**The power of narratives for GOOD and BAD – an ethical key competence**

How easy it would be if we could divide everything into good and bad, black and white: but the reality of human life in society is diverse and capable of change. Yet we carry with us formative narratives in our societies, subjective memories of events that have shaped our society, our parents, grandparents and far beyond.

1. **The function of narratives**

**Narratives are the condensed memories** that **integrate us into our society** and shape our **cultural and historical identity**. In Africa, it´s often the narratives in the form of songs of the people that carry these memories. My teacher Juan Carlos Scannone brought me very close to this "wisdom of the people".

The integration of historical experiences into a narrative context arises from historical events. This processing into narratives is always accompanied by an interpretation: the Hamas narrative, for example, asserts that Israel is an "*imperialist-colonialist*" power, that Israelis are "*invaders*" and that Palestinians have the right to eliminate their oppressors.
The result of this narrative led to the barbaric terror of October 7, 2024.

These narratives dominate the international debate and, at the same time, destroy the foundations of interreligious dialogue. Cardinal Pizzaballa stated, "*Muslims have felt attacked and complicit in the October 7 massacres. After years of interreligious dialogue, we have realized that we do not understand each other. Now this interfaith dialogue must take an important step. It cannot be just a dialogue between representatives of Western culture, but must take into account different sensitivities, cultural and local approaches."*

In Nigeria we find the narrative of the Britains in the 19th century, that the Royal Niger Company as private company helps the British Empire to save money. No official British administration must be paid, all was private. And Britain got the raw material and later the petroleum. A success story.

The anticolonialism narrative is the opposite: Under the British colonial administration, buying cartels (from companies such as Unilever, Nestlé, and Cadbury) kept the prices of cocoa, palm oil, and peanuts artificially low, damaging Nigerian agriculture. Racial segregation prevented equality, and the exploitation of the oil fields (Shell) polluted the farmland and fishing grounds and contaminated the air. This narrative of suppression let to the independence of Nigeria. So, we may see:

1. **Narratives are not innocent stories**

All this demonstrates that social narratives are not innocent bedtime stories. They are **powerful narratives** that **give rise to group identities**. In Daesh, the so-called Islamic State, Islamic narratives about "enemy crusader nations" become the horizon of justification for the Islamic caliphate and bring terror to our cities. Conversely, the "Islamic threat" narrative, as cultivated in far-right circles, makes any dialogue with Muslims impossible.

Narratives based on **half-truths** are the greatest danger to a pluralistic society. They reinforce the polarization of social groups and destroy the internal coherence of any pluralistic society. These are the walls of the narrative traditions of different societies and cultural spheres.
**The fall from grace begins in people's minds**.

1. **The struggle between individuality and community**

**Muslim societies** recognize the narrative that humanity is defined by religion and subordinate the individual to the community. However, European society has also passed on this narrative for centuries and has prioritized the community over the welfare of the individual. European feudalism grew out of this basic attitude.
**The Christian paradigm shift** began in the 13th century with Thomas Aquinas. In his writings he emphasized the dignity of the individual's erring conscience. Erasmus of Rotterdam took up his ideas and developed from them a new conception at the beginning of the Middle Ages: understanding religion from a human perspective, that is, from the human being.

**Terms** such as **freedom of conscience** or **individual rights** have their social origin here as an account of our current democratic societies.
However, I would like to point out that much of this already appears in the Gospels and is also deeply rooted in Jewish theology.

1. **Combating hate narratives**

On the one hand it is useless to fight hate narratives with arguments. There is nothing more dangerous than blind idealists, because logic bounces off them and they are blind to all alternatives that do not fit their distorted picture of reality. The high emotional level that accompanies storytelling makes impossible a free discussion of thesis, antithesis and synthesis.

These emotionally charged **narratives of hate destroy** the rational basis of debate that we have achieved from Thomas Aquinas and Erasmus of Rotterdam to Kant and Voltaire and in our democratic culture of dialogue. On the other hand, in today's media society we live a secularism without religion and a negative religious freedom that wants to banish religions from society as a superfluous private matter.

We urgently need to **return to the achievements of our societies**, which are based on principles other than those on which they themselves can be based. In the sense of Böckenförde axiom, this means that the liberal, secular state lives on conditions which it cannot create itself.[[1]](#endnote-1) It must - also through its religious policy - provide social forces and individual citizens with the freedom necessary for the formation of a sustainable basic consensus:[[2]](#endnote-2) Human rights and dignity can never become a matter of majority decisions. They must be protected primarily by the state. Secular society must not become blind to those whose actions deny the fundamental values of our cultures. **These fundamental values** also include **the prohibition** of child marriages, blood **feuds**, **oppression** of women and forced **marriages**. The limit is always where tolerance leads to leaving the field open to the intolerant. **Karl Popper** puts it simply: **there is no tolerance for the intolerant.** International attempts to establish human rights charters attest to this commitment .

1. **"Narratives of life" as bridges of hope and tolerance.**

The good news is that we can rewrite the narratives of hope. We just must be brave enough to go beyond reason and intellect and engage with emotions. We must reach people's hearts with the "narratives of life." The White House press spokesman made a remarkable statement in this regard, *"We cannot give them the narrative victory of suggesting that all Muslims are responsible for this kind of terrorism. That's false and it's not true. ... The other thing we can do is work to try to raise the voices of patriotic Muslims. There are millions of them. ... They can talk about the poisonous mythology that is being propagated by ISIS.* ***In a way, this is nothing more than a war of narratives****."[[3]](#endnote-3)*

This is exactly where our responsibility begins. We must ensure that counter-narratives are already being told in preschool and school education, in universities, in business and in politics.

And yes, religious communities can take responsibility for **actively introducing life** narratives **into** their sphere of influence. We need narratives **about the peacemaking power of religions in the state**. However, if religions give up positive narratives of cooperation **in respect** and tolerance, it creates a free space that other **deadly narratives** of hatred fill.

Developing "**life narratives**" requires courage and strength. For example, the courage to communicate our own cultural and religious narratives and to put them up for discussion. The courage not to **misinterpret** integration as assimilation and not to raise new fears.
The courage to take religious people seriously, even in a secular society.
**Respect for the value of the individual** is becoming the **fundamental issue** of a modern society in a polarized global world. It is urgent to raise this issue also with religious societies. The **Gospels** make it easy for **Christian churches** to reflect this basic attitude of individual freedom in their theology. **Islamic communities will** still **have to face** this question. A new approach to an **interpretation immanent** to the times will have to be found in the study of the Koran. The knowledge that such interpretations have already existed in the **history of Islam** will help in this regard. However, since the early Middle Ages, these new outlets for an **intellectually critical** understanding of the Qur'an have been suppressed and forgotten.

1. **The contribution of religions to reconciliation**

Religious communities themselves must initiate dialogue among themselves. This authentic internal and external dialogue of positive narratives does not exist simply as a deus ex machina. It has to be worked for. Pastor Wilm from Hamburg describes it very well: Dialogue "*only works if neither side has to deny its identity. Sincerity helps. And a culture of debate. If you don't* ***want*** *that, you prevent reconciliation."[[4]](#endnote-4)*

We wish our religious representatives and all believers the necessary strength to be more visible in society. Visible with their own beliefs, **coupled with openness** to diversity.

Our society lacks this competition between religious beliefs; religious communities **withdraw too much** into their own *ghettos* and refuse to participate in the social discourse. In Europe, unfortunately, this also applies to the Catholic Church.

I believe that it is precisely religions that have the power to tell their own **narratives of life** based on spirituality and their narrative of human dignity and peace in the world. A narrative that Pope Francis addressed in his encyclical **"Fratelli tutti,"** for example. Now the course is being set for the future of our global society. **Nigeria must find and affirm** its place in this process.

This is the reason why organizations like CIDJAP are so important. Exchange across borders is indispensable today. In a world of wars, narratives of hatred and intolerance, there must be fixed points of honest dialogue and reconciliation. May CIDJAP be a space for meeting, for the development of alternative narratives of reconciliation and dialogue – and of narratives of HOPE. Monsignore Obiora Ike has laid the foundations for this. I´m especially indebted to him.

1. **We are being asked**

**The focus is on education**.

Education from the youngest to the oldest.

At **Kindergarten** and at **school**, **universities** and **training centers**.

Therefore, we must **insist** on the fact that it is a question **of education.**

* **based on values** (ethics, religions),
* followed by an **authentic dialogue**, because without dialogue there is no mutual understanding,
* and accompanied by **socio-political action** (intertwining education and civil society).

**That is the way forward.
It is the task of each and every one of us.
And it starts here and now.**

1. *E.-W. Böckenförde: "Die Entstehung des Staates als Vorgang der Säkularisation", in: Ders: Staat - Gesellschaft - Freiheit. Studien zur Staatstheorie und zum Verfassungsrecht. Frankfurt/Main 1976, 42ff.60* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Vgl. T. Marauhun, die Bewältigung interreligiöser Konflikte in multireligiösen Gesellschaften, in: H. Lehmann (Hrsg.), Koexistenz und Konflikt von Religionen im vereinten Europa, Göttingen 2004, 14f.* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *http://www.mediaite.com/tv/wh-press-secretary-on-war-on-isis-this-is-actually-just-a-war-of-narratives/* [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *S. Wilm, Tolerance does not grow automatically, in: Die Zeit no. 39 Hamburg 2016, Feuilleton, 54.*

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In a world where everything is bought and sold, people’s **sense of their worth** appears increasingly to depend on what they can accumulate with the power of money. We are constantly being pushed to keep buying, consuming and distracting ourselves, held captive to a demeaning system that prevents us from looking beyond our immediate and petty needs. The love of Christ has no place in this perverse mechanism, **yet only that love can set us free from a mad pursuit that no longer has room for a gratuitous love.** Christ’s love can give a heart to our world and revive love wherever we think that the ability to love has been definitively lost. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)