

“IT DOESN’T WORK WITHOUT FEAR”*

A conversation with the theologian
Wolfgang Palaver

DIE ZEIT: Mr. Palaver, only statistics speak of the corona deaths, their fate is rarely told. Can’t death be represented in the media? It seems like that in the USA in particular.

Wolfgang Palaver: I have to contradict you right away. Perhaps it is the case in Europe that individual fates are lost in statistics. But in the USA, for example, the PBS *NewsHour* sends short portraits of the deceased every Friday. Similar to *The Loss* from NBC News or the *Those We’ve Lost* section in the New York Times. Apart from the president, the way the country mourns its dead is exemplary. In Europe I miss that. In our country it seems that a Covid infection is something to be ashamed of. You don’t want to speak to them. They are anonymized.

ZEIT: Are we incapable of public mourning?

Palaver: Maybe we are too moralistic about the virus. Family and friends are “good”, so not infected, then why shouldn’t we be able to meet them? And we have nothing to do with infected people. The best thing to do is to hide Covid as the cause of death if it does happen.

**Only fear of death and catastrophe leads us to act responsibly: A conversation with the theologian Wolfgang Palaver about dying and mourning in the pandemic. Interview: Thomas Assheuer.*

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ZEIT: Are corona-deniers extremists of repression of death?

Palaver: The people who scream for freedom at such demonstrations believe that they are not in danger, and that is why they suppress the danger. In fact, as humans we always have to suppress death in a certain way, otherwise we would constantly look into the abyss of our own mortality. On the other hand, we cannot use our freedom without an enlightened apocalyptic, not without a certain fear. As long as we regard disasters or our own death as a mere distant possibility, they leave us cold. Therefore, we need to be aware of our own mortality again.

ZEIT: Do you want to make politics with fear?

Palaver: It's not about a politics of fear, but about an enlightened catastrophism, that is, a fear that motivates to act out of responsibility and does not assume in an optimistic blind flight that nothing will happen. This is essential with a view to the climate catastrophe and also important with regard to the pandemic. Only if we consider catastrophic bottlenecks in intensive care medicine early enough can we motivate society to stop dangerous developments.

ZEIT: The philosopher Giorgio Agamben claims that the medical effort with which we save the infected proves that we have lost our natural relationship to dying and death. Liberalism makes life a fetish.

Palaver: Agamben really upsets me. He is more papal than the Pope and more ecclesiastical than the Church. He claims that the Church has given up salvation and sacrificed it to health: because it sought salvation - "salvezza" - in history, it could

only end in health - “salute”. Nonsense! Why did Jesus heal people and take care of physical ailments? The many healings alone contradict Agamben’s theological escape from the world. “I am the LORD, your doctor.” Or think of the miracle of the multiplication of bread. When people are hungry, you have to do something! Agamben practices bad theology when he tears salvation and health apart.

ZEIT: Many theologians and philosophers seem to like that.

Palaver: They often prematurely applaud Agamben. Sure, you have to ask where he sees something right. Indeed, bare life is not enough; it is about living with dignity. And Agamben rightly laments an attitude for which health and survival are the most important things in life. But here one would have to ask: is it about my own life? Or is it the concern that applies to other people? I would find it fatal if Agamben’s criticism resulted in the attitude: Don’t make such a fuss about the pandemic and don’t try to save everyone. At some point we’ll die anyway, a few years don’t matter.

ZEIT: In the discussion about the corona measures, the name of the theologian Ivan Illich appears again and again. He was a sharp critic of apparatus medicine. Like Agamben.

Palaver: Agamben is the editor of Illich’s writings in Italy. And Illich was a master at showing how good things can turn into negative. He showed that one must not elevate the sanctity of life to an ideological program, otherwise one achieves the opposite and turns life into a fetish. It is the same with the parable of the good Samaritan. That is great, but we cannot derive a rigid set of rules from it, it would be counterproductive. Nevertheless, we can only understand Illich’s criticism of the fetishization of life as a warning. And by no means as an

invitation to let people die.

ZEIT: There is no life without risk. After all, we don't prohibit driving.

Palaver: It's not the same. Of course, there are risk factors in life, but we would never justify driving a car if we knew that this or that group would be killed in the process.

ZEIT: From the AfD you can hear: "Life is not the highest of goods."

Palaver: Bare life is certainly not the greatest good. But the crucial question is whose life is at stake here. I agree with the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who recognized that clinging to your own life at all costs is the root of violence and war. However, we are responsible for each other's life. It is our highest responsibility, for which we may even have to sacrifice our lives, like Maximilian Kolbe or Franz Jägerstätter. Or the pastor Don Giuseppe Berardelli, who left his ventilator to the seriously ill.

ZEIT: Trump fans are demanding that the state protect freedom and not abolish death. Others claim the pandemic is giving us an opportunity to learn how to die again. For you this is a "sacralization of death". What do you mean by that?

Palaver: There is an opinion that we have to understand death like the dying of plants. If the grain of wheat doesn't die, it won't produce rich fruit. Such images have always shaken me when they are misinterpreted. The origin of this thinking, I believe, lies in the archaic scapegoat mechanism described by the French religious philosopher René Girard. Girard shows that killing a member of a tribal group brings harmony and

new life to that group. The peacemaking is only attributed to the scapegoat and not to the group - his death brings new life, the body of the victim becomes the source of life. Judaism protests against this transfiguration of death and insists that death provides no orientation. Life alone gives orientation.

ZEIT: And what does that have to do with the pandemic?

Palaver: A lot. During the pandemic I learned to emphasize the primacy of life with Judaism and not to agree to any watering down of this attitude. We must hold on to the Jewish idea of the holiness of life. Everything that we are now writing about death in the pandemic must not deviate from the Jewish line of tradition, the emphasis on life. And where Christian theology deviates only a millimeter from the Jewish preference for life, it becomes bad theology. The Christians here - also because of a wrong view of Jesus' death on the cross - often too quickly made compromises with death. Christ did not die in praise of death.

ZEIT: Does the sacralization of death open the abyss to social Darwinism? In the USA, corona deniers demanded: "Sacrifice the weak!"

Palaver: The scapegoat logic is built into utility thinking, based on the motto: If a person dies and therefore a million people live, it is a good calculation. Morally I find that wrong, and it leads to social Darwinism: "Sacrifice the weak!" Consciously accepting the sacrifice of people for the greatest happiness of the greatest number is not acceptable.

ZEIT: Did the Swedish way of fighting pandemics also follow this victim logic? The old people were not given much attention.

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Palaver: I refused the way from the start. Ethically, everything in us would have to rebel if there were any consideration of sacrificing the old. We mustn't take other people's lives into account. In the meantime, even in Sweden, this path has been recognized as the wrong one.

ZEIT: It is unrealistic to align politics with the sanctity of life. We have to weigh up.

Palaver: That's true, but with this consideration one would still orientate oneself on the sanctity of life. And that doesn't seem to have been the case in Sweden.

ZEIT: Aren't we experiencing an abysmal relationship between freedom and death in the pandemic? By exercising my freedom, I can kill others. This is not provided for in self-centered liberalism.

Palaver: I have to keep wondering what my freedom means for the lives of others. But we see how difficult this responsibility is for us - presumably for the reason that we cannot imagine the deadly danger.

ZEIT: The writer Juli Zeh, the essayist Thea Dorn, the philosopher Julian Nida-Rümelin or the virologist Hendrik Streeck - to name just a few - complain about the restriction of basic rights. How far does the appeal to the concept of freedom carry? Does it need correction?

Palaver: When it comes to the lives of others, fundamental rights may have to be restricted - but democratically controlled. In everyday life, however, one often comes across an understanding of freedom that only sees one's own needs.

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That needs correction. But as someone who has enjoyed globalization so far, I have to wonder how people at the bottom of the economic ladder are doing. Therefore we, the privileged, should refrain from complaining about restrictions of freedom.