

## Times after Pandemic – Times to make inventory

What are the main social, ecological, economical and social long-term consequences and challenges of the pandemic to our societies?

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The corona pandemic made us confront ourselves. Who are we? As individuals, as a society, as Christians? Looking back a year and a half after the outbreak of the pandemic, we have gone through experiences that have changed our lives. My question therefore is:

How could we make inventory? What are the main social, ecological, economical and social long-term consequences and challenges of the pandemic to our societies?

To begin with, I believe it is far too early to find adequate answers to all of these questions. At the moment we are still in the process of sorting out what we have experienced, how it has affected us and what consequences we can deduce from it. We look with amazement at some of what we have thought and done over the past few months. At the beginning of the crisis, a German minister made the remarkable statement: "We will have a lot to forgive each other for!" And we have not even started with that process. Realistically speaking, the pandemic has not yet been overcome. The virus continues to rage in many countries around the world, people are dying and the vaccine is not available. Therefore, the view on any long-term consequences is rather only a European centered partial take of an overall global view. In an interview with "Die Zeit", pandemic historian Frank Snowden said: **"Covid-19 does seem to be a transformative plague. It has already shown that it is capable of bringing the economy and people's daily lives to a standstill. I do not think it is possible, nor desirable, to return to the old normal. Because the old normality is what got us into this predicament. We should look at the pandemic as a gateway through which we can move on to something better (...)."**<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Normality and exile

What "normality" meant before the Covid crisis was a kind of social consensus - depending on where, quite heterogeneous, but at least as a form of accustomed and practiced agreement. Normality denotes that which is taken for granted in a society, which no longer needs to be explained and which no longer needs to be decided. This fact which is considered to be a given concerned social norms and the concrete behavior of people. Until the beginning of the pandemic, it was relatively clear in European societies what was "normal" in a given case. The "normality" of pre-pandemic society, at least in the secular societies of Western Europe, allowed a great deal of space for individualism and independent living arrangements - with all the risks of being overwhelmed by this. There was a lot of talk about self-optimization and responsibility for one's own lifestyle. Everyone was the architect of their own life plan, responsible for ensuring that it succeeds. In many ways, it was a lone warrior culture. In this situation, "normality" was also a concept of invulnerability. Of course - illnesses, accidents and failures were real, but by no means something that entire societies had to confront. Epidemics, existential threats, and emergency laws took place on other continents. Democratic systems were hardly questionable in their

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/2021-02/frank-snowden-historiker-pandemien-corona-virus-menschheit-gesellschaft-globalisierung>

dignity and durability. Social security systems were firmly anchored in many European countries. With the outbreak of the pandemic, however, this "normality" was put into quarantine. The crisis came and with it the "abnormal" instead of normality. The pandemic soon proved a living testimony to our lack of control, of global human vulnerability. The loss of normality and the onset of the crisis immediately caused a critical reception in large parts of the public and the concern that life under pandemic conditions, its need for regulation and requirements, would now become the "New Normal," and thus a surrogate for the old normal. But very soon it also became clear: distance, isolation, wearing masks, curfew, travel restrictions and the fear of infection and dying are not the "new normal," but a crisis. A state of emergency. Michel Foucault explained in his theory of panoptism<sup>2</sup> what this means: The pandemic crisis situation strengthens a rational administration and establishes authoritarian access to the individual, but at the same time also paternalistic effects of upbringing and self-education, sanitary regulations and hygienic advice. Compliance to all this is subject to social control, which in turn becomes second nature to individuals. They establish health institutions from plague houses to clinics to sanatoriums, and later also research facilities. During and after the epidemics, according to Foucault, a strange alliance is formed by social progress and an authoritarian administrative state.

For many people, this has been demonstrated in the last year and a half through experiences of borders suddenly being closed, distance and isolation being legally prescribed, monitored and even enforced punishment for non-compliance. A dystopian experience, but not a dystopian reality. A crisis has to be overcome, and where it will lead is initially unclear - the concept is based on the idea of a collective effort aimed at improving the situation.

## 2. The multi-dimensional crisis

The Covid crisis is a multi-dimensional crisis.<sup>3</sup> It not only affects "the economy" or "everyday life - that is, rituals and habits", or the "political system", but it is a so called deep crisis, and it radically intervenes in our lives: in areas of political decisions, communication and economics, into global systems, culture, technology and science. As comprehensively and totally as the crisis has encompassed all human areas, so is its reach. People and societies experience the crisis mentally, economically, socially and globally. They were not able to develop strategies in the old "normal" because the crisis was to be expected, according to the parameters of the calculus of probability, but could not be precisely calculated. All simulation games related to the pandemic were always only simulation games<sup>4</sup>, and insofar not resilient, and certainly not suitable for losing billions - based on a theoretically described eventuality. Albert Camus described the nature of the deep crisis in his book "The Plague" 70 years ago. He developed the image of exile for the deep-dimensional crisis: **"So the plague first brought our fellow citizens into exile," he wrote. And he continued: "Because the plague exceeds the human dimension, one says to oneself that it is unreal, a bad dream that will pass."** And so it is with the Corona pandemic. It was the first to exile us, and that does not mean to only far away places, but the exile from what we used to find "normal". And how does such an exile work?

You don't go into it voluntarily. You can't just go back. And when you come back, nothing is like it was before. That changes things. After the crisis, there can be no return to the former "normality". This is

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<sup>2</sup> Foucault, Michel: Überwachen und Strafen. Die Geburt des Gefängnisses. Frankfurt a.M. 1994,

<sup>3</sup> Horx, Matthias: Die Zukunft nach Corona. Wie eine Krise die Gesellschaft, unser Denken und unser Handeln verändert. Berlin 2020

<sup>4</sup> Ebd.

exactly where the new begins. The new normal that we have to work towards. One does not have to immediately assume that societies are traumatized after the onset of the abnormal, but that certainly also depends on the coping strategies they have developed. Nevertheless, the mere presence of the new narrative "Corona" - the narrative of the crisis - will change something.

The deep covid crisis includes first and foremost the experience of distance, alienation and new wordings. Life in this crisis was initially unfamiliar and strange. Often even disturbing. Who made decisions on what basis? In Germany: How can it be that fundamental guarantees of the constitution can be overridden when we have learned that the articles of the constitution are protected rights against the state? Obvious rituals were affected. The smile upon greeting. The handshake. In the deep crisis, Corona changed the relationship with the world. We disinfected during the crisis. Our environment. Contact surfaces. Our hands. The virus had taken hold of our world right down to the doorknobs and washbasins. Everything that we took for granted was subject to the risk of infection. Touch - deadly. Socializing, sport, community, worship. A new wording is taking hold. Remote work. Lockdown. Incidence. Excess mortality. Reproduction number. Mask requirement. Social Distancing. The virus made us homeless. Of course we reacted, and even reacted quickly: Digitalization has opened up unimagined possibilities for contact. In a short time, we were all able to meet digitally, to hear from one another and to perceive each other, and do so worldwide in a quality and intensity like never before. At the beginning, that was strange and we missed the meetings in-person. We are now so far that we are aware that we cannot and do not want to do without real encounters, but that some long journeys are no longer necessary for a short session. We learned new things at turbo speed that we now have on hand to create a new normal. It was a moving experience for me when we found out about the illness of our brother in Brazil - with whom we had zoom sessions shortly beforehand - through digital networking in the global communion. It was moving because we could hear reactions from all over the world: "I am on my knees before God" from Canada, "Lord, help our brother" from Namibia, "strengthen his family" from the Czech Republic, and "give him air to breathe" from South Africa. After a year and a half of the Covid crisis, I'm still cautious about describing what we learned during the pandemic. The curtain between the crisis and the new normal is only gradually opening, and what exactly we are seeing is not yet clear.

### **3. The role of the church in the pandemic and what we could learn for the future if we wanted to**

In many zoom calls and digital meetings, we, as church workers, have exchanged ideas about what it means when church services are canceled, singing is forbidden, and home visits are not possible. When pastoral care does not make closeness possible, or new forms of closeness have to be invented, and even when we do not know whether they will work. We suffered when our churches were closed, we rebelled internally when we were not allowed to sing. Many of us therefore developed digital formats, called our parishioners - there were no limits to creative distancing.

And many of us have been working at to the limit of our capacities. But: While, at least in Germany, the question of whether churches were systemically relevant, i.e. had a special role and weren't treated like any other association, whole church leaderships went into quarantine, and were no longer available or working from home. Thus church congregations, at least in Germany, came to overly adapt to the new regulations, closed their doors and at the same time remained silent when old people lived for months isolated from their relatives, locked up and weren't even asked what their own opinion on the subject of life and death actually was. I hear stories from many of those affected and their relatives in which elementary human gestures have been institutionally forbidden. And I haven't heard churches claim it.

Churches have often expressed their systemic relevance by protecting and supporting the system where resistance would have been necessary - for humanity - and they have publicly declared that all of this is done "for our best"! The columnist of the Süddeutsche Zeitung, Heribert Prantl, calls this "**generalized heartlessness**"<sup>5</sup>. We all know these stories, of the people who died alone in the hospital, looked after by staff in plastic suits and masks. From the old man who, after 60 years of marriage, was not allowed to say goodbye to his dying wife. We know the stories of senior citizens who were happy and cheerful before the pandemic and now no longer recognize their children because loneliness has accelerated dementia. In retrospect, the pandemic challenged the guardianship and freedom of the church. A challenge which we often failed. We found emergency solutions and saved ourselves by making ends meet. We discussed compulsory masks in worship, but we were not anchors, not a safe harbour for humanity, not advocates for human dignity. When asked what challenge this experience poses to life in the „New Normal“, we have to admit that it is time to take inventory. Which, by the way, every profound crisis enables and even recommends doing.

What does systemic relevance really mean, and is it not time to break free from the "old normalities" and find a new role - to think fundamentally about the importance of church relevance to political systems?

Dr Dimitris Boukis has described the task of the church in times of the pandemic and beyond in a contribution to the Discernment Process of the World Communion of Reformed Churches<sup>6</sup>:

**„The opportunity of doing things better, thus “not be foolish and understand what the Lord’s will is” for the post Covid-19 era should lead us to leave back our old situation and as His Church embraces existence anew.**

**In Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s words: “The tax Collector had to leave his booth and Peter his nets to follow Jesus. According to our understanding, even back then things could have been quite different. Jesus could have given tax collector new knowledge of God and left him in his old situation. If Jesus had not been God’s Son become human, then that would have been possible. But because Jesus is the Christ, it has to be made clear from the beginning that his word is not a doctrine. Instead, it creates existence anew. The point was to really walk with Jesus. It was made clear to those he called that they only had one possibility of believing in Jesus, that of leaving everything and going with the incarnate Son of God»<sup>7</sup>**

In other words - what can we really contribute to togetherness, to an open society, to humanity in a crisis? For the people. Not for relevance.

#### **4. Bridge over troubled water**

The Covid crisis has also raised the question of trust and community in Europe in many ways. The fact that after the fall of the Iron Curtain this Europe grew together at best, if at all, is not new and has historical and cultural reasons; some things can be deduced, while a lot is mood-making - it is a painful rift through Europe. This was particularly evident in the way in which Eastern and Central European

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<sup>5</sup>Prantl, Heribert: Not und Gebot, Grundrechte in Quarantäne. München 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Boukis, Dimitris: Handout, 25.2.2021

<sup>7</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: Nachfolge. Gütersloh 1989

countries dealt with the crisis. The right-wing populist parties often looked for scapegoats for the crisis – migrants and Muslims, or the crisis was trivialized and dismissed as an invention of the West and played down for a while, as recommended by the Belarusian head of state Lukashenko, who recommended vodka and saunas against the virus. Where the vaccine was ordered became a statement about who was trusted. Hungary ordered two million doses of Sputnik V in Russia and five million doses of Sinopharm<sup>8</sup> in China. All of this reveals a deep distrust of the institutions of the EU and a fundamental tendency to distance oneself and to go our own way - until, for example, Victor Orban tied the acceptance of EU aid to political conditions despite escalating incidences. **Sandor Fazakas describes this as „a popular democracy“, while deeply antipluralistic, consciously exemplifies a counter model to Western models of democracy. Fazakas describes this as a "backward-looking utopia" a "commitment to a romanticised, unhistorical, ideal world".<sup>9</sup>**

The signal is: we will not allow ourselves to be patronized, we can do it without you - because we are strong and live in strong countries. In the Covid crisis, this behavior has become a state discipline. In some countries in Eastern Europe by the way, the measures against Covid-19 served to exert massive influence over the freedom of the press and freedom of expression.<sup>10</sup> The rift between Central and Eastern Europe to Western European countries is a painful separation and division that has become deeper and more painful since the Covid crisis. It will be a challenge to build bridges, to find bridges over troubled water and to find a new understanding that may also affect our western self-image. As churches with enormous ecumenical wealth, our connections and contacts, people of good will, we should be role models here. We can create the space in which discussions are possible and support those who work towards a common Europe. To do this, we need to be on the same level and interlocutors with all who are willing to engage in such discourse. But we also have to be open to ourselves. As churches we can enter the narrative of a successful, open, affectionate and deeply diverse community in the next attempt to have Europe come together.

## 5. Immunitas versus communitas

To look at those who are particularly at risk during a crisis, to protect the so-called vulnerable, is an achievement of civilization. We can be proud of the fact that the protection of the weak became societal consensus so quickly and without hesitation. In general, the crisis has shown us that in many places humanity is not an obsolete model. Nor do I believe that clapping and singing are simply ridiculous forms of charity to caregivers. It was an encouraging sign that people were standing together. The question of payment and financial recognition needs to be clarified, but does not diminish open signs of solidarity in the community at all. But - in the confusion of the situation and completely untrained in pandemics, decisions were made that we must view critically today and that will certainly keep us busy - I already talked about this when it came to the role of churches. In some places we can only ask ourselves - why were we able to accept and allow this? Human dignity was often viewed with reference to the current “state of emergency” as a brake pad for decisions - or equated with “health protection”.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.aerzteblatt.de/nachrichten/121131/Ungarn-startet-Impfungen-mit-Sputnik-V>

<sup>9</sup> Fazakas, Sandór: Vortrag gehalten in Hannover (Kirchenamt der EKD) am 14.05.2019 ☒ Evangelische Konferenz für Mittel- und Osteuropa: „Der Umgang der Kirchen in Europa mit Nationalismus und Populismus“ Evangelische Konferenz für Mittel- und Osteuropa

<sup>10</sup> Ost-West Europäische Perspektiven. Corona und die Folgen: Soziale Verwerfungen in Mittel- und Osteuropa. 168ff., 22. Jahrgang 2021, Heft 3., renovabis

Or - as Stefan Dinges<sup>11</sup> describes it for some - not all - care facilities in Austria: due to the pandemic, the meetings of the ethics councils were suspended, ethical decisions were transferred to the learned routines of the staff, and decisions were made at the micro level. Whatever served the cause became practice - in this case, to protect the life of the weak - and accepted that "useful" is by no means automatically "good" - and those affected were not asked, either. "Naked survival" was bought at the price of "social death" - that's what Ulrich Körtner calls it<sup>12</sup>. In the future, a lot will depend on courageously exploring possibilities, and perhaps even taking risks in order to protect human dignity. Freedom and responsibility should not be understood as mutually exclusive. Human dignity also includes the freedom to take a self-determined risk in your own life and to accept death. I'm not sure, but it seems to me that this is a basic element of protecting human dignity: it involves taking risks and making risky decisions. In addition to considering this question, the pandemic has also brought other conflicts to the surface over time. Here the role of media coverage is also questionable. Ingo Reuter points out that the *Zürcher Zeitung*, for example, has more than once invoked the protection of the market economy against the protection of at-risk groups.<sup>13</sup> And the discussion about why old "useless" people should be vaccinated first and only then young earners may still ring in our ears. It is clear that we have to come to an agreement on how the protection of vulnerable people can be guaranteed without completely incapacitating them. We will also have to work to ensure that the cracks in society that are, perhaps inevitably, caused by decisions made during the crisis do not divide society in the long term.

## 6. Climate and the response of the question of justice

The question of the extent to which the pandemic has an influence on the climate or on the climate debate has often been asked. Crisis theorists recognized early on that there is a difference between a crisis "breaking" into life and a crisis that occurs insidiously and kills in the long run like a slow acting poison. However, we have learned in the deep crisis that it is possible to react quickly and efficiently. If needed, we can. The question is: how many resources will politics and society bring to bear to deal with the crisis? The measures during the COVID-19 crisis led to radical restrictions on economic, cultural, political and everyday processes. Politics had to react quickly in the face of infection numbers, and politics have since been in balancing mode, deploying enormous resources to contain many negative impacts. As Christians, discipleship means again to leave the old and follow Jesus in the transformation that is needed. It is clear that this must not be at the expense of others – we have long been practiced in asking the question of what "life in abundance for all" means – even if we are sometimes very flexible in our interpretation. Professor Ulrich Brand, political scientist from Vienna put it in a nutshell in an interview: "I would like to see a transformation process that is fair and not carried out on the backs of those who have little influence and alternatives anyway. The state must overcome its dependence on economic growth, the social partnership must green itself and participate in the decision-making process. We should learn from the corona pandemic that services of general interest are more important than ever bigger cars. And if we think justice globally, we need different rules. I would like to see a world economy in which the interests of investors and the wealthy in countries that tend to be *rich*

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<sup>11</sup> In: Kröll, Wolfgang, Platzer, Johann, Ruckenbauer, Hans-Walter, Schaupp, Walter (Hrsg.): „Die Corona-Pandemie“, Ethische, gesellschaftliche und theologische Reflexionen einer Krise, Baden-Baden 2020

<sup>12</sup> Ebd. S. 348

<sup>13</sup> Reuter, Ingo: Ansteckung, das Fremde in viralen Zeiten, Würzburg 2020.

do not dominate, but in which the countries in the global south, the people there and nature conservation are given a high priority.<sup>14</sup>

### **7. In the places where things really can't go on, attitude is required!**

The discourse about which restrictions on individual freedom are acceptable and under which conditions has been conducted intensively. And yes, it was not easy to accept that the Infection Protection Act could suddenly “cash in” fundamental rights enshrined in eternity. However, it is often overlooked that these restrictions have three requirements. They may only be carried out by an institution / authority legitimized by the people, they must be subject to control and they must be limited in time. The reaction of some people to the political and ethical decisions made during the crisis remains strange to this day. What we call “conspiracy theories” refers to a deep insecurity and destructive potency, which in the longer term do pose threats to our democracies. Without going into detail about everything that lateral thinkers and Corona deniers have produced in the last year and a half of over-the-top wisdom - it is clear that they have contributed to the uncertainty and, above all, to the division in society. The supporters of the conspiracy theories came from the most diverse political camps, from the art scene and the left, from the middle class and the right. The latter played themselves up to be the “guardians of parliamentarism” in an almost ingenious way by fundamentally questioning the legality of political decisions that were not confirmed by parliament. A really shoddy game! Social polarization became particularly painful when justified criticism or even requests for decisions were discriminated across the board. That too has contributed to the fact that the climate in society has changed and that the attitude “whoever is not for me is against me” has often gained the upper hand. We will have to deal carefully and lovingly with those who have become insecure and have moved out of the area of social consensus. We will have to defend the foundations of our democracies with great emphasis, where political rascals suddenly get the upper hand. And we will have to stand together adamantly against those who spread their poison in the form of lies and denunciation.

### **8. Conclusion**

During the lockdown, the number of voices that suddenly found pleasure in decelerating increased. Those who enjoyed the silence on the streets like a concert, and who took the view early on that this - also in regards to the climate issue – must now be the appropriate way of life. I am not optimistic about this. On the one hand, this seems to me to be the wishful thinking of those, who with a lot of living space and garden, have every opportunity to celebrate the lockdown as an interesting attempt at a new life plan. On the other hand, we can already see that cities and streets are full again, and that in some places the difference to the “time before Corona” is barely noticeable. Nevertheless, something has changed, and how far this change has penetrated the souls of children and young people, of the elderly and their relatives, only the future will tell. What we could definitely discover in the crisis was that it is possible to create something together. I don't just mean the solidarity with the weak that we have seen in many places. Rather, it is the fundamental statement that we have resources in solidarity that we no longer expected in late capitalism. But that's not all, in the - albeit spatially distant - conversations with many people, it has been shown that it is not just the ethical orientation that is required in times of deep crisis. It is the question of the just or unjust God; it is the question of WHY the crisis happens; it is

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<sup>14</sup> <https://medienportal.univie.ac.at/uniview/wissenschaft-gesellschaft/detailansicht/artikel/die-vergessene-krise-klima-im-schatten-von-covid-19/>

the experience that the spiritual questions of life can and must be asked independently of existing political systems and their condition. One of the challenges we have to face after the deep crisis is admitting our own uncertainties. A dear friend to whom I gave this text to read beforehand, wrote to me on this issue: "Why the crisis" - as a theological question: Can't it just come out of nonsense? As a biological question, sociological question, etc. I find that fruitful. But theological-ethical, in my opinion, the question can only be: What does charity mean in this crisis? What does mercy mean? What about justice? Perhaps just now: What does the presence of God mean? And let me add: what means "Following Christ?" like Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us? The Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt saw the greatest gift of human beings in the ability to start anew. In her book "Vita activa"<sup>15</sup> she describes how every generation has the chance to start anew not only looking back, but in a completely new way.

Even if the experienced reality now already shows that many people have a great need to return to the old normality, to forget what they have experienced, perhaps even to repress it: When the curtain rises between the crisis and the new normal, we will get some chances to start over and rethink the old for its meaning and importance to us – we can, if we want.

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<sup>15</sup> Arendt, Hannah: Vita activa, oder vom tätigen Leben. München, 2007.