Angela Merkel as the bulwark of European values, the Lutheran vicar’s daughter or the child of ‘1989’?

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Speaking about Angela Merkel in February 2017, almost four weeks after Donald Trump took office in the United States, means not only to speak about the most powerful politician in the European Union. It means to speak about "Europe's last leader standing", the woman, who "wears the west's mantle", as the Financial Times put it in November, just after the US election.

Angela Merkel as the bulwark of the West, whatever 'the West' still is. The German chancellor as standard bearer of a liberal order and European values – to be honest, to a German journalist, who followed her closely since 1999, this perspective still needs getting used to. And indeed, how ironic: the woman, who grew up in the far East of Germany, some 50 kilometers away from the Polish border, who spent more than half of her lifetime under a communist regime, she of all people should now save the West!

But obviously this is the way, how she is perceived, at least by those who fear for the West and its values. So, the question is obvious: What are her values? What are her roots?

This is not the place and I'm not the man to draw a fully-fledged portrait of Angela Merkel. What I would like to do in the next ten to fifteen minutes, is to speak about two motives, which are in my opinion crucial for understanding Angela Merkel as a politician and to answer the question, what it is that makes her 'tick'. Two motives which might also help to explain what kind of European she is.

Lutheran vicar's daughter

Angela Kasner – that's her birth name – grew up in Templin, a small town around 90 kilometers north of Berlin. At that time Templin was part of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the communist part of the country, which laid behind the iron curtain. Behind, if you were looking from Brussels, Paris or Rome. Merkel's father, Horst Kasner, was a Protestant pastor (not exactly a vicar), who was asked by his church to establish and to run a seminar for Protestant theologians in Templin. That was in 1957. The seminar buildings as well as the vicarage were located outside the town, together with a home for the handicapped, which was also run by the church. The name of the whole ensemble, which still exists, is der Waldhof.

To grow up as a vicar's daughter – that means something in Germany. Das evangelische Pfarrhaus, the Protestant vicarage, is much more than just a residential house – it is a German myth.
Friedrich Nietzsche, the philosopher, the famous authors Jean Paul and Hermann Hesse, but also Gudrun Ensslin, a terrorist of the so called Red Army Fraction are just a few names of a long list of prominent public figures, who all grew up in a Protestant vicarage. From the very beginning, after the Reformation, exactly 500 years ago, the vicarage has been a particular place: privat and public at the same time; an institution, where the Christian values and the Protestant culture are cultivated in a particular way. No Protestant vicarage would be complete without Johann Sebastian Bach! The vicarage is "a refuge of education and a bulwark against secularism and a loss of meaning", to quote Christian Eichel, one of the authors, who studied its myth.

Bible lectures, services, the church choir: All this was part of Merkels daily life, when she was a child. But Protestant culture means more than this. – Allow me to quote her in German, I will give you a raw translation afterwards:

Ich bin ... in einer Familie groß geworden, in der das Christliche nicht nur den Lebensort, sondern auch die Lebenseinstellung prägte.

I grew up in a family, where Christianity formed not only the way of life but also the attitude towards life.

What does this mean? I would argue that Merkel is a very authentic representative of what the German sociologist Max Weber called die protestantische Ethik. The Protestant ethics: an attitude towards life, which focuses very much on the concept of efforts, duty, and hard work. You have to work and to fulfill your duties! That was the spirit in which Merkel was educated. Her father, who died some years ago, was a very strong and serious person.

So, Angela Merkel grew up in a vicarage, in the spirit of a well founded Protestantism. But it was a vicarage in a communist state. A religious place in an anti-religious environment. A bulwark! And hence a political place. The Protestant church played an ambigious role in the GDR. At the beginning it was perceived as opposition and as a threat to the communist regime. Later on many clergymen arranged themselves with the regime, for better or worse – this is subject of difficult and often fierce debates, which have not yet come to an end.

However, Angela Merkel, the vicar's daughter, experienced religion and faith in at least two ways. Growing up in a vicarage was distinctive. When she was a child, she felt already what it means to be an outsider. Since there was no religious education at school, she was lectured in private, together with some other children. Most of her schoolfellows went to the Jugendweihe, a festivity which was organized by the communist state to replace confirmation (the Protestant equivalent to the First Communion); the vicar's daughter was confirmed, of course.


Due to my faith I learned at that time, that it can be justified to think and to decide in a different way than other people.
A strong believer within a hostile environment – that was one side of her experience. The other one was: Religion and faith were never just private, under the communist regime they always got a political meaning.

Merkel kept her faith, until today. She refers to herself as a practicing Christian (gläubige Christin) and says that she is praying every day. She is a constant speaker at the so called Kirchentage – huge gatherings with tens of thousands of Christians which are organized either by the Protestant or the Catholic church. She speaks openly and repeatedly about her faith. And she is member of a party, who claims to be a Christian Democratic Union. But she has never given religious reasons for a particular political decision! Not even when it came to the refugee crisis. She often refers to the "Christian idea of man", but:

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\text{Die Berufung auf Gott ist kein Freibrief. Sie kann ein Kraftquell sein, aber sie entscheidet nicht darüber, ob die eine oder andere Auffassung die richtige ist. (2014)}
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The invocation of God is no guarantee. It can be a source of energy, but it doesn't imply the decision about the right opinion.

For the vicar's daughter, who became chancellor, faith is no longer a matter of politics. Nor is it a matter of restrictions. Quite the contrary: The strength and the certitude of faith, which she experienced in her childhood, are the precondition of – liberty.

**Child of 1989**

Freedom and liberty – this is the second motive. Angela Merkel is a child of 1989. And in my opinion this is the second answer to the question, what kind of European values she stands for.

To describe the German chancellor as a child of 1989 has at least two aspects.

1. In 1989 Angela Merkel was a woman of 35, already divorced from her first husband, one Mister Merkel. She held a Ph. D. in physics and worked at the Academy of Science in east Berlin. In the night, when the wall came down, she took a sauna together with a friend, as she did on any given Thursday. So far, she had made her career as a scientist without touching upon politics. But six weeks later, in December 1989, she joined Demokratischer Aufbruch, a fairly new party, which, by the way, was founded and dominated by Protestant pastors. Three months later, after the first free elections in the GDR, she became deputy spokesperson for the last Prime Minister of the GDR. Seven months later Germany was reunified, and in January 1991 Helmut Kohl chose her as minister, responsible for family, women and youth.

From the sauna to the cabinet's table within a year: In 1989 Merkel experienced that a political system is not carved in stone and can collapse within months – with radical consequences for almost everyone. The experience that everything may change from one day to the other has determined her perspective on the Western European societies. First in Germany: In 2003, as leader of the opposition, Merkel demanded a fundamental overhaul of the German society and economy. In a famous speech, which she delivered on the occasion of German Unity Day and which is still worth to
be read, she evoked what she called "die zweiten Gründerjahre unserer Republik" – nothing less than a fresh start for the Republic. It took her some years and a near-defeat in the following elections to understand, that most people – definitely most Germans – are much more looking for stability than for radical change. A lesson, she seems to have forgotten when it came to Greece.

But nevertheless, the experience that everything may change is still effective. Today, her perspective on Europe is this:

*Die heutige Stellung Deutschlands und Europas ist nicht naturgegeben. ... Man hat keinen Rechtsanspruch auf Demokratie und keinen auf dauerhaften Wohlstand. (Kornelius, S.83f)*

Today's position of Germany and Europe are not granted. There is no legal claim to democracy and ongoing prosperity.

2. Her second lesson as a child of 1989 brings me back to the question of values. When the wall came down, she gained an emphatic and extensive understanding of liberty. No matter what policy area we are speaking about, be it economy, society or foreign policy – the pursuit of liberty is what makes her 'tick'.

*Ohne Freiheit ist alles nichts.*

Without liberty all is nothing.

That was 2003, in the speech on German Unity Day. Liberty as a core principle of the economy: The early Merkel was much more an advocate of a free market economy than of a social market economy. Which, by the way, caused some opposition inside her own party, namely – and not by incident – on the Catholic, more leftist wing. A constellation very similar to the constellation at the European table, when it came to the Euro crisis.

Indeed, it is not difficult to find the impact of the Protestant ethics on her understanding of liberty, when Merkel went on in 2003:

*Freiheit steht für Leistungsfreude ... Jeder muss bei sich selber anfangen. (2003)*

Liberty stands for the joy of efforts (achievements?) ... Everyone has to start for him- or herself.

For Merkel, liberty and efforts are two sides of the same coin.

And liberty, again, was the leitmotif, when she addressed the German Parliament for the first time as chancellor, in autumn 2005:

*Lasst uns mehr Freiheit wagen.*

Let us dare more liberty.

She stated according to Willy Brandts famous word: "Let us dare more democracy."

The longer she is in office, the more liberty and freedom have become an asset in her foreign policy, too. That was the case after the annexation of Crimea: Her sharp reaction and her firm stance on Russia are not to be understood without her personal background, without the experience of 1989.
The same with the Arab Spring. It was at the Munich Security Conference in February 2011, when Merkel delivered a highly remarkable and highly unusual speech. Exhilarated, declamatory, full of drive – that's not her style normally. But to her the people on the streets of Cairo or Tunis were a clear reminder to 1989.

_Menschen, die sich etwas trauen, Menschen, die ihre Angst ablegen, Menschen, die aussprechen, was ihnen nicht passt, und Ungerechtigkeit beim Namen nennen. Wer wären wir denn, wenn wir nicht sagen würden, dass wir auf der Seite dieser Menschen stehen, die das ausdrücken, was sie beschwert? (5.2.2011)_

People, who have the heart to do something, people, who give up their fear, people, who speak out on what they don't agree, who call injustice. Who are we, if we don't say, that we're on their side?

At that very moment, Hosni Mubarak was still in charge. But Merkel went on:

_Es ist absolut notwendig, dass die Freiheiten, die wir für universell halten – Pressefreiheit, Meinungsfreiheit, Freiheit des Journalismus – nicht nur in Europa, in Amerika oder anderen Plätzen der Welt ihren Platz haben, sondern dass auch die ägyptischen Verantwortlichen aufgefordert sind, diese zu sichern. ... Wir können bei der Achtung der Würde jedes einzelnen Menschen keinen Kompromiss machen. (5.2.2011)_

It is absolutely necessary, that the freedoms, which we consider as universal – the freedom of press, the freedom of expression, the freedom of journalism – are not only respected in Europe, in America or on other places of the world. Also the authorities in Egypt are requested to protect them. ... When it comes to the dignity of man there is no room of maneuver.

Never before and never since then the vicar's daughter, who experienced freedom not before her 35th anniversary, has preached that way. But her congratulation to the president elect Donald Trump in November 2016 was a variation of the same motive. Democracy, liberty, the rule of law and the dignity of man, on the basis of these values, she said, "I would like to offer you good cooperation".

**Conclusion**

I have to come to an end. "The European identity", that is the title of the conference.

When it start in Rome 60 years ago, the European Union started as a reincarnation or, maybe better, as a revenant of the Carolingian Empire. Most of the founding fathers were Catholics: Schumann, Monnet, Adenauer, de Gaspari. Until today the Catholics are by far the biggest religious group in the Union. Statistics are rather vague, but following a Eurobarometer survey from 2012, 48 percent of all EU citizens consider themselves to be Catholic, another 8 percent are Orthodox. Only 12 percent are Protestant.

However, my argument is that the European Union has become more protestant over the last ten or twenty years. And without any doubt it has become more eastern since 2004. More peripheral, too. This shift of geography, political culture and identity is reflected in the personality of Angela Merkel, the vicar's daughter, the child of 1989; and the chancellor has contributed to this shift.
Please allow my a final remark, just to avoid any misunderstanding: Speaking on the meaning of liberty and Protestant ethics, I was referring to Angela Merkels mindset, her roots and her values – not judging her politics. Will the lady from the East succeed as standard-bearer of the West? First of all she has to survive an election.