

## DECALOGUE

# STONEHENGE, WILTSHIRE, 21. JUNE 2005, AT THE BREAK OF DAY.

On the day of the summer solstice a vast crowd of people social contract, in which the structure of the family alone has the means to assure tolerable survival in a no-longer has gathered at this prehistoric cult site. Some are standing alone, some casually next to each other in groups, without however communicating with each other. Their apparent silent and expectant stance is aimed not at the famous stone circle, which largely remains unobserved in the background, but rather at an occurrence to the right and beyond the picture's field of view (the approaching sunrise, which is apparent from the picture's title but not from the picture itself). Perhaps in a similar way the people of Israel saw their leader Moses approaching them as he came down from Mount Sinai to deliver the stone tablets after forty days and forty nights in dialogue with God. That the location, occasion and context of an occurrence may be recorded by photographers is circumstantial; the decisive point is the critical moment - whatever the cause - in which the nucleus of communal spirit is formed from an initially anonymous mass of people. Every community, if it desires to avoid a descent into relentless anarchy and within

no time at all sink again into chaos, requires for its existence rigid, uncountermandable and recognisable norms of behaviour. These „commandments“, initially collectively recorded, and in historical times then increasingly documented in writing and thereby becoming well determined, longterm regulations for social intercourse must be unambiguous, easy to understand and without exception binding upon all parties. Thus, explained by its socially binding and community promoting function, the recurring key role in many cultures is played by the law-giver, who as a real person often has mythical origins. This found, so to speak, a late sequel in Napoléon Bonaparte himself and in the Code Napoléon named after him.

Laws, as the word-root of statute suggests, are not at all made a priori, but are based on authoritative example, or - as is usual in modern, democratically constituted societies - on reciprocal consensus. They may be founded on the logic of reason, which does not however exempt them from a critical reflection and scrutiny. In extreme cases there remains the moral option of a pre-emptive offence with the intention of avoiding the greater evil.

Commandments on the other hand, as we are used to them from the Decalogue of the Old Testament, function as God-given directives beyond all human rationale. They are absolutely binding and therefore ultimately irrevocable. In any case, such is the Bible's clear and unmistakable declaration, regardless of any desire to assess its messenger Moses as a historical person: as a verbally fervent founder of a religion and law-giving leader of his people, as a seer and prophet inspired by divine spirit or indeed as the medium chosen by God to proclaim his - God's - will to the tribes of Israel. Angered by the corruption from belief in his fellow men during his absence, Moses breaks the tablets he had brought down from Sinai with him and engraved with the Ten Commandments in God's hand. Thus finally there remains only the word, the word of Moses, for the divine message he had brought with him. The Ten Commandments Words are like pebbles that over the years, decades and centuries of use, lose their original sharpness and angularity, and finally deteriorate into flowery, non-committal phrases. This is true in English for the rather feeble subjunctive

„thou shalt“ (in contrast to the unmistakable meaning „you must“ ) and no less so for the expression „commandment“ frequently misunderstood as a mere recommendation for action. Previously, the unavoidably binding character of „commandment“ now only effectively exists in complementary expressions such as „recommend“ as well as in synonymous derivatives such as „directive“ and „instruction“. The linguistic efficacy of the Bible's text in the Anglo-Saxon Ten Commandments has to some extent retained its robustness in comparison to some other language families, where above all, like an aural whiplash in one's ear ; you shall not ( in archaic Bible English: thou shalt not ) verbally points the finger of responsibility, an idiomatic expression which should be wholly avoided in everyday usage, so that one may also avoid the rather haughty „Oh, shouldn't I ?“

It is no surprise that a God-given legal agreement according to a Judaeo-Christian conceptual viewpoint and originating many millennia ago still contains, in some places, notions, which appear archaic. In human historical terms, manifesting itself here and evident in all early cultures; polytheism and idolatry ( the golden calf destroyed by Moses after his return from Sinai ) was finally overcome via the „more modern“ and more progressive form of an abstract monotheism ( Thou shalt not make any graven image or any likeness ). But what sort of God would this be - he that deserves my undivided and infinite reverence ( first commandment ), if he should fear his name being taken in vain, more than anything according to the second commandment, because this misuse is harmless since it is no longer attended by magical effect ? A „jealous „ God, indeed, but hardly the all-embracing God-the-creator, high above all human fallibility and baseness, just as the Old Testament seeks to evoke him. Above all understandable from the time of origin of the text and yet still today by continuous, uninterrupted topicality, the fourth commandment also proves its worth: Thou shalt honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee. Within this is hidden the basic structure - in a positive sense - of a primitive employable old age ... a generational contract, as it was and still is by all Christian brotherly love, which even long after the enlightenment, is still the general rule.

All in all, the Ten Commandments have been able to retain up to now a good part of their original effectiveness in contrast to more recent interpretations, precisely due to their openness. Primarily, they are based on three factors: the reduction down to a few, easy to conceive, basic principles; the therein markedly primary preconditions for any thriving togetherness in a social community, however conceived (not killing, not stealing, not telling falsehoods or deceiving); and finally and conclusively in the direct speech of a person's individual responsibility: „you“ instead of an anonymous „one „ or even the nonspecific „it is forbidden to“. At the same time one finds herein the ultimate dilemma, since the succinct character of the message stands in diametrical contrast to an extremely complex reality that was, not only today, but also previously evident. Thou shalt not kill: principally this includes one of the most fundamental moral requirements of all. How, though, can I comply with this principle in an obvious situation of self-defence ? How can I weigh up tyrannicide against mass murder in order simply to remain in the rational spectrum? And the question of the death sentence that, particularly in the deeply religious Bible belt of the USA, finds many radical supporters, ready to ignore any dilemma. Thou shalt not commit adultery - even this is certainly not pleasant, especially if for all affected parties it is enhanced with an abundance of cheating and lies, and showing no sign of any increased capacity for interpersonal communication; however a capital crime on the same level as murder, robbery and false oath? Hardly that. The more concise and precise the formulation of the ten commandments are in detail, the more growth and accumulation there is in the employment of the demand for explanation, concretization and specification. The theological exegesis of the Decalogue could fill whole libraries and is outdone in extent only by the countless guideline-volumes of current law and regulation texts, whose formulation-minutiae keeps an army of modern Philistine bureaucrats well fed.

Ralf Kaspers' photo cycle of the Decalogue brought about in the years 2004/2005 is also, if you will, an exegesis, an interpretation of the passed-down biblical text. The graphic representation of the Ten Commandments is not found especially often in the history of

western Christianity, but it nonetheless certainly has a long tradition here, and this is true despite the former second commandment (strictly maintained by Judaism as well as the Eastern church at times also) in the West however subtly avoided, which says: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. The deeper sense and purpose of this Old Testament illustrative prohibition appears to be quite clear. The ability to differentiate between a thing itself and its likeness or image, is also among otherwise rather critical individuals still largely underdeveloped. We now see the photo of a future German politician among stone-throwing demonstrators in Frankfurt in the seventies and say: This is certainly Mr. X at a violent protest action aimed against the state and its constitutional organs! - This statement is false, and furthermore completely independent of its possible historically true content: What we see is the medial reproduction of a (possibly manipulated) print of a negative of a (possibly reconstructed) scene, amongst whose participants is one of a number of persons throwing punches, or perhaps not, who has a certain similarity with the above mentioned. What the photo equally inadequately shows, in a closer and wider context, is the question, how the person concerned in this very situation precisely and actually behaved or thought he should have: more moderate, more anticipatory or perhaps even stir up a further escalation? How dangerous and misleading the desire for a more illustrative view of God must have seemed to the patriarchs and priests of the Old Alliance in the face of such imponderabilities? It is not by chance that the Old Testament relates the episode of the dance around the Golden Calf (Exodus 32) in direct association with the events on Mount Sinai. The image of God transmutes here into a base idol, is no longer governor and paraphrase for a metaphysical perception of God but in itself an object of adoration and worship.

Conversely, Ralf Kaspers' photographs stand in no illustrative relation to the Bible text, and this is what decisively separates them from traditional representations of the Ten Commandments. The connection becomes much more apparent only via the alternating alloca-

tion, which in turn excludes a direct transmission and maintains an associative approach. In order to get the reflex process rolling, additional information is required in many cases for the underlying image object. Only now, with the knowledge of that which in each case is tangibly reproduced in the photo, is the observer able to conceive a connection and thereby to arrive at a more profound understanding of the picture as well as individually filling the literary wording of the commandments with new meaning.

1. I AM THE LORD THY GOD,  
THOU SHALT HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME.

The Lord's Prayer embossed into a former American one-cent piece.

How many religious phrases fit onto a tiny copper disc hardly the size of a thumbnail? A sufficient number should be the answer, corresponding to the length of the Golden Gate Bridge, the height of the Statue of Liberty or the monumental size of the presidents' heads at Mount Rushmore. Additionally they can be found in the vicinity of the main tourist attractions and at the rest stops along American interstate highways, squeezed between squalid coffee stands, junk food and soft drink machines: Embossing machines at which, for a few quarters, you can turn pennies into handy souvenirs. Is such a massively copied Lord's Prayer just another cheap holiday souvenir, about which the widely travelled European smirks and turns up his nose? Or is there perhaps some further meaning hidden behind the facade: a naïve, deeply felt belief that has been long lost to the traditionally educated here at home?

2. THOU SHALT NOT TAKE THE NAME OF THE LORD THY  
GOD IN VAIN.

A crucifixion statuette of our Lord in a birdcage, a studio shot.

What actually is the meaning of taking something in vain? Initially this means an intentional form of misappropriation, which is attended by a negative effect for others. The commandment not to take the name of the Lord thy God in vain, is not, as is to be read now and again in older catechisms, aimed at the harmless verbal curse, but at the deadly

sin of blasphemy. Whether this applies in the present case or not, is ultimately a question of the intentions involved and their interpretation. The placing of a crucifix in a birdcage with the cross' inscription added above, can certainly involve an artistic message to be taken seriously and with religious intent. It may also be interpreted as a cheap gag that makes fun of Christian symbols and their fervent reverence via rearrangement. Here as well, it is important to precisely distinguish between the reality itself and its photographic reproduction: It is not the photographer Ralf Kaspers who forces the crucified image in die into the disrespectful role of a canary in a cage; he simply shows us the picture of a birdcage with a crucifix attached inside it, and thereby compels the observer to reconsider each possible instance of meaning.

### 3. REMEMBER THE SABBATH DAY, TO KEEP IT HOLY.

New York City, Fifth Avenue, a grey, Easter Sunday morning.

Otherwise buzzing with hectic commerce, the main artery of midtown Manhattan is dead quiet. In a now meaningless cycle of phases the traffic lights regulate an absence of traffic. „The City that never sleeps“ lies alone and deserted. Is the inhabitants' well-deserved Sunday peace a sign of religious inner thought? Certainly not for the millions of Jewish New-Yorkers; for them Saturday is the chosen day of the Lord in the commandment and the Christian Easter festival naturally without any deeper meaning. In our modern industrial societies the seventh day has become the weekend, which no longer serves for spiritual reflection but as leisure time, and above all as corporal intermission and for enjoyment. The imperative red light hand raised on the pedestrian crossing signifies „Stop“. Is it this message that the picture is trying to give us?

### 4. HONOUR THY FATHER AND THY MOTHER: THAT THY DAYS MAY BE LONG UPON THE LAND WHICH THE LORD THY GOD GIVETH THEE.

The cemetery in the village Felanitx, Spain. Cemeteries hold our dead. They are places of remembrance, at which children and grandchildren meet at intervals to remember those

that have passed away. However they are also, particularly in many western cities, places of repression of feelings and of forgetting. After a suitable period of decomposition graves are „left open“, and any remains are more or less respectfully disposed of. All of us will one day end up there - and live on in the memory of our descendents. Really, for how much longer?

### 5. THOU SHALT NOT KILL.

An empty wall space with a picture hook in the former Nazi Party (NSDAP) central administration building in Munich.

This „National Socialism“ stands for the greatest genocide in the history of mankind. Adolf Hitler, whose image decorated all public offices (and, what some are happy to forget, many private living rooms) in Germany, and whose immortalised oil, stone and bronze portraits took places of honour in representational structures erected under the regime, was transformed from the fervently extolled saviour of the nation into the supreme personification of evil. Above all he carries the responsibility for the death of millions - though at any rate, after the bitter end, time and again was and is to be heard the desired assumption by many „again we only just managed to survive all that“ which is a perfidious exchange of the roles of victim and perpetrator. The traces of guilt alone do not allow themselves to be erased without a fight, even if the picture hook and a shadow of dirt are quite obviously from a later period: They remain inscribed within us all for ever.

### 6. THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT ADULTERY.

The 'Pascha' brothel in Cologne.

A ten-year-old school-child, growing up in the dreary, moralist dullness of the later years of the economic miracle, can hardly commit adultery, and so in the catechisms of that time free interpretation was unceremoniously applied and the cute expression 'unchastity' was revived. The sound of the word alone made one's blood boil, especially since it was not so precisely said which form of serious wrongdoing could precisely be implied. A dismal bordello in any one of many railway



terminus areas or in the suburbs awakes recollections of these times, in which every occurrence of budding sexuality instantly brought about the verdict of sinfulness. Meanwhile, at closer scrutiny the picture is put into perspective: The structure in the form of a drab apartment block more or less openly confesses in large, pink neon letters to its actual function and via reference to their pertinent website will not allow even the shy, new client to run off without hope. The satisfaction of needs as trade goods, euphemistically called 'sex for money' was not unknown even in biblical times; However it becomes here a bleak, impersonal routine, which almost rekindles a nostalgic desire for those grubby little places of the early post-war decades.

## 7. THOU SHALT NOT STEAL.

A multiplex garage in New York City. What the camel, ox and donkey was for the Israelites on their passage through the Sinai desert, the automobile is today for city nomads: A guarantor of mobility and independence, societal status symbol and a sign of economic success, and thereby at the same time an object of severe concupiscence. Automobiles require just as much or even more garage space than an average children's room, they fill the streets and city squares and are stacked up beneath the narrow space-ratios of Manhattan in adventurous, hydraulic-sliding shelf-constructions. Among all modern offences automobile theft takes up a prominent position. In its ubiquitous availability this object of desire is relatively easy to acquire and just as easy to dispose of and turn into in hard cash. Automobile theft is seen by such thieves themselves within their gangs as 'no big deal' but they also put their groups' new recruits to the acid test, who then thereby earn respect. The inhibition threshold is considerably reduced and not only amongst 'professional' criminals.

## 8. THOU SHALT NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS AGAINST THY NEIGHBOUR.

Postal box addresses at the Empire State Building, Manhattan.

False oath occurs in the case of a capital crime; however the most common form of delibera-

te, false statement is economically motivated. In the struggle for one's own advantage, financial harm to others is quickly endorsed and sanctioned, and the unequal competition is passed off as a sporting competition. Deceit begins straight off with labelling fraud and is just as true for a dummy address at a feigned 'secure' prestige location and no less for the cheaply produced illegal copy of name-brand articles. Specifically because deliberately false 'labelling' enjoys an increasingly wide complicity, which regards more and more the successful deceit with clandestine joy and subliminal pride, is the commandment against falsehood to be taken in earnest. The erosion of moral values begins here, where in deceitful intent the apparent triumphs over the real.

## 9. THOU SHALT NOT COVET THY NEIGHBOUR'S WIFE.

Via di Pre, Genoa. The street in the old Genoese harbour district is similar to the developed urban structure in many cities in the Mediterranean area. The fact that it hides in an apparently so harmless, superficial impression of one of Italy's oldest red-light districts, is only of secondary importance for the picture's statement. For the potential john it should be quite insignificant which legal personal status the women here hold in their private lives while they go about their business. It is another matter that tips the scales: The uninviting facades with their few, barred windows in the twilight of the narrow chasm-like streets impart a sense of everything hermetically sealed, inquisitiveness and covetousness, which is further increased by the shadowy outline of a solitary woman. Does this picture make a statement on the corpus delicti of the libidinal violation? As in all the photographs for the Decalogue Kaspers abstains from a concrete moralising statement. We further intertwine ourselves in the already stimulated thoughts and strive - with our endeavours to bring text and picture together into harmony - to make these things rhyme.

## 10. THOU SHALT NOT COVET THY NEIGHBOUR'S HOUSE, NOR ANYTHING THAT IS THY NEIGHBOUR'S.

In the ring of a 'fight club' in Düsseldorf. What was previously mentioned is just as true for

the final illustration for the tenth and last commandment of the Decalogue. Initially one notices: It is this, anticipated from the apparitional figure in the Via di Pre, along with the initial picture in the series it is the only photograph in which real people are to be seen. Here as well they remain silent and expectant in the throng, and then as still passive participants of approaching events. Initially, there is nothing to be seen of the events' actual participants ( the boxers ), predominantly young men from the most various classes of society, who seek to thrash out their occupational and private frustrations up to the extreme limit of physical injury. Only the brightly lit square of the fighting ring, with its blue mat covering spattered with sweat and blood, inevitably enables the picture's observers to feel the tension vibrating in the air. The pent up aggression races for the body as the most precious goods and chattels of the individual, and which, once destroyed, cannot in any way be replaced by material compensation. Initially the aggression affects the fighter's actual opponent in a strange sadomasochistic mood, but much more however, it affects the drooling mass of spectators who draw their wholly individual satisfaction from this frightening spectacle.

With his photo cycle Ralf Kaspers unfolds a highly idiosyncratic perspective of the Decalogue. His photographs do not illustrate, nor do they graphically demonstrate, as is sometimes the case in many historical representations, despite the originally preserved illustration ban and its erst- while and present intention. While here generally a direct, readable graphical adaptation of the individual behavioural maxims aimed for, Kaspers certainly offers thought provocation. His view of things is a deeply personal one, which however carefully avoids circular reasoning of an individual iconography, and thereby avoids forcing the observer into a pure recipient correlation. His view is personal insofar as he wishes to bring the selffelt, self-experienced, self- thought into the picture, and this then, setting it in relation to one of the commandments without allowing the combination of text and picture to have been predetermined by the author in each individual case. In Kaspers' case, text and picture offer no simple correlation. Much more are the pictures to be read in the sense

of analogies, in which in each case a single, but for him a central aspect of the relevant commandment is brought up. Kaspers proceeds therefore no differently from generations of priests, scribes and theologians before him: He performs exegesis, interprets, attempts to intrude into the very core of the passed down texts and to question their statements with regard to current relevance. Despite all this he always ensures at the same time a certain measure of objectivity and careful distance that, bearing in mind this very personally affected view may seem at first to be a contradiction. Kaspers' viewpoint of these things does not imply any incontrovertible causality, does not lead to any dogmatic conclusions, nor even to moralising judgements of values. As a photographer he creates associations, offers pictures, that once again act as a trigger for chains of association, but however leave the actual picture statements intentionally vague and ambiguous. Without any doubt it would have been possible to find other picture motifs that could even have reflected the deeper sense of the commandments; That Kaspers very carefully avoided this very simple step is also a sign that separates the artist from the illustrator. As an artist Ralf Kaspers does not pursue a literal exact photomotif significance of the Decalogue. He seeks instead the inner dialogue with one of the most fundamental texts in the history of mankind, which in turn leads him to other original and ever surprising expression.

TEXT: PROF. DR. WOLF TEGETHOFF

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