

The “spirit of our time” – On the relevance today of the ideas of the great humanist Albert Schweitzer

by Prof. Dr. Rüdiger H. Jung*



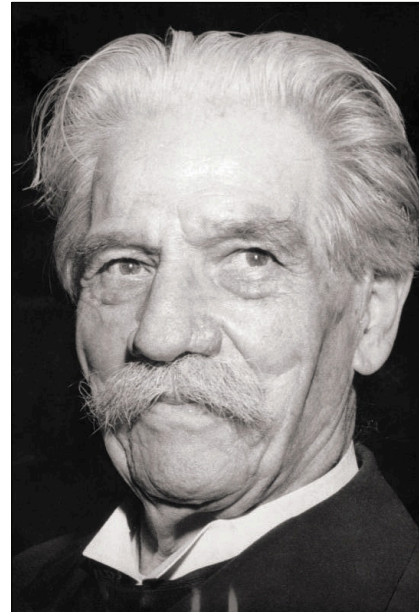
Rüdiger H. Jung.
(Picture Hochschule
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“The ‘spirit of our time’ [...] keeps us in a frenzy of activity so that we do not come to our senses and ask ourselves what this restless devotion to goals and achievements actually has to do with the meaning of the world and the meaning of our lives.”

No, this sentence was not written today. The quote comes from *Albert Schweitzer’s* “Philosophy of Civilization,” first published in 1923. The great social analysis of the humanist, organ virtuoso, philosopher, theologian and physician Albert Schweitzer, born 150 years ago, is impressively relevant today.

To emphasise the distressing nature of this relevance, one could – presumably with Schweitzer’s approval – add to the “frenzy of activity” the frenzy of crisis and panic with which the population is caught up in a condition of fear by politicians and the media, preventing them from reflecting on the true value of life.

Albert Einstein is quoted as saying that he considered Schweitzer to be the only person in the Western world whose moral influence was comparable to that of *Mahatma Gandhi*. When Albert Schweitzer, already at an advanced age, tirelessly campaigned against nuclear armament and for peaceful coexistence among nations in accordance with his famous “ethics of reverence for life” in the 1950s and 1960s, it was contemporaries and fellow campaigners such as Albert Einstein, *Werner Heisenberg*, *Otto Hahn*, *Linus Pauling*, the philosopher *Bertrand Russell* and the



Albert Schweitzer. (Federal Archives, picture 183-D0116-0041-019 / Unknown / CC-BY-SA 3.0)

first UN Secretary-General *Dag Hammarskjöld* who relied above all on the influence of Schweitzer’s moral authority.

What could be more fitting in today’s world, where ideology is declared morality through sheer unbearable reinterpretation in the political arena, than to remember Albert Schweitzer and his timeless ideas?

Two central concepts in Schweitzer’s thinking

At the heart of Schweitzer’s thinking is the question of what ultimately determines the progress of civilisation. It is not, as is often claimed, technical and material progress; for it is precisely this that keeps us in a frenzy of activity and constantly gives birth to new possibilities for artefacts that are hostile to life and destroy it.

The decisive factor for true progress in human civilisation is the development of human beings into “ethical personalities” who act in freedom and responsibility – a central concept in Schweitzer’s thinking. The “affirmation of life through active devotion to other life” and the striving for “inner perfection” are the two basic principles and fundamental movements of the ethical personality. Schweitzer describes these two funda-

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mental movements as self-sacrificing love and constant striving for truthfulness towards others and oneself – values that also determined his own thinking and actions.

Albert Schweitzer contrasts the individual, the single human being, with “collectivities”, as he called the social organisations in which the individual is embedded. Only the human individual is a spiritual being with an inherent striving for values, an unconditional will to live and the ability to develop an ethical personality.

No organisation is capable of this – no commercial enterprise, no political party, no so-called *non-governmental organisation* (NGO), not even a religious institution. There is an antagonism between these collectivities and the human being capable of ethical personality, which Schweitzer never tires of emphasising as a problem for the progress of civilisation.

“The ethics of the ethical personality seek to preserve humanity. Those established by society are incapable of doing so. [...] Ethics [...] can only come about in the individual.” Collectivities with their own interests “fear the personality because the spirit and truth that they want to silence can find expression in it,” according to Schweitzer. That is why social and political forces are constantly striving to “limit the authority of the ethics of the ethical personality as much as possible.” They want “servants who do not rebel.”

And further: “Where collectivities have a stronger influence on the individual than it has on them, decline ensues.” Even after these warnings were published, but still during Schweitzer’s lifetime, history provided sufficient evidence for his ethical argument – with wars and genocides as the terrible culmination of collectivist movements ending in mass madness.

Abusive behaviour of collectivities

But haven’t we been experiencing increasingly abusive behaviour by collectivities in recent years? Are we not currently witnessing the political rulers creating additional agents of this intrusiveness by financing so-called NGOs, in addition to tightening legal precautions? An intrusiveness that – to quote Albert Schweitzer once again – seeks to educate “modern man into an unfree, uncollected, dependent, incomplete and inhuman being”.

Even standing up for peace and against war-mongering is now denigrated because it runs

counter to the interests of certain groups and ideological muddleheads. Schweitzer’s principles for ethical behaviour are expressed in clear, universally valid statements such as “Good consists in maintaining, promoting, and enhancing life, and that destroying, injuring, and limiting life are evil.” Those who think and act in this way, who are “ethical personalities,” are often met with a disparaging smile and accusations of naivety. Despite the high regard in which his moral authority was held, Albert Schweitzer also found himself confronted with this:

“It is the fate of every truth to be an object of ridicule before it is recognised. [...] But the time is coming when people will be amazed that the human race existed so long before it recognised that thoughtless injury to life is incompatible with real ethics.”

Development of an ethical personality

The development of an ethical personality is the ultimate challenge for all of us who are engulfed by other than humanitarian interests in the frenzy of activity, crisis and panic. The sheer scale of this challenge is demonstrated by the fact that, a good hundred years after Schweitzer’s reflections, after life-destroying dictatorships and world wars, and despite apparent progress in the meantime, we are still facing this challenge. Even in our education system, the early acquisition of digital technology skills and the continual acquisition of professional skills have relegated the promotion of the development of an ethical personality to obscurity.

It is not surprising that Schweitzer is reduced in many texts and speeches on the occasion of his 150th birthday in January this year to his undoubtedly highly commendable work as a “jungle doctor” in Lambarene in Central Africa.

The strange old man with a moustache and tropical helmet, the son of a pastor from the Alsace province, blessed with many talents for a classical career, spurned the parquet floors of the supposedly civilised upper middle class and became a servant of the poorest in the heart of Africa.

This commands the utmost respect – and offers the opportunity for a narrow view of the person and his life’s work.

In times like these, when belligerence is once again booming, this reduction is downright functional. Now is not the time for disruptive arguments about the ethics of peace. They could

jeopardise the inhumane, ethically absurd activities of influential forces, precisely because these arguments can be read in Schweitzer's unusually clear and understandable language.

"True truth versus the truth of propaganda"

"And how great are the tasks that the mind must tackle! It must restore understanding of the true

truth where only the truth of propaganda prevails."

It remains as important as ever to keep alive the thoughts of one of the greatest humanists of the German and French languages, Nobel Peace Prize winner Albert Schweitzer.

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