

Bookpresentation '*weltfragen im Libanon*' in Goethe Institut Beirut, May 23rd 2007

I would like to thank all of you also on behalf of my colleague the artist Roland Kreuzer for being here today and giving up your time to hear more about this project.

It is thanks to the financial and logistical support of our sponsors, and also and especially thanks to the contributions of our speakers from the Universities of Lebanon, that we are able to present this documentation of the “Weltfragen im Libanon” project today. I would like to thank the philosopher Dr Doumit Salameh of the Notre Dame University, Father Selim Abou of the University of St Joseph, Dr Henry Cremona of the University of Saint Esprit de Kaslik, Dr Richard Dean from the American University, Beirut and Dr Ridwan al-Sayyed from the Lebanese University, who will be speaking to us shortly. I would also like to thank Dr Fitnat Messeike from the Islamic Cultural Institute. Thanks to their contributions, we – and I am speaking here of those of us with a German or European background – have been privileged to learn more about some of the ideas and cultural structures that have formed and continue to form Lebanese society as we know it today.

I would like to remind you all briefly of the history of the Weltfragen project. Roland Kreuzer is an artist based in Berlin. For over ten years, he has participated in discussions with people from different linguistic backgrounds talking about the so-called ‘Universal Questions’ of the philosopher Immanuel Kant. Those questions are: What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope for? and What is the human being? The culmination of this project was a decision to translate the four questions into over 100 different languages and place these translations in prominent public spaces. Kreuzer called this project ‘weltfragen’ (universal questions) and in 2001, several European cities were chosen to be the sites of the first public poster action. Hundreds of yellow posters bearing the questions were placed around the cities, so that passers-by were confronted with questions in languages they did not immediately understand. However, the continuing confrontation with the posters led the passers-by to begin to decipher the ‘code’ that Kreuzer was using and hence gradually to recognise that these questions are profoundly important for everybody, no matter what their nationality. By using these ‘shock tactics’ Kreuzer wants to fill the public arena with philosophy, confronting individuals with questions about their religion and morality and in this way to think about the meaning of their lives. The poster action is intended to be a catalyst for thinking about the true meaning of these words and hence not only to understand reality but also to recreate and idealise it.

“All good things take time” is a German proverb which seems very appropriate today, given that Kant first asked his questions over 200 years ago. A central aspect of his philosophy was that the human being is valuable in its own right, and must never be treated as a means to an end. This concept of humanity is recognised in the first article of the German constitution, which became law exactly 58 years ago today, on 23 May 1949, and the same principle – named in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as “All human

beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” – is enshrined in the laws of all European democracies and the United Nations Charter of Human Rights. And, as you know, a Lebanese citizen, Charles Malik, was one of the composers of that charter.

Roland Kreuzer’s poster initiative in Europe ended in December 2001 with a symposium in Berlin. Academics and thinkers from different fields were invited to give papers on the meaning of Kant’s Questions for a modern Europe. It was agreed at the symposium that one of the effects of the “Weltfragen” project had been to show how difficult it is for Europeans to answer these questions, not because of a lack of interest but perhaps even because they are still so important to us. Since the beginning of the Enlightenment in Europe there has been an ongoing deconstruction of ideas and values which was originally necessary in order to redefine the relationship between politics and theology. When I speak of “politics” and “theology” I am not talking about religion or belief but about how religious dogma at that time dominated politics in Europe. Today, the postmodern elites in Europe are no longer identified by any religious or national loyalties, to which they appear to be intellectually superior. However, because those elites emphasise cultural heterogeneity and tolerance, it has become difficult in Europe to reach consensus on how to live a good life, and hence to find common ideals for our lives, especially in terms of education and bringing up children.

Our experiences as Europeans led us to the decision to take the Kantian Questions to a non-European space and look at how they might be answered in places where religion still forms the basis for cultural values. An Arabic culture seemed the obvious choice, because we believe that in Arabic cultures religion still plays an important role in value-forming and also that in Arabic cultures people are less likely to base their values on a purely utilitarian attitude. We also believe that in Europe, the kind of analytical thought that resulted from the Cartesian separation of body and soul (Cartesian dualism) has led to immense advances in technology but has also led to a dangerous division between human beings and their environment. As a result of this, the entire Western world is currently undergoing huge ecological, social and cultural crises. Arabic cultures, on the other hand, were not so deeply influenced by the implications of Cartesian thought, and the Western post-Enlightenment deconstruction of body and soul did not take place in the Arabic world in the same way. Instead, there has been a continuity in a metaphorical unity of body and soul which we see today in the richness of literature, art, sociology and the other humanities in Arab cultures. We hope that the “weltfragen” project will help us as Europeans to conserve and transmit the Arabic experience for Western readers and to play a part in making sure that the treasures of Arabic thought are not lost. We hope that the book we are presenting today will contribute to this aim.

I would now like to say something about why we are in Lebanon today.

Amman in Jordan was awarded the status of “Cultural Capital of the Arab World” in 2002. As a result of this, we made contact with cultural institutions in Amman to try to implement the project with the co-operation of Jordanian academics. However, due to the political

situation we were advised by the Jordanians in November 2002 to contact their neighbours in Lebanon instead to try to establish the project there. Lebanon for us meant a country that has been one of the most important places for cultural and commercial exchange since antiquity, and we also knew that it is the home of the biggest publishing houses in the Middle East. Due to Lebanon's cultural significance and the recommendation from Jordan, we decided at the beginning of 2004 that Lebanon would be the most appropriate country for our work. Lebanon, like Europe, values cultural difference and tolerance. Lebanon is multilingual – besides French and English, Arabic opens up the world of Arabic thought for Europeans, as thought is always embedded in a social context via language.

The poster action took place in October 2005 in Beirut and was accompanied by a symposium in the Masrah al Madina theatre, where the philosophers who are here today gave papers on the Kantian Questions. The book “weltfragen im Libanon” documents their different approaches. Dr Doumit Salameh looked at what the questions might mean to us in the future. Father Selim Abou discusses the relationship between Kant's Questions and human rights and what this means for individual nations. Dr Henry Cremona sees the questions here as a guide to education. Dr Richard Dean, by an charming sleight of academic hand, manages to summarise the four questions into just one and offers us practical solutions. Dr Ridwan al-Sayyid, proves that these same questions were influencing Muslim thought as long ago as the 9th century, long before Kant. Dr Fitnat Messeike focuses on the question “What is the human being?” to discuss the special role of women and compares the rights that women are given in the Koran and the Bible.

Translating all the papers for the book into German, English and Arabic was a great challenge. However, it also meant that the contributors' papers were part of an intensive cultural discussion right from the beginning, as the translations were worked on by linguists from England, Palestine, Syria, Jordan and Germany who were all directly or indirectly in communication with each other.

Friedrich Schiller, Goethe's great contemporary, said, “Only abundance brings clarity”. Here “abundance” implies not only the abundance of our experiences, but also the abundance of words for things, the abundance of languages, the different ways that we talk about different phenomena. This abundance and the bringing together of individual ideas about Kant's questions makes up the content of the book. Earlier I talked about a European kind of analytical thinking which consists in examining facts in isolation, and the problems that can result from that. In this abundance in Lebanon I see a counter-model to European analysis. While in Europe we assume we can get to the truth by breaking things down, or de-constructing, I see here a possibility of finding truth by bringing things together. Logical linguistic analysis can put us in danger of over-simplifying situations. Aristotelian logic focuses its practioners on those specific linguistic structures which allow us to create a linear, unambiguous connection between cause and effect, and it excludes other ways of using language. These “other ways” might be, for example, lateral associations between words based on their secondary or implied meanings. These secondary, implied meanings

resonate in our consciousness and play an important part in how we recognise the nuances of a sentence and hence in our daily communication with each other. The fact that every word is capable of arousing multiple associations in our minds can be used to clarify certain aspects of reality via language that would remain hidden if we focused only on a linear logical language structure.

Goethe, who, as you know, this Institute is named after, criticized the methodology of the natural sciences because one of its results was to separate the two concepts “right” and “true”. For Goethe, truth was something that cannot be separated from values. Human beings, in his eyes, can and should orientate themselves only according to the compass of the “unum bonum verum”, and science can only be “true” – as opposed to merely being “right” – when its premises are based on the Divine order of things.

The optimism, calm and hospitality of your people in Lebanon have made the “weltfragen im Libanon” project possible. Our work on the texts of the contributors has given us the feeling that we are coming closer to understanding the meaning of life. Thank you.

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