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## **The Ethics of Albert Schweitzer as an Inspiration for Global Ethics**

1. A Turning Point in the Life of Albert Schweitzer – 2. Summary of Schweitzer's Ethics – 3. The Reverence for Life as a Basis for Global Ethics

### **1. A Turning Point in the Life of Albert Schweitzer**

In 1905 Albert Schweitzer renounced his promising career at the University of Strasbourg in order to serve the disadvantaged population in Africa. He was thirty years old, had received doctoral degrees in philosophy and theology, and was about to finish his best-known theological book *The Quest of Historical Jesus* and his book in musicology on J. S. Bach. He was a protestant priest, and studied organ playing in Paris, eventually leading to his reputation as a famous organist. It is almost unbelievable that one person could have so many talents.

Why did Schweitzer go to Africa at the apex of his promising academic, pastoral and musical career? On top of Schweitzer's popularity in 1950, Carl G. Jung wrote that Schweitzer's work in Africa was "no more than a flight from the civilized world that more than ever needed his presence"<sup>1</sup>. Jung stated that instead of working in Africa, Schweitzer should have continued his theological work on historical

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<sup>1</sup> James N. Carleton Paget. 2012. "Albert Schweitzer and Africa". *Journal of Religion in Africa* 42 (3): 277.

Jesus. Jung was convinced that Schweitzer betrayed his theological mission by forsaking his theological studies. Was it a flight from the civilized world? Schweitzer explained his decision with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus:

Out there in the colonies sits wretched Lazarus, the colored folk, who suffers from illness and pain just as much as we do, nay, much more, and has absolutely no means of fighting them<sup>2</sup>.

As we know from Schweitzer's autobiography, this decision was gradually cultivated over time. As a student, he saw many people suffering and wrestling with care, while he could lead a comfortable life. One morning during the summer of 1896, he was aware of the fact that he must not accept this happiness as a matter of course, rather that he must recompense it:

I settled with myself before I got up, that I would consider myself justified in living until I was thirty for science and art, in order to devote myself from that time to the direct service to humanity<sup>3</sup>.

He was searching for appropriate activity, and in 1904, he found an advertisement of the *Paris Mission Society*, for volunteers to perform missionary work in Gabon. From the letters between him and his future wife Helene Bresslau, we know that Schweitzer had a big inner struggle about his life-decision. Already a year before, he wrote to Helene that the goal of his life was not to be a professor at a university, but rather that he wanted more. "No, I want to 'live', live my life"<sup>4</sup>. In a letter from February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1905 he wrote: "I have given up the ambition to become a great scholar, I want to be more – s i m p l y a h u m a n"<sup>5</sup>.

We have to notice that Schweitzer decided to become a medical doctor only because of objections raised to his liberal theological positions by members of the board of the Paris Mission Society. He had to promise to the board that he would be "dumb as a carp". From 1905 to 1910 he studied medicine in addition to his regular work at the university and parish. On Good Friday 1913, Schweitzer and his wife

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<sup>2</sup> Albert Schweitzer. 1998. *Out of My Life and Thought*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Schweitzer, Helene Bresslau. 2003. *The Albert Schweitzer–Helene Bresslau Letters 1902–1912*. Ed. by Rhena Schweitzer Miller, Gustav Woytt. New York: Syracuse University Press, 32–33.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

Helena travelled to Africa. He worked as a medical doctor in the midst of primeval forests in the town of Lambarene in Gabon, where he dedicated his life to the disadvantaged for more than fifty years. For his humanitarian work, he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952. He died in Africa in 1965.

In a sermon in 1908, Schweitzer explained benevolent activity in missionary countries as atonement (*Sühne*) for all the atrocities committed by Christians from Europe in the colonies. However, Schweitzer never “openly protested against what he understood as colonial misrule”<sup>6</sup>. Schweitzer kept his distance from the African culture in which he lived. He was very interested in elaborating universal ethics, leading him to study Indian and Chinese culture, though he never developed an interest in African culture, as he viewed African culture as a “non-developed” culture. For Schweitzer, Africa was the place where he could take distance from Western civilization to reflect on it. His philosophical position remained strongly occidental. Schweitzer had physically left Europe, but he had “not abandoned”<sup>7</sup> it. African culture with its attention to all living beings could give Schweitzer support in the elaboration of his ethics of reverence for life, but he did not appreciate it.

Carleton Paget summarizes the relationship of tension between Schweitzer and Africa in this way: “Writing on this subject ranges from the hopelessly hagiographic to the needlessly polemical, but much of it comes from some time ago”<sup>8</sup>. However, “‘The Journal of Religion in Africa’, for instance, has never published an article on Schweitzer; and he has never been the sole subject of articles in other specialist African journals”<sup>9</sup>.

In recent years, some biographical works have tried to work out the process of demythologization of Schweitzer’s person and present his life and his work in a more critical way. Sebastian Moll describes him even as “a master at staging himself”<sup>10</sup>. Moll is convinced that the autobiographical presentation of Schweitzer in his books does not correspond to the historical reality. In his detailed analysis he compares the statements of Schweitzer with other historical sources and demonstrates modification of the historical truths for personal purposes. Nevertheless, Moll recognizes the impressive achievements of Schweitzer’s work in Africa and

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<sup>6</sup> Carleton Paget. 2012. “Albert Schweitzer and Africa”, 290.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 302.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Sebastian Moll. 2014. *Albert Schweitzer. Meister der Selbstinszenierung*. Wiesbaden: Berlin University Press.

shows respect also for his academic work. In the eyes of Moll, Schweitzer was a gifted showman, who was able to attract many people for his ideas, and a capable fundraiser for his humanitarian work. The historical critical analysis ends with the following statement:

Albert Schweitzer embodies the commitment that thinking and acting have to be in harmony. This confession is and remains timelessly true. No historical research will change that<sup>11</sup>.

The same description of Schweitzer as “a master at staging himself”<sup>12</sup> uses also Nils Ole Oermann in his critical biography published in German in 2009 and translated to English in 2017. He tries to draw a more nuanced and realistic portrait of “the greatest man of the world” as Schweitzer was often depicted in the newspapers. One of the research questions – presented in the introduction of the book – is: “Was he in the end perhaps ‘only’ a man skilled at self-promotion, someone who was best at selling himself and his work?”<sup>13</sup> Oermann considers unpublished documents from the archives, unpublished writings and other historical sources to discover the real truth of Schweitzer’s life behind the fascinating narrative. He believes that each age seeks for its own ideal stories and the story of Albert Schweitzer has many mythical elements in presenting him as the selfless jungle doctor of Lambarene in the hard times after the Second World War. There was a need for the symbols of humanity, authenticity and new values and Schweitzer fitted in as an ideal person to these expectations. Despite all the critical concerns, Oermann admits that Schweitzer also has a lasting significance because of his deep engagement. Especially his concept of reverence of life is timeless:

His Reverence for Life inspires people to change their way of thinking and reflect on their actions in ethical terms. He gave this inspiration a face and this enthusiasm a place in Lambarene – and this is what makes Albert Schweitzer one of the great individuals of the twentieth century<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 188: „Albert Schweitzer verkörpert das Bekenntnis, dass Denken und Handeln in Einklang stehen müssen. Dieses Bekenntnis ist und bleibt zeitlos wahr. Keine historische Forschung wird daran etwas ändern“.

<sup>12</sup> Nils Ole Oermann. 2017. *Albert Schweitzer. A Biography*. Oxford: University Press, 220.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

In the second part, Schweitzer's ethics of reverence for life that he elaborated on for the restoration of a declined Western civilization are presented, as this is in our contemporary globalised and fragmented world even more relevant than ever in the past.

## 2. Summary of Schweitzer's Ethics

According to Schweitzer, the First World War was only an external sign of the earlier internal collapse of Western civilization. The reason for this collapse was the disproportion between the inconceivable progress in science and technology on one hand and the lack of an ethical and spiritual dimension of the civilization on the other. Through advances in science and technology, modern man gained extreme power to control and change life, while lacking an equivalently powerful understanding of morality. This type of rapid material progress needs a strong ethical consciousness in order to be performed ethically.

It was at the University of Uppsala where Schweitzer in 1920 presented his Ethics of Reverence for Life in the academic sphere for the first time. A very positive echo of his thoughts gave him courage and joy for the elaboration of his first book on ethics<sup>15</sup>. In 1923, he published *The Philosophy of Civilization*, in which he elaborated his ethics of reverence for life as a solid platform for the reconstruction of the declined civilization after the First World War.

Schweitzer rejected the anthropocentric view of modern philosophy and is very critical of Descartes philosophy that reduces man to its "cogito" and lays aside everything that was physical, material, emotional, and sensuous. Schweitzer begins his analysis with the basic experience of life for each man. "True philosophy must start from the most immediate and comprehensive fact of consciousness, which says: 'I am life that wills to live, in the midst of life that wills to live'"<sup>16</sup>. My natural desire, my will-to-live, leads me through the process of thinking about myself and the world to reach universal world-affirmation: I realize that everything around me – plants, animals, and people – want to live as I do. Thus, the basic experience of a human being is not my absence from the world, as with Descartes, but my experience of affinity and connectedness with the life surrounding me in the world.

From daily experience, Schweitzer knew that nature was far from an ideal or harmonious system. Each will-to-live strives for affirmation and for the best reali-

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Schweitzer. 1998. *Out of My Life and Thought*, 186.

<sup>16</sup> Albert Schweitzer. 1987. *The Philosophy of Civilization*. New York: Prometheus Books, 309.

zation of its being. This effort leads to a conflict of interest and a struggle between the living creatures of the natural world. Events in nature are ambivalent: beauty and logic intertwine with horrors and illogicality. Due to this uncertainty, man cannot establish clear guidelines for her/his life based on her/his knowledge of nature. The natural world around the human beings does not behave ethically, and so a human being instead must find the guidelines for an ethical life in her/his internal will-to-live. Schweitzer says:

Nature knows only a blind affirmation of life. ... But in man this natural effort is in a state of tension with a mysterious effort of a different kind. Life-affirmation exerts itself to take up live-negation into itself in order to serve other living beings by self-devotion, and to protect them, even it may be, by self-sacrifice, from injury or destruction<sup>17</sup>.

According to Schweitzer, the ethical will-to-live is an innate element of each human being that commands him/her to show equal respect to all wills-to-live as he/she does to his/her own: "Ethics therefore consists of my experiencing the compulsion to show all wills-to-live the same reverence as I to my own"<sup>18</sup>. Ethics is not a closed system of obligations and norms used to determine human actions; rather, its task is to provide individuals with a basic moral principle that serves as a compass, showing the direction in every concrete case, but not making or predisposing the decision in advance. "Ethics is not a park with precisely arranged and well maintained paths, but a wilderness in which everyone should find and travel his own route. What is determined is the direction that one has to follow"<sup>19</sup>.

The philosopher of the African primeval forest is convinced that, through his basic moral principle of "devotion to life inspired by reverence for life"<sup>20</sup>, he provided general material contents to the formal ethical imperative. The basic ethical principle shall read: "It is good to maintain and encourage life; it is bad to destroy life or obstruct it"<sup>21</sup>. Ethics is defined as "responsibility without limit towards all that lives"<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 309.

<sup>19</sup> Albert Schweitzer. 2000. *Die Weltanschauung der Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben. Kulturphilosophie III. Dritter und vierter Teil*. München: C.H. Beck, 154.

<sup>20</sup> Schweitzer. 1987. *The Philosophy of Civilization*, 311.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 309.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 311.

No matter wherever and for whatever purpose man harms or destroys a life, any form of it, he/she acts unethically and is guilty (*schuldig*).

Schweitzer did not allow any scale of values for living creatures. He wrote:

A man is truly ethical only when he obeys the compulsion to help all life that he is able to assist, and shrinks from injuring anything that lives. He does not ask how firmly this or that life deserves one's sympathy as being valuable, nor, beyond that, whether and to what degree it is capable of feeling. Life as such is sacred to him<sup>23</sup>.

All beings in creation strive for their perfection. The living beings want to live and to live well. And the mission of a human being is to bring the unity in this multifiform craving for perfection.

The essential nature of the will-to-live is determination to live itself to the full. It carries within it the impulse to realize itself to the full. It carries within it the impulse to realize itself in the highest possible perfection. In the flowering tree, in the strange forms of the medusa, in the blade of grass, in the crystal; everywhere it strives to reach the perfection with which it is endowed. In everything that exists there is at work an imaginative force, which is determined by ideals. In us beings who can move about freely and are capable of pre-considered, purposive activity, the craving for perfection is given in such a way that we aim at raising to their highest material and spiritual value both ourselves and every existing thing which is open to our influence<sup>24</sup>.

It is obvious that man by his very nature inevitably intervenes in the lives of other living creatures. On the one hand, the ethics of reverence for life is completely consistent on a theoretical basis and allows no ranking of beings as more or less worthy of living. On the other hand, at the practical level, people must face reality. To save one life, a man sometimes may be obliged to destroy another. Schweitzer himself presented the following example: "In order to keep a heron from starving if it has broken its wing, we must condemn that many fish to death. We can show mercy only if we act without mercy at the same time"<sup>25</sup>. For such conflict situations, Schweitzer created the following guideline: "Whenever I injure life of any sort, I must be quite clear whether it is necessary. Beyond the unavoidable I must never go, not even with what seems

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 310.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>25</sup> Schweitzer. 2000. *Die Weltanschauung der Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben*, 153.

insignificant”<sup>26</sup>. He does not specify the limits of inevitability or some basic criteria for discerning; the individual responsibility is what is required.

Schweitzer acknowledged that a man could not know the meaning of her/his devotion for life to the world as a whole. We cannot discover our ethical orientations from knowledge about the world, but rather from an inner compulsion to be true to ourselves. This concept of ethics is based in human conscience. And the highest level of conscience is “the sentiment of reverence for life”. “Reverence for life, *veneratio vitae*, is the most direct and at the same time the profoundest achievement of my will-to-live. In reverence for life, my knowledge passes into experience”<sup>27</sup>. According to Schweitzer, rational thinking about the meaning of our life always ends in mysticism. “To relate oneself in the spirit of reverence for life to the multiform manifestations of the will-to-live which together constitute the world is ethical mysticism”<sup>28</sup>. Thus, the unity of human with the universal will-to-live is reached through ethical actions.

As Goodin states, Schweitzer “never received critical recognition for his philosophy during his own life time”<sup>29</sup>, however, with a growing awareness of the current ecological crisis, his ethical writings gain value. His life and ethical works generate hope and inspire many people at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the area of ecological ethics, bioethics, peace ethics, education and global solidarity. His ideas were discussed in many conferences and developed in numerous publication all over the world<sup>30</sup>. He is seen as a pioneer of bioethical questions, protection of the environment, and global ethics. He is still a fascinating person that attracts many people and stimulates ethical thoughts and engagement. Sometimes these

<sup>26</sup> Schweitzer. 1987. *The Philosophy of Civilization*, 318.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>29</sup> David K. Goodin. 2013. *The New Rationalism. Albert Schweitzer's Philosophy of Reverence for Life*. Montreal – Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 8.

<sup>30</sup> I list just a selection of recent literature that emphasizes the importance of Schweitzer's ethical thought in the contemporary social context. Marvin Meyer, Kurt Bergel (Ed.). 2002. *Reverence for Life. The Ethics of Albert Schweitzer for the Twenty-first Century*. New York: Syracuse; Günter Altner, Ludwig Frambach, Franz-Theo Gottwald, Manuel Schneider (Ed.). 2005. *Leben inmitten von Leben. Die Aktualität der Ethik Albert Schweitzers*. Stuttgart: S. Hirzel-Verlag; Andreas Steiner. 2006. *Das Leben, unser höchstes Gut. Albert Schweitzers Ethik im 21. Jahrhundert*. Freiburg im Br.: Herder; Michael Hauskeller (Ed.). 2006. *Ethik des Lebens. Albert Schweitzer als Philosoph*. Zug: Die Graue Edition; Ara Paul Barsam. 2008. *Reverence for Life. Albert Schweitzer's Great Contribution to Ethical thought*. New York: Oxford University Press; Borut Ošljaj. 2010. *Ethica, quo vadis? Albert Schweitzer in vprašanje renesanse etične kulture*. Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete; A.G. Rud. 2011. *Albert Schweitzer's Legacy for Education. Reverence for Life*. New York: Macmillian; Angela Berlis, Hubert Steinke, Fritz von Gunten, Andreas Wagner (Ed.). 2013. *Albert Schweitzer. Facetten einer Jahrhundertgestalt*. Bern: Haupt; James N. Carleton Paget, Michael J. Thate (Ed.). 2016. *Albert Schweitzer in Thought and Action. A Life in Parts*. New York: Syracuse University Press.



positive evaluations of Schweitzer are exaggerated and too idealistic. Nevertheless, the amount of writings taking place recently testifies that his ideas are still valid in our globalised world.

In the third part, we examine to what extent the ethics of reverence for life can serve as a basis for global ethics.

### 3. The Reverence for Life as a Basis for Global Ethics

Until his death, Schweitzer was struggling to elaborate a worldview of reverence for life that would be embraced by all religions and cultures. He strived toward global ethics. His ethics should be universally true for all people, regardless of time, place, or cultural background. He wrote more than 1,000 pages on this topic. An edition in two volumes, published just two decades ago<sup>31</sup>, reveals that he rewrote the same chapter several times as he could not bring his project to a successful end. His starting point was elemental natural philosophy – the consciousness of being life in the midst of life. He was convinced that this starting point could be accepted by every human person in every time, place, and within every cultural background.

Schweitzer's way of proceeding was different from Hans Küng's project "Weltethos"<sup>32</sup>. Küng seeks for common elements in the different ethical traditions and religions through dialogue. Schweitzer had elaborated on his own original project and subsequently sought support from different ethical and religious traditions. He tried to demonstrate that various religious and philosophical traditions can accord to the worldview of a reverence of life that he proposed. Schweitzer was not aware that his philosophy was culturally, religiously, historically and also personally (biographically) conditioned, since it is impossible for anybody to step out of his or her historical and cultural background. It is the nature of human reflection to be always immersed in a specific context. The practical reason is not outside of time and space, but a reflection on the immediate experience of the human condition could be in our opinion a good starting point to understand the shared common morality of all humans. However, it was Schweitzer's *i n t u i t i o n* that a man who reflects about his mystical experience of connectedness with all living beings will immediately have reverence for life, and, in accordance with this attitude, he will

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<sup>31</sup> Albert Schweitzer. 1999. *Die Weltanschauung der Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben. Kulturphilosophie III. Erster und zweiter Teil* München: C.H. Beck. Albert Schweitzer. 2000. *Die Weltanschauung der Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben. Kulturphilosophie III. Dritter und vierter Teil*. München: C.H. Beck.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Hans Küng. 1992. *Projekt Weltethos*. München: Piper.

take a responsibility for all that lives. He believes that the fundamental attitude of reverence for life is placed in every human being. Nevertheless, we agree that he started at the correct point. As the basis for global ethics, we should begin with the elemental experience of life, which must be elaborated on a rational basis. The awareness of interconnectedness among all living beings, triggers in human beings the reflection on their role within the whole of creation. There is a need for stronger emphasis on the emotional, Schweitzer would have said mystical, dimension in ethical reflection. The logical deduction from the abstract moral principles alone is unable to move people for an ethical engagement. The experience of awe, of wonder, of connectedness is essential and can be universally experienced. From Schweitzer's proposal we can not elaborate a global ethics in the normative form. His approach is closer to virtue ethics and one that is oriented to cultivating the moral character of acting persons<sup>33</sup>.

The main reasons that Schweitzer's ethics has received large acceptances in the last four decades are due to his critique of the anthropocentric view and his emphasis on the responsibility of man for the whole of creation. He was right in criticizing western ethical thought for its limitation on the inter-human relationships. We support that the responsibility involving non-human beings is a part of ethics, as ethics should be understood as a systematic reflection on that which is good for a human being as an individual, for human society and for the creation in its entirety, known as ecological good. We need to include an ecological dimension in our ethical reflections, not just as a part of applied ethics, but as a constitutional part of fundamental ethical reflection.

In this regard, Schweitzer's ethics is very close to the message of Pope Francis' encyclical letter *Laudato si'* on care for our common home<sup>34</sup>. Pope Francis advocates that man is situated in the world to honour "the laws of nature and the delicate equilibria existing between the creatures of this world" and that "the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures" (LS 68)<sup>35</sup>. In the encyclical letter we can find some more examples of the Pope's explicit opposition to the "distorted" (69), "modern" (115), "excessive" (116), and "misguided" (119) anthropocentrism. Similar as Schweitzer hundred year ago also

<sup>33</sup> The similar opinion is shared also by other researchers: "Reverence for Life is first and foremost a virtue ethic for humanity". Goodin. 2013. *The New Rationalism*, 7; "Ehrfurcht ist ein haltungsethischer Begriff". Heike Baranzke. 2012. "Was bedeutet 'Ehrfurcht' in Albert Schweitzers Verantwortungsethik?". *Synthesis Philosophica* 53 (1): 25.

<sup>34</sup> Francis. 2015. *Encyclical letter Laudato si'* (=LS). Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

<sup>35</sup> For ecological spirituality see: Ivan Platovnjak. 2019. "The Ecological Spirituality in the Light of *Laudato si'*". *Nova prisutnost* 17 (1): 75–91. Ivan Platovnjak. 2019. "The Role of (Christian) Spirituality in the Economy in the Light of *Laudato si'*". *Synthesis philosophica* 34 (1): 73–86.

the leader of the Catholic Church sees the present ecological crisis as “one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity” (LS 119). Almost like a refrain, along the whole document, the claim is made that “everything is interconnected” (LS 11, 16, 70, 85, 91, 92, 112, 117, 120, 137, 138, 141, 240). The encyclical letter emphasizes that both individual beings (LS 69, 76) and ecosystems (LS 140) have their own value regardless of their usefulness to humans. However, it is not quite clearly expressed, what the value of other created beings is, and what concrete consequences it has for the functioning of a human. Francis explicitly opposes biocentrism and argues that the place of the human being should be understood more properly “in the sense of responsible stewardship” (LS 116). The responsibility comes out of the awareness of the connectedness with the whole of creation (LS 78), but with the recognition of a specific role within it. “Human beings cannot be expected to feel responsibility for the world unless, at the same time, their unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility are recognized and valued” (LS 118). Although all created beings have their own value, human beings have a specific, unique and inalienable dignity (LS 81, 90, 118, 136, 208).

Schweitzer, who is often represented as a promoter of biocentric ethics<sup>36</sup>, had in regard of the interconnectedness of the entire creation and human responsibility a very similar position as the encyclical letter *Laudato si'*. On the theoretical level Schweitzer refused the ranking of life forms and argues for the intrinsic value of all living beings, but on the practical level he admitted the killing of animals and did not advocate vegetarianism. He is very clear in describing the specific role of the human being in the world, because only in the humans will-to-live comes to the ethical awareness of responsibility. Only humans have a moral obligation. That is why, human life undoubtedly consists of a higher inherent worth than that of other living creatures. As a doctor in the African jungle, Schweitzer implemented this approach every day. If human beings were accorded a special role within the living world, the ethics of reverence for life, in our opinion, would not lose its value. However, we agree with Schweitzer that other living organisms are not merely objects, which is why their inner telos, their intrinsic purpose or goal has to be recognised and respected.

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff. 2009. *Ethik des Lebens. Grundlagen und neue Herausforderungen*. Freiburg im Br.: Herder, 83–105; Ulrich H. J. Körtner. 2013. “Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben”. Zur Stellung der Ethik Albert Schweitzers in der ethischen Diskussion der Gegenwart. In *Albert Schweitzer. Facetten einer Jahrhundertgestalt*. Ed. by Angela Berlis, Hubert Steinke, Fritz von Gunten, Andreas Wagner, 101–104. Bern: Haupt; Martin M. Lintner. 2017. *Der Mensch und das liebe Vieh. Ethische Fragen im Umgang mit Tieren*. Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 107–108.

Schweitzer's thoughts on the connectedness of all living beings and of boundless ethics are deeply influenced by his studies of eastern religions and philosophies from China and India<sup>37</sup>. He highly appreciated the Jain principle of *ahimsa*, which promotes nonviolence to all living beings<sup>38</sup>. Because of the boundless demands of ethics that encompass every form of life, Schweitzer evaluated Jainism as "one of the greatest events in the spiritual history of mankind"<sup>39</sup>. However, he was convinced that the reverence for life surpassed the principle of *ahimsa*, in that it does not promote only nonviolence toward other living beings, but also involves an active concern and compassion for all life<sup>40</sup>. In Schweitzer's interpretation, the reverence for life goes beyond the Christian ideal of love too, because it widens the responsibility to all living beings<sup>41</sup>. Schweitzer believed that thoughts from East and West can benefit from one another and he included treasures from different religious and philosophical traditions in his ethics of reverence for life. As Barsam states, "he tried to 'build bridges' with other traditions through his academic texts and, more personally, by devoting numerous correspondences to Indian and Asian individuals in an attempt to highlight the mutuality of thought between reverence for life and the ethics of their religions"<sup>42</sup>.

The lifelong struggle of Schweitzer was to elaborate the universal ethics that would be founded on the rational basis and would have in its congruity a binding strength. His global ethics should obligate on its own basis, and not from a religious or social authority, people of all nations, cultures, religions, of all times and places. Behind this effort, we can identify his firm commitment to the ideals of the Enlightenment that proclaimed the unity of all human beings and expressed the unlimited trust in human reason. Schweitzer failed to present the worldview of reverence for life as a logical consequence or necessity of thought, attainable by all people as long as they think clearly and sincerely<sup>43</sup>. As Meyer states:

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Albert Schweitzer. 2001. *Kultur und Ethik in den Weltreligionen*. München: C.H. Beck.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Ara Paul Barsam. 2002. Albert Schweitzer, Jainism, and Reference for Life. In *Reverence for Life. The Ethics of Albert Schweitzer for the Twenty-first Century*. Ed. by Marvin Meyer, Kurt Bergel, 207–245. New York: Syracuse.

<sup>39</sup> Albert Schweitzer. 1951. *Indian Thought and its Development*, London: Adam and Charles Black, 82–83.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Barsam. 2002. Albert Schweitzer, Jainism, and Reference for Life, 231–232.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Schweitzer. 1998. *Out of My Life and Thought*, 235: "The ethic of Reverence for Life is the ethic of love widened into universality. It is the ethic of Jesus, now recognized as a logical consequence of thought".

<sup>42</sup> Barsam. 2002. Albert Schweitzer, Jainism, and Reference for Life, 244.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Roman Globokar. 2002. *Verantwortung für alles, was lebt. Von Albert Schweitzer und Hans Jonas zu einer theologischen Ethik des Lebens*. Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 189–192.

“Reverence for life remains a powerful, appealing ethical option, but it does not appear to be a necessity of thought”<sup>44</sup>. In our opinion, the project of Schweitzer is infeasible, because the ethics is not like a mathematics and has not the same logic of universality. However, there are various expressions of the Golden Rules in different religious and cultural traditions that are fostering the reciprocity and responsibility toward others. In this rich tradition of the elements of universal ethics, the reverence of life has an outstanding part. It possesses the inner power that can move people regardless of individual differences, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds. The attitude of reverence for life prevents us from perceiving the other as merely a mean for achieving our goals but encourages us to recognize in others their intrinsic value.

The real downside of Schweitzer’s ethics is its limitations to individual ethics. It is not possible to solve great social problems (environmental protection, climate change, world justice, migrations, etc.) within a modern, complex and global society only through individual ethics. The encouragement of individual persons is not enough. We also need the implementation of social ethics and political decisions to bring about a lasting change. Schweitzer’s basic tendency was to avoid making any public statements on political affairs. He never publicly criticized National Socialism, even though his wife was of Jewish descent<sup>45</sup>. He was also reserved in his critique of colonialism, which is why Carleton Paget characterizes him as a man of contradictions. “The same individual who can argue for the absoluteness of the attitude of reverence for life with what that implies about the unconditional respect of one person for another, of one person for any form of life, can show only marginal respect for the culture in which he works and a strong sense of the ongoing need for the indigenous Gabonese to be colonised in spite of wishes for political autonomy”<sup>46</sup>. He believes that the new world order cannot be established through political change, but rather through ethical individuals. In other words, the individual person is the beginning and centre for the establishment of ethical civilization. The reverence for life is for Schweitzer “a pre-political principle”<sup>47</sup>. After World War II, he became a sort of “metapolit-

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<sup>44</sup> Meyer. 2002. *Affirming Reference for Life*, 34.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Suermann. 2012. *Albert Schweitzer als “homo politicus”. Eine biographische Studie zum politischen Denken und Handeln des Friedensnobelpreisträgers*. Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 46.

<sup>46</sup> Carleton Paget. 2012. „Albert Schweitzer and Africa“, 295.

<sup>47</sup> Ulrich Sarcinelli. 2013. Das politische Wirken Albert Schweitzers. “Metapolitisches Verhalten als Politikum”. In *Albert Schweitzer. Facetten einer Jahrhundertgestalt*. Ed. by Angela Berlis, Hubert Steinke, Fritz von Gunten, Andreas Wagner, 151. Bern: Haupt.

ical world authority”<sup>48</sup> and especially after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, he was constantly called upon to address specific political issues. Towards the end of his life he entered into the sphere of politics and with his radio appeal in 1957 intended to mobilize public opinion for the abolition of nuclear weapons<sup>49</sup>.

Many aspects of the ethics of reverence for life remain without clear answers. Schweitzer was not able to elaborate a universal worldview of reverence for life that would be able to unite people of different cultural and religious background. However, the profoundest legitimation of the ethics of reverence for life is the work and life of Albert Schweitzer. “Stirring people all over the world to take action – this is the most important achievement of his life’s work at a small hospital in the middle of the jungle”<sup>50</sup>. He was and still remains an ethical role model and inspiration for all around the world.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Claus Biegert. 2005. “Keine Sieger, nur Besiegte”. Albert Schweitzers Kritik an der Politik der atomaren Abschreckung. In *Leben inmitten von Leben. Die Aktualität der Ethik Albert Schweitzers*. Ed. by Günter Altner, Ludwig Frambach, Franz-Theo Gottwald, Manuel Schneider, 144–151. Stuttgart: S. Hirzel Verlag.

<sup>50</sup> Oermann. 2017. *Albert Schweitzer*, 223.

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**Abstract:** Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) was a fascinating person, a multivalent icon, mostly known as a doctor in the primeval forest of Africa. There he elaborated the ethics of boundless responsibility towards all living beings as a treatment for the restoration of a decadent civilization. Until his death, Schweitzer was struggling to elaborate a worldview of reverence for life that would be embraced by all religions and cultures. His ethics should be universally true for all people, regardless of time, place, or cultural background. In this article we present his worldview of reverence of life in a critical way. It will be emphasized that Schweitzer was not aware enough that his philosophy was culturally, religiously, historically, and also personally (biographically) conditioned, since it is impossible for anybody to step out of his or her historical and cultural backgrounds. He limited his ethical reflection to the individual sphere and did not allow for any ranking among living beings on a theoretical level. Despite these critical observations, reflection of the immediate experience of the human condition could be in our opinion a good starting point to understand the shared common morality of all humans. We are convinced that his ethical thoughts and seeing him as a role model can stimulate the search for global ethics today.

**Keywords:** Reverence for life, ethical mysticism, responsibility, intercultural dialogue, universal ethics.

**Streszczenie:** Etyka Alberta Schweitzera jako inspiracja dla etyki globalnej. Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) był fascynującą osobowością, wielowartościową ikoną, najeczęściej



znaną jako doktor w dziewiczym buszu w Afryce. Tam opracował etykę nieograniczonej odpowiedzialności wobec wszystkich istot żywych jako projekt mający na celu odnowę dekadentnej cywilizacji. Schweitzer aż do śmierci walczył na rzecz wypracowania światopoglądu szacunku dla życia, który dotyczy wszystkich religii i kultur. Jego etyka powinna być uniwersalną prawdą dla wszystkich ludzi, bez względu na czas, miejsce, albo tło kulturowe. Niniejszy artykuł w sposób krytyczny przedstawia światopogląd szacunku do życia Alberta Schweitzera. Autor podkreśla, że Schweitzer nie był wystarczająco świadomy, iż jego filozofia była uwarunkowana kulturowo, religijnie, historycznie, a także personalnie (biograficznie), gdyż nie jest możliwe, aby wyjść poza swój kontekst historyczny i kulturowy. Schweitzer ograniczył swoją refleksję etyczną do sfery indywidualnej i nie dopuszczał żadnego rankingu wśród istot żywych na płaszczyźnie teoretycznej. Pomimo uwag krytycznych refleksja o bezpośrednim doświadczeniu kondycji ludzkiej może być dobrym punktem wyjścia dla zrozumienia podzielanej przez wszystkich ludzi wspólnej moralności. Autor artykułu jest przekonany, że myśl etyczna Schweitzera i postrzeganie jej jako wzór może współcześnie inspirować badania na temat etyki globalnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** szacunek wobec życia, mistycyzm etyczny, odpowiedzialność, dialog międzykulturowy, etyka uniwersalna.

