

Populist Appropriation and Reinterpretation of Religious Freedom

The Special Responsibility and Concern of the Churches and Religious Communities

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Right-wing ideologies are in fundamental contradiction to the basic contents of many religions. In Christian faith, commandment of love of one's neighbour excludes group-focused enmity per se. Churches and religious communities all over the world have a special moral responsibility in the fight against right-wing populism and extremism. They need to take a stand against misanthropic ideologies and discrimination and can play a key role at various levels when populist actors try to reinterpret the universal right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and use it to serve their own interests.

Furthermore, the commitment against right-wing populism and extremism is a question of interreligious solidarity, especially for Christian churches in most European countries, which can operate in democratic and free spaces. The major churches in Germany also expressly acknowledge this repeatedly.¹ However, as the largest religious community in Europe, Christian churches are also called upon to stand up in solidarity with Christians who live as a minority in other countries against the damage to religious freedom caused by a populist reinterpretation. They need to object to disproportionate restrictions on FoRB, because such restrictions can be abused by autocratic states as a pretext

1 Only recently, this acknowledgement was renewed in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the World Council of Churches in their joint statement: *Serving a Wounded World in Interreligious Solidarity: A Christian Call to Reflection and Action During COVID-19 and Beyond*, WCC Publications/PCID 2020, <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/ServingWoundedWorld.pdf>, accessed on: 21 Jul. 2023.

to relativise their own even worse violations of this right to freedom, following a pattern of “whataboutism.”

In addition to moral responsibility, churches and religious communities also have specific resources and potential for the fight against right-wing populism and its temptations: especially in a changing world shaken by various (existential) crises, many people are looking for meaning, community and identity. Churches and religious communities must not leave this field to right-wing populist and extremist forces. Offering meaning, community and identity has always been one of the basic functions of religious communities. If this need remains unsatisfied, right-wing populist and far-right extremist forces can easily take advantage of this situation, simulating an (exclusive) sense of belonging, and thus offer a generally exclusionary identity. This works all the better the more strongly people feel overwhelmed by an increasingly complex world. Churches and religious communities are therefore challenged more than ever to provide real alternatives to the fatal and harmful illusory solutions offered by populism and extremism.

However, religious communities themselves are by no means immune to populist sentiments. For example, the fear of Islam – which is perceived as foreign and unknown – makes quite a few parishioners of Christian churches in Germany and large parts of Europe susceptible to prejudice, resentment and populist narratives such as concern for the Christian Occident and supposed Christian values. Some right-wing conservative, populist and extremist groups that are church-based or church-affiliated (or claim to be so) actively participate in the appropriation and reinterpretation of religious freedom and spread corresponding narratives. Thus, headlines such as “Muezzin call to prayer in Cologne – politics courting ‘radical headscarf Islam’ – knife in the back of integration” or “Catholic bishops’ denial of reality in the debate with Islam” are not uncommon on the traditionalist internet portal *kath.net*, which is financed by private donations.²

In some cases, open alliances between church actors and populist politicians are already evident. For example, the former right-wing populist Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro owes his election victory in 2018 not least to strong support from the circles of Evangelicals and Pentecostals.³ The former Pres-

2 <https://kath.net/suche.php?suche=islam>, accessed on: 1 Jul. 2022.

3 See chapter “Religious Freedom for Christian Majorities: The Brazilian Case”.

ident of the United States Donald Trump also benefited massively from the support of the “Christian right.”⁴

The susceptibility of such Christian actors to populist arguments is in turn what extremist actors from the far right try to exploit. For example, they often use Christian symbols in a decontextualised way and incorporate them into their misanthropic ideological framework.⁵ In the process, obvious contradictions between the far-right ideological way of thinking and central Christian principles of faith (such as the contradiction between group-focused enmity and the commandment of love of one’s neighbour) are deliberately hidden or covered up. The appropriation and reinterpretation often represent a profanation of what is Christian, reducing it to something purely cultural-folkloric.

In some cases, attempts by the far right to get closer to churches with the aim of using church representatives for their own interests and thereby gaining legitimacy can also be observed. For example, the far-right Identity and Democracy (ID) group in the European Parliament nominated the Chaldean Archbishop of Mosul, Najib Mikhael Moussa, for the Sakharov Prize 2020, not without inciting anger about the immigration of Muslims at the same time.⁶ A member of the parliamentary group contacted church dignitaries in Germany to promote this nomination, arguing that together they could convince chairpersons of other parliamentary groups, which was highly unlikely given

4 See chapter “Populism, Religious Identity, and the Instrumentalization of ‘Religious Freedom’ in the United States during the Era of Donald Trump”.

5 See e.g. NBC News: “Trump Stands In Front of Church Holding Bible After Threatening Military Action Against Protesters” (2 Jun. 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0oRQF68psdY>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023; AfD spokesman Hans-Peter Hörner shows the crucifix while Imam Ahmed Gezer calls for prayer from the roof of the mosque: Kromer, Hardy: “AfD sagt Kundgebung ab – Albbündnis veröffentlicht Appell für Religionsfreiheit” (7 May 2020), https://www.swp.de/lokales/hechingen/ramadan-und-8.-mai-in-hechingen-afd-sagt-kundgebung-ab_-albbuendnis-veroeffentlicht-appell-fuer-religionsfreiheit-46034346.html, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023. In this context, the Freedom Party of Austria’s (FPÖ) strategic rapprochement with the Church is also interesting: Mühlberger, Andrea: “Rechtspopulismus im Zeichen des Kreuzes” (29 May 2009), <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/rechtspopulismus-im-zeichen-des-kreuzes-100.html>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023.

6 Anderson, Christine (@AndersonAfdMdEP): Der Erzbischof von #Mossul, Najib Michael Moussa, kämpft im #Irak gegen die Verfolgung von #Christen durch den #Islam und warnt vor den Folgen unregelter muslimischer #Migration. Die ID-Fraktion nominiert diesen mutigen Mann für den #Sakharov Preis! #AfD (7 Oct. 2020), <https://twitter.com/AndersonAfdMdEP/status/1313805433161777154>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023.

that four parliamentary groups had already declared themselves in favour of awarding the prize to the Belarusian opposition.⁷ On several occasions, Members of Parliament from right-wing parties have also travelled to countries such as Syria or Armenia where the Christian population is under pressure for domestic or foreign policy reasons. At meetings with Christian representatives, they presented themselves as the only sincere supporters of the interests of oppressed Christians abroad.

If the churches refuse to cooperate or even criticise the right, they are sometimes sharply attacked by the far right. For example, in Germany, the Protestant and Catholic churches have already been the target of accusations from the far-right party Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD) because their positions on the most important social issues are diametrically opposed. In June 2019, for example, the Thuringian state parliamentary group of the AfD – with the support of other prominent representatives of the party – published a paper entitled “Unholy Alliance – The Pact of the Protestant Church with the Zeitgeist and the Powerful,” which criticises the Evangelical Church in Germany (*Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*, EKD) for its position on refugee aid and its commitment to climate protection, among other things, and complains about an exclusion of the AfD on the part of the churches.⁸ Overall, the defamation of church representatives with a different opinion is a common pattern in the rhetoric of the far right. They are portrayed as representatives of a “politicised” institutional church⁹ running after the *zeitgeist*, thus distancing themselves from the “true” faith and representing neither the faith nor the people.

7 European Parliament News: Sakharov Prize 2020: the nominees (17 Sep. 2020), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20200917STO87301/sakharov-prize-2020-the-nominees>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023.

8 See Lohmann, Heinz-Joachim: “Kommentar zum Kirchenpapier der Alternative für Deutschland: Unheilige Allianz. Der Pakt der Evangelischen Kirche mit dem Zeitgeist und den Mächtigen,” <https://www.eaberlin.de/aktuelles/2019/pressemitteilung-kirchenpapier-afd/kommentar-zum-kirchenpapier-der-afd.pdf>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023.

9 In German often the expression *Amtskirche* is used in a pejorative way by the far right for its criticism of the official churches.

Church engagement against the right-wing populist appropriation of religious freedom

Contradict

Due to their moral responsibility as well as their position in society, it is important that Christian churches do not allow themselves to be taken over. This risk of appropriation exists specifically in dealing with mandate holders from the far right. In democratic processes, representatives can also be elected who seek to distort or abolish human rights and/or democracy. The question is how churches should deal with them. For example, in 2019 there was an invitation from the far-right party AfD to the German Bishops' Conference (*Deutsche Bischofskonferenz*, DBK),¹⁰ which represented a feint or a dilemma: if the invitation was accepted, the AfD was given legitimacy; on the other hand, if it was rejected, the AfD could present itself as a victim of exclusion. Therefore, how should it be dealt with? In principle, respect for democratic decision-making and democratically legitimised office applies. However, this respect must not be confused with a right to social and political acceptance for right-wing extremist parties and politicians.¹¹ Nor is there any taboo on contradicting anti-human statements or an undermining of human rights. On the contrary, precisely due to the special public reach that results from a church office, churches and their representatives must contradict particularly clearly and loudly. It must also be understood that contents that are contemptuous of human rights must not be given a stage at church events.¹²

10 Alternative für Deutschland: Joachim Kuhs: AfD lädt Bischofskonferenz zum Dialog ein. <https://www.afd.de/kuhs-afd-laedt-bischofskonferenz-zum-dialog-ein/>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023.

11 There is no such right as the EKD aptly states: Dernbach, Andrea: "Evangelische Kirche zur AfD: 'Kein Recht auf gesellschaftliche und politische Akzeptanz'" (2 Aug. 2019), <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/kein-recht-auf-gesellschaftliche-und-politische-akzeptanz-4654960.html>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023.

12 While the DBK and EKD are very clearly opposed to right-wing ideas and populist narratives, some evangelical and far-right Catholic actors in Germany have difficulty in clearly distancing themselves, see also the observations of Liane Bednarz at an event of the Heinrich Böll foundation: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung: Die Angstprediger – Wie rechte Christen Gesellschaft und Kirchen unterwandern (21 Jun. 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVmfXRha5AU&t=3568s>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023.

In 2018, a controversial discussion arose after the participation of an AfD politician on a podium at the German *Katholikentag* in Münster led to protests. As a result, both the *Katholikentag* and the German Protestant *Kirchentag* (the regular large-scale meetings of the laity in the two major German churches) decided not to invite any more representatives of the AfD in the future. They argue that group-focused enmity is to be clearly and unequivocally opposed. Far-right ideas that fundamentally contradict the Christian image of human being should not be given a platform.

There are particular tensions in countries where far-right parties have major influence through a large parliamentary group and/or government participation. To what extent are churches prepared to accept disadvantages for themselves when they contradict the positions of the far right? In such contexts, contradiction can be associated with painful consequences, for example the cancellation of financial support, of rights and resources (cultural support, support for church youth, education and social work, voluntary work and associations, support for church development cooperation, exemption from taxes, etc.). However, in order to avoid denying oneself and one's own convictions, the consistent answer here is also to accept painful consequences in case of doubt.

Opposition from churches is urgently needed, especially regarding the human right to religious freedom, which is being reinterpreted and instrumentalised by populist and far-right extremist actors. The appropriation of Christian identity must not go unchallenged for the sake of the Christian witness. Equally, solidarity with Christians in need must not be falsely played off as a counterargument to universally valid of FoRB.

Educate and leave no space

To ensure that the opposition to populism and extremism does not remain without content, it should go hand in hand with educational and public relations work, strengthening a Christian position that takes a human rights approach in its commitment to FoRB. In doing so, it is important to show that the Christian image of human being is only compatible with a decisive commitment to religious freedom as a universal right to freedom and does not allow any reinterpretations. The visibility of church actors, human rights education with a focus on FoRB and networking with other human rights actors are important to counter misunderstandings and convey an understanding of why religious freedom is an essential component of indivisible human rights.

Even though representatives from churches and politics report growing mistrust and dwindling acceptance of churches, Christian churches and their organisations in Germany still have reliable contact and liaison points in politics. The human rights commitment of church organisations and especially their expertise and international networks continue to be appreciated. Here, it is necessary to bring the churches' expertise regarding the human right to religious freedom into politics and show that they are important actors in human rights work. It should also be discussed collectively how the suffering religious (also Christian) minorities in regions of the world that currently receive no special public attention can be helped without falling into clientelistic or paternalistic patterns. Furthermore, politics can be encouraged to promote actions and initiatives that focus on the value of FoRB for the whole of society.

Opposition to populism and educational work by the churches for the universal right to religious freedom must not be limited to discussions with political representatives. As far as possible, no room should be left for the instrumentalisation of religious freedom. Therefore, it is important that churches involve themselves in the broader public with their own information, initiatives and continuous public relations work. Christian churches in Germany have already positioned themselves as strong and serious actors in the field of religious freedom with various initiatives.¹³ Church relief organisations are also visible with their commitment to human rights and religious freedom; for example through the promotion of projects in the field of interreligious dialogue and peace work, even if sustainable aid is more difficult "to sell" than supposedly simple answers and convenient illusory solutions.

Leaving no room also means strengthening interreligious initiatives, making successful initiatives and cooperations visible and forging broad alliances, including with non-church actors who stand up for the indivisibility of human rights, such as the cooperation between the Pontifical Mission Society *missio*

13 See e.g. the country reports on religious freedom by the Pontifical Mission Society *missio* Aachen, the joint reports of the German Bishops' Conference and the Protestant Church in Germany on religious freedom worldwide (Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz/Kirchenamt der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland [eds.]: 3. Ökumenischer Bericht zur Religionsfreiheit weltweit. Eine christliche Perspektive auf ein universelles Menschenrecht [= Gemeinsame Texte Nr. 28], Bonn/Hannover 2023), the initiative "Solidarity with persecuted and oppressed Christians in our time" of the German Bishops' Conference; the days of remembrance for persecuted Christians, which take place in the Catholic Church on St. Stephen's Day and the initiatives of the EKD on Reminiscere Sunday.

Aachen and Reporters without Borders, who campaigned together for the release of a Vietnamese blogger.¹⁴ This literally suggests combining the advocacy for religious freedom with the advocacy for other human rights, such as freedom of the press or women's rights, and creating synergies in corresponding cooperations and thus reaching other circles that have not yet been confronted with the relevance of religious freedom.¹⁵

Successful educational work is made more difficult by a media logic that rewards polarisation, sensationalism and simplification – including in the form of quantification in rankings – with attention. Accordingly, it is important for churches to consciously seek dialogue with media representatives on the topic of religious freedom and tirelessly express their human rights-guided perspective. It is necessary to reflect together on how to address sensitive concerns such as legitimate public safety interests without appealing to populist sentiments or accepting collateral damage to religious freedom.

Open learning spaces for religious freedom through interreligious dialogue and ecumenical learning

Nowadays, many members of non-Christian religions live in Europe, although even after years they are still perceived as foreign by large parts of the population. Real encounters do not take place often. A typical reflex to this insecurity is to retreat into one's own world. The demarcation from the foreign – whether it is an individual or a different opinion – and the search for community with like-minded people are obvious. Reinforced by media debates about Islamist violence and a perceived overburdening by excessive migration, corresponding experiences of foreignness or the fear of it are a breeding ground for populism and exclusion.

In view of the challenges that globalisation poses to people, churches and other religious communities can consciously contribute to enabling people to deal constructively with experiences of foreignness, fears and sometimes also

14 *missio* Aachen: *missio* und Reporter ohne Grenzen gemeinsam für verfolgte Christen in Vietnam | *missio* (1 Feb. 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-bEDh0MjBU>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023.

15 See e.g. the publication of the Norwegian mission and human rights organization Stefanus Alliance International: Freedom of religion or belief for everyone: Women in focus, 2021, <https://www.stefanus.no/english/women-and-forb/>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023.

conflicts to create a sustainable basis for community in this way.¹⁶ Interreligious dialogue and ecumenism are spaces in which churches can lay the foundations for constructive coexistence, a learning experience that in turn also makes people more resistant to the appropriation of right-wing populist actors. In such learning spaces, an awareness of the necessity of a human rights-based approach to religious freedom can also grow.

Interreligious dialogue

Interreligious dialogue plays a vital role in countering the appropriation of religious freedom by right-wing populist actors. First of all, dialogue itself is to be understood as an expression of the fundamental Christian conviction that underlies the churches' commitment to religious freedom as a universal human right: from a Christian perspective, dialogue is not only important to defend human dignity together but carries its own value as a place of a joint search and encounter with God.

Interreligious dialogue is also strategically important because it gives the commitment to religious freedom greater credibility and a broader impact. Interfaith coalitions – as well as statements on a common understanding of FoRB – can show politicians and society that the commitment to religious freedom is not about clientelism. Through the lens of interreligious dialogue, it becomes evident that the appropriation of religious freedom leads to violations of this very freedom. Church partners worldwide report that only through interreligious dialogue can living together and the situation of religious freedom be improved in the long term.

The commitment to religious freedom in interreligious dialogue also highlights the importance of a differentiated approach in order to first create a communicative basis for a dialogue on religious freedom. For example, a distinction should be made according to the severity of violations of religious freedom, rather than generally speaking of “persecution of Christians” even in the case of isolated minor discrimination. Only through a differentiated perception and communication can it be clearly stated where situations are not to be

16 See e.g. the reflection on a constructive approach to fear within the framework of the Concerted Action 2023/2024 by *Justitia et Pax Europe: Facing our Fears and Reconnecting the World* (22 Feb. 2023), <http://www.juspax-eu.org/en/home/meldungen/Concerted-Action-2023-2024.php>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023.

tolerated and less existential problems can be discussed together and improved without alienating the other party through undifferentiated statements.¹⁷

Finally, interreligious dialogue helps to work on attitudes. Interreligious dialogue creates curiosity about others, helps with an understanding of what is foreign as an enrichment and not as a threat and makes positive experiences possible. In this way, interreligious dialogue at all levels is part of the churches' commitment against the appropriation of religious freedom. Positive dialogue experiences – including from churches worldwide – need to be communicated, and corresponding networks have to be strengthened. Churches have the structures to do this at grassroot level. Where people experience interreligious dialogue as beneficial, the appropriation of religious freedom hardly has a chance of success.

Ecumenical learning

Ecumenism represents diversity per se and offers spaces in which the acceptance of differences can be learned. This is helpful in order to be alert to the appropriation of religious freedom by far-right extremist or right-wing populist actors and raise the voices together against such tendencies.

Sometimes denominational diversity within Christianity is understood as a troublesome challenge, especially when there is a background desire for “the Christians” or “the churches” to speak with one voice. There is also no unity of opinion on religious freedom in some ecumenical contexts, especially when one church has to assert itself as a minority in its context, while other churches' freedom is guaranteed and protected by the state.

However, if diversity is not defined a priori as a deplorable state but as a natural result of the development of a religion over the millennia, in which people have come to different views of faith and the Gospel, new possibilities for learning together open up. The common foundation – faith in Jesus Christ – supports, strengthens and encourages people to engage with the other. Differences in theology and understanding of what church means cannot and must not be dismissed. Rather, it is precisely in the exchange about these differences that there is the chance to better understand not only the other but also one's own view.

17 Voges, Katja: *Religionsfreiheit im christlich-muslimischen Dialog. Optionen für ein christlich motiviertes und dialogorientiertes Engagement*, Zürich: TVZ 2021, p. 340.

With the various exchange and study programmes, the churches already have numerous opportunities to empower people to deal positively with foreignness in a globalised world.¹⁸ Anyone who has had the experience of being a stranger has a different perspective of people from other countries and religions and can guide them and others when it comes to living together and integration and when it comes to not being taken over by right-wing extremist and populist actors in questions of religious freedom.

Ecumenical learning can also take place at the parochial level if local parishes consciously approach local Migrant Churches, offer them spaces and if the joint use of church spaces also provides opportunities for exchange during activities such as coffee at church, congregational lunches, leisure activities, etc.

Overall, interreligious and ecumenical learning changes the view of the other and thus also strengthens awareness of the importance of religious freedom and the notion that religious freedom applies equally to all. Such spaces of dialogue are also only possible in contexts in which a certain degree of religious freedom exists, which in turn sensitises people to recognise far-right appropriations of religious freedom as being hostile to dialogue.

However, interreligious and interdenominational encounters can also “tip over” and intensify experiences of strangeness if the dialogue is not consciously conducted and strategically accompanied. Interreligious dialogue and ecumenical exchange need experience and know-how, and they have to be taught and studied.¹⁹ Churches can strengthen and promote these programmes and make them even more visible in their contexts and beyond, so that interreligious dialogue and ecumenical encounters are not perceived as the specialty of a few but rather valuable and important tools of the churches,

18 E.g. Studium in Israel (Theological study year at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem); Studium im Mittleren Osten (SiMO); Interreligious Studies in Japan Programme; Bread for the World Scholarship Programme; Intercultural Theology in Hermannsburg and Göttingen; Study Programme at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey; Study Programme at the Ecumenical Theological Institute *Al Mowafaqa* in Rabat; Ecumenical Volunteer Programmes of mission agencies, etc.

19 Repp, Martin: “Globale theologische Ausbildung im Zeitalter zunehmender Globalisierung. Die Aufgabe interreligiöser Studienprogramme für multireligiöse Gesellschaften,” in: Martin Repp (ed.), *Theologische Ausbildung im Zeitalter zunehmender Globalisierung. Ökumenische und interreligiöse Studienprogramme in Indien, Israel, Japan und dem Libanon*, Leipzig: EVA 2022, pp. 113–128.

enabling people to locate themselves in an increasingly complex world and not to be blinded and appropriated by populist and extreme right-wing narratives.

Meaning, community and identity

At the beginning of this paper, the specific resources and potentials of churches for the fight against right-wing populism and its temptations were addressed: in a world where many people feel a lack of orientation and meaning, churches can create meaning, community and identity and thus offer a true alternative to illusory solutions of populism and extremism. In order to make full use of these resources, it is essential that the churches' potential is perceived and recognised in the broader society. A prerequisite for this is to overcome the deep credibility crisis in which the churches find themselves in Europe and partly also in other continents – not least the faulty and slow coming processing of sexualised violence and the adherence to problematic structures have alienated large sections of society from the churches and undermined their position as trustworthy institutions that offer support.

This lost trust must be regained so that churches are generally perceived as contact partners in difficult life situations and dealing with existential questions. Debates about church structures must undoubtedly be held. The observation that debates within churches take up so much space that people's questions of meaning and faith are neglected should make us think. If the churches do not take up these existential questions of the people, create real spaces of encounter and seek new and unusual ways, there is a danger that the space will also be taken up by right-wing populist actors.