" image is a symbol for a Western-centric World Council of Churches. However, this Western focus did not last long.

After World War II,[17] a wave of decolonization swept across the Global South: the fight for political autonomy in the colonized countries evolved and, at the same time, economic build-up processes and industrialization in Europe and Japan led to a reduction in the economic importance of colonies for their mother-countries. Furthermore, the Cold War between the USA and the Soviet Union scaled to global dimensions, as almost all wars in Third World countries could be identified as proxy wars. In April of 1955, the presidents of Yugoslavia and India invited delegates from 29 decolonized countries to a conference in Bandung, Indonesia, and searched for a third way between the two blocks. In 1961, they founded the movement of the non-aligned countries, proclaiming goals of development, social justice, disarmament, anti-colonialism and integration. The Western-oriented nature of international world organizations such as the UN or UNESCO, and the impact of the West, began to shift and shrink.

These new global coordinates for politics, economy, and society also influenced the World Council of Churches: As a reaction to the Bandung-conference, the World Council of Churches started a "Rapid-Social-Change-Program"[18] in order to give more attention to the Southern "young churches." The program focused on responsible citizenship, rural living conditions, the problems of urbanization and the impacts of international aid and foreign transactions. The shift of attention became manifest at the third assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1961 which took place in New Delhi, India. It was the first time that an assembly was not held in Europe or North America. Additionally, 23 new member churches were added to the World Council of Churches: 11 from Africa, 5 from Asia and 3 from the Latin American and Pacific areas.[19] Another important step was the association of the World Council of Churches with the International Missionary Council. As missionary and ecclesial ecumenism were united, the understanding of mission changed: Mission was no longer perceived as the task of European and North American Churches, but a call relevant to churches on all six continents.[20] Willem Visser't Hooft, the first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, later remembered: "We were forced to think henceforth in terms of the whole world."[21]

This change in the self-understanding of the World Council of Churches continued and had an impact on the tasks that the Council gave itself. In 1962, the central committee of the World Council of Churches commissioned the section "Church and Society" to conduct a world conference on the pressing global questions of economic injustice, social and political conflicts and new technologies.[22] This conference was held in 1966 in Geneva. The purpose of the conference was to achieve a fundamental reorientation of church and society and to review the basic theological and ethical assumptions of the ecumenical community.[23] In order to com-

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15   Cf. Lüpsen 1948, 45–56.
16   Cf. Kunter and Schilling 2014a, 36.
17   For a summary of the development, see Kunter and Schilling 2014a, 24–28.
18   Cf. Kunter and Schilling 2014a, 30f.
19   Cf. Kunter and Schilling 2014a, 32. Also the confessional composition changed: Now, two Pentecostal and four Orthodox Churches joined the World Council of Churches.
20   Cf. Kunter and Schilling 2014a, 33f.
21   Cited from the memoirs of Visser't Hooft in Kunter and Schilling 2014a, 36.
22   Cf. Ökumenischer Rat der Kirchen 1968a, 17f. See also Kunter and Schilling 2014a, 37.
23   Cf. Ökumenischer Rat der Kirchen 1968a, 18f. See also Kunter and Schilling 2014a, 37f.

bine the perspective of the decolonized countries with the perspectives of the Western members dealing with different societal changes and growing secularization, experts from politics, economy, society and human sciences were invited to Geneva.[24] It was the first time, in a conference normally constituted of ecclesial delegates, that lay specialists were invited and theologians were a minority.[25] In this constellation, "a proper balance between theologians and different types of lay specialists [was possible, as well as] […] a representation of regions corresponding to their role in the world community."[26] Now, the model of the "responsible society" was criticized as it supported the existing public orders,[27] and primary questions included the construction of national states in Africa and Asia and how the churches in Latin America should behave towards revolutionary changes.[28] Theological and ethical conversations became more oriented towards the contexts of the different churches and countries; global and local discourses were intertwined and a so-called "glocal" ecumenical consciousness developed.[29]

III. Values as a bridge between churches, society, and religions

In the atmosphere of a "glocal" ecumenical awareness, the concept of "value" comes into play. In search of an ecclesial code of conduct towards the current glocal problems, the term "value" became important in descriptions related to the secular world. One of the main speakers at the opening session in Geneva was Dr. Emmanuel G. Mesthene, Executive Director of the program on Technology and Society at Harvard University, who talked about: "Religious Values in the Age of Technology."[30] He considered technological advancement as a chance to liberate humanity from the tyranny of the material and natural world as it enables human beings to conquer these forces. At the same time, he acknowledged that technological developments were also destroying many traditional human values and threatening familiar perceptions of reality. Mesthene described a crisis for the churches, namely, the fear of becoming irrelevant if humans were able to gain power over nature and matter – a power that churches had formerly reserved to God alone. To deal with this crisis, Mesthene advised the churches to distinguish between man's business and God's business. For this purpose, he generally distinguishes between what is in the power of human beings and what is reserved for God alone. With regard to values, he said: "It is for human beings to recognize values and to realize possibilities. It is for God to be the last value and eternal possibility and to give human beings the mercy to recognize and to serve him."[31] Mesthene clearly draws a distinction here between the values, which emerge when people are evaluating what is important to them, and the highest and eternal "value," which is God. However, for him both dimensions are important and linked when human values serve possibilities and the eternal possibility and last value is God. With the term "value," Mesthene

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24   Cf. World Council of Churches 1967, 8.
25   There were 180 lay persons – professionals, economists, political leaders, social workers, business associates, social and physical scientists – and 158 theologians and church leaders of which almost half were from Asia, Africa and Latin America. Cf. World Council of Churches 1967, 9f.
26   Cf. World Council of Churches 1967, 9. See also Kunter and Schilling 2014a, 37f. As almost half of the participants came from Third World countries, the social and political problems of the Third World became dominant in the discussions.
27   Cf. Kunter and Schilling 2014a, 41.
28   Cf. Kunter and Schilling 2014a, 44.
29   Cf. Kunter and Schilling 2014a, 46–48. The term "glocalization" was introduced by the sociologist Roland Robertson and refers to the interdependence and interlocking of global and local discourses, cf. Kunter and Schilling 2014a, 48 Footn. 105.
30   Ökumenischer Rat der Kirchen 1968a, 43–56.
31   Ökumenischer Rat der Kirchen 1968a, 54 [translation by the author].

builds a bridge between human endeavor and godly sphere as God as the last value grounds the values that guide human action.

The working group on "Man and Community in Changing Societies" drew on this general distinction and referred to values in order to describe the church's assignment: "The Church could help ethnic and cultural groups by fostering respect for the values of different peoples."[32] Although values are seen as part of a person's identity,[33] the working group also reflected that, at times, values are enforced upon other people and motivate political action.[34] Conflicts over values do not only occur between different people. The report describes the changes that were occurring in the traditional secular value system due to modern technologies.[35] These changes provoked conflicts between the older and the younger generations. However, behind the questioning of values stood the question of how the various familial and societal roles (wife, husband, child, etc.) ought to be modeled. Local contexts became important for answering this question since "actual communities where men, women and children together are helping or hindering each other's human development"[36] had to be the contexts for consideration. They also proposed: "This means that tensions between the generations develop in relation to traditional community values and are to be resolved in terms of new community values."[37] As values are part of the humane basis of a community, the report formulates the implication for the church as follows:

> The Church should support the constructive use of technology and the development of urbanization as a means of liberating mankind. At the same time, it continues to stress the primacy of humane values and identifies itself with any peoples despised or bloodied in a period of transition.[38]

The reference to Mesthene's lecture is obvious, however the report also stresses the humane values which have to be considered first and protected independently of the cultural and ethnic contexts. With the concept of "values", secular developments are addressed and the church is set in relation to them, which led the churches into a critical discussion of the present age and into dialogue with the new worldwide power structures in order to humanize decisions.[39] As a consequence, "[t]he Church should encourage the training of its people in responsible participation as citizens. It must support laymen who are engaged in critical struggles for human values in the public arena."[40]

So far, the term "values" is mostly used for describing the secular world and ecclesial reaction to it. However, this use changed when the World Council of Churches started to reflect on its self-understanding in relation to global problems, beginning most seriously at the fourth assembly in Uppsala in 1968.[41] Here, the topics discussed in Geneva were inspected for their

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32   World Council of Churches 1967, 157, paragraph 11. In the following the different paragraphs are cited in brackets.
33   See, for example, the following statement: "The roles which people fulfil reflect the values, beliefs, obligations and self-understanding which they have acquired in personal and social relationships with others." (World Council of Churches 1967, 165 [48]).
34   World Council of Churches 1967, 157 (11).
35   Cf. World Council of Churches 1967, 173 (79-81).
36   World Council of Churches 1967, 173 (81).
37   World Council of Churches 1967, 173 (81).
38   World Council of Churches 1967, 182 (121).
39   Cf. World Council of Churches 1967, 182 (121–123).
40   World Council of Churches 1967, 208 (7.f).
41   Here, the global dimension of the World Council of Churches was complemented by the Roman Catholic perspective. The Roman Catholic Church did not enter as a member, but sent observers to the assembly of the World Council of Churches.

programmatic implementability.[42] Along with the economic and social development of the world, justice and peace in international affairs, the Vietnam War and the student protests, the assembly also debated racism and passed an anti-racism program. The message of the assembly was clear:[43] the churches came together in order to listen to those that long for peace and justice, for human dignity and a sense of life. These calls were heard in awareness of a global neighborhood in which people are living in plurality and frictions. The hope expressed for the global community was that it might be renewed by the Church of Jesus Christ which is to be a sign and the announcement of a new human community. "Renewal" was the key word of this assembly. The idea was that the process of renewal of the global community should be guided by enduring humane values.[44] Therefore, the Church of Jesus Christ should support human and personal values in conflicts of power and in situations of discrimination.[45] At the same time, the renewal of the global community is a process of integration and consolidation, as the church "ventures to speak about herself as the sign of the future unity of mankind"[46] and thus has to deal with the plurality and frictions within her own structures.

Here, the renewal-motif is used to reflect the intertwined relationship of the church and the global community. This relation was also discussed at the conference of the commission on Faith and Order in Leuven in 1971. Leuven focused on the topic "Unity of the Church and Unity of mankind" and asked how the unity of the church has to be defined and related to the growing global unity and interdependency.[47] In this context, the Roman Catholic Cardinal Suenes stressed that the unity of the church will be part of the Kingdom of God.[48] In anticipation of this unity, the church ought to provide a brotherly community that can inspire worldly communities struggling with plurality: "The Church's mission is to provide the world with access to the Kingdom of God, to help men to fulfill the profound resources of his humanity."[49] As such, the church and the world are both involved in humanity, but the church has to lead to truth, justice and brotherhood that is more than mere solidarity. Quoting the American theologian Richard P. McBrien's book *Do We Need the Church?*,[50] Suenes concludes:

> The Church must offer itself as one of the principal agents whereby the human community is made to stand under the judgement of the enduring values of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: freedom, justice, peace, charity, compassion, reconciliation. The Church must be a place where all these forces, personal and political, which challenge and undermine these values are themselves effectively exposed, prophetically denounced, and, through the instrumentality of moral rather than material force, initially disarmed and dismantled.[51]

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42   Cf. Kunter and Schilling 2014a, 48.
43   Cf. Ökumenischer Rat der Kirchen 1968b, 1f.
44   "The development of a real global community can only be accomplished if indispensable models and institutions are in place, in order to give a reliable structure to the global community. Such models and institutions must observe the lasting human values and orient themselves to them." Ökumenischer Rat der Kirchen 1968b, 73 (38) [translation by the author]. In the following, paragraphs are cited in brackets.
45   Cf. Ökumenischer Rat der Kirchen 1968b, 68 (25), 69 (28.c). For the consequences for the institutions, see Ökumenischer Rat der Kirchen 1968b, 73 (38), and for the individual, Ökumenischer Rat der Kirchen 1968b, 94 (4), 100 (24).
46   Ökumenischer Rat der Kirchen 1968b, 15 [translation by the author].
47   Cf. Raiser 1971, 185. With this focus, the more dogmatic orientated commission on Faith and Order incorporated questions that were normally debated in the Commission of Church and Society.
48   Cf. Raiser 1971, 172–79.
49   World Council of Churches 1971, 176.
50   McBrien 1969.
51   McBrien 1969, 229 cited by World Council of Churches 1971, 178.

Suenes stressed the critical call of the church to promote the values of the Gospel. It was the first time that the concept of "values" was applied to the church itself and its message. And more specifically, that the Church of Jesus Christ has the values of the Gospel, which stand in opposition to secular values. From now on, values became prominent in order to describe the church's message to the world.

The discussions about the unity of the church and human unity did not reach a conclusion but called for further studies. Leuven showed how the question of a global and interdependent world is evermore related to the unity of the church and its processes of self-understanding. The impact of a globally united community of equal churches facing contextually different problems finally led back to the relation between the churches themselves and thus to the self-understanding of the World Council of Churches.

The question of church unity and the contemporary global situation occupied the following assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi in 1975 as well. Working groups on the requirements of ecclesial unity and community between people of various faiths, cultures and ideologies as well as on education pointed to unity and living together. Again, the concept of values was central for describing and criticizing societal conditions.[52] However, the "human values revealed in Christ Jesus" were also referred to in contrast to consumer-orientation and anti-Christian competitiveness and selfishness.[53] Values have now become a bridge between the secular world and the church: The World Council of Churches uses this term in order to confront secular values with the humane values revealed in Jesus Christ. Thus, by using the term "value," essentials of the Christian faith can be translated in societal debates. While the concept of values initially was reserved for secular dimensions, it increasingly became incorporated into ecclesial language – not only for describing the tasks of the church, but also for naming the ethical dimensions of the Gospel. It was only eight years later when the World Council of Churches passed the following guidelines for its future actions: "As Jesus Christ is the life of the world, maturing ecumenical fellowship among the churches and growth towards unity should be supported by conciliar fellowship as a purpose of all programmes of the W[orld]C[ouncil of]C[hurches]."[54] The image of Jesus Christ as life of the world "is to be expressed through justice and peace for the whole world and respect for the integrity of all creation."[55]

These three, justice, peace and integrity of all creation, are nowadays referred to as "values of the Gospel." In the process of ecclesial reflection within the World Council of Churches, these values became important to describe the church's role in and for the world. The reflection on doctrine of the church was led by the Commission of Faith and Order. It was a long discussion process since the 1980s that was concluded in 2013 with the paper *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. Here, not only is the bridging function of values between the church and the world taken up but also relation of Christianity to other religions is reflected and described by referring to values: "Today Christians are more aware of the wide array of different religions

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52   Cf. Paton 1976, 47 (paragraph 27), 81 (41), 89 (15.g), 91 (25), 96 (41.3), 123 (12), 132 (45).

53   Cf. Paton 1976, 88 (8). In the German translation of the reports, the value concept is also used to describe the quality of human beings as creatures of God, cf. Krüger and Müller-Römheld 1976, 113 (paragraph 51), 114 (56). However, the English has a wider range to express the different semantics of the German "Wert" and thus uses "precious" and "worth" in these places. This example shows the difficulties of identifying actual value discourses.

54   Gill 1983, 251. "Conciliar fellowship" refers to the so-called "conciliar process." The term was coined by Ulrich Duchrow and draws on the image of a council of peace which Dietrich Bonhoeffer had proposed facing the beginning of the Second World War. This image was transferred into a process and bond between the churches which committed themselves to life, peace and justice. Within this process, the World Council of Churches obliged all its assembly issue groups to always consider its issues regarding justice, peace and preservation of creation in reference to the unity and obligatoriness of the church. Cf. Duchrow 2008, 291–320.

55   Gill 1983, 251.

other than their own and of the positive truths and values they contain."[56] Consequently, Christians should work together with adherents of other religions in order to promote "not only those individual moral values which are essential to the authentic realization of the human person but also the social values of justice, peace and the protection of the environment"[57]. These values, that describe the message of the Gospel for society are intrinsically linked to the community of the churches itself as it "includes not only the confession of the one faith and celebration of common worship, but also shared moral values, based upon the inspiration and insights of the Gospel."[58] As Christians are part of social and societal structures, these social values of justice, peace and protection of creation are to be promoted which is part of the discipleship:

> The explicit call of Jesus that his disciples be the 'salt of the earth' and the 'light of the world' (cf. Matt. 5:13-16) has led Christians to engage with political and economic authorities in order to promote the values of the kingdom of God, and to oppose policies and initiatives which contradict them. This entails critically analyzing and exposing unjust structures, and working for their transformation, but also supporting initiatives of the civil authorities that promote justice, peace, the protection of the environment and the care for the poor and the oppressed.[59]

By attributing freedom, justice and peace as "values of the Gospel" and "values of the Kingdom of God," not only a common ethical basis for the World Council of Churches' action is named, but the importance of these concepts for the whole world are also unmistakably acknowledged. In addition, they include the task to criticize the global secular power structures by comparing and opposing them with these values. In the end, this is not only a Christian task, but a task of all religions which are acknowledged to represent positive values. Therefore, the World Council of Churches' values-language is not only a bridge to the secular world but also a bridge for interreligious dialogue.

Observing how a world organization such as the World Council of Churches adopts values-language, the function of this concept becomes obvious: it allows one to translate the foundations of Christian action and behavior in a secular world. Addressing justice, peace and protection of creation as "values," the validity of these values is stressed and proclaimed for society. Examining society and its changes, the concept of "values" is used to propose a vision of the kingdom of God that is understandable outside the ecclesiastical context and thus can illustrate the impact of Christian action in the world. The concept of "values" – a modern concept that replaced the ethical impact of religion and God – is used to describe a Christian vision of a humane society for which the image of the Kingdom of God is an inspiring example. At the same time, by applying "values" a common purpose is developed which can lead the churches' actions in society and the interreligious dialogue. Whereas the concept of "virtues" emphasizes character traits, the notion of "values" – especially in combination with the eschatological Kingdom of God – stresses the individual and societal desirable[60] and thus allows the development of a comprehensive collaborative vision of a better world in which God is still relevant for moral action.

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56   World Council of Churches 2013, 34 (60).
57   World Council of Churches 2013, 35 (62).
58   World Council of Churches 2013, 35 (62).
59   World Council of Churches 2013, 36f. (65).
60   Cf. Kluckhohn 1962, 395.

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