

## **“Religion and Social Change in Europe”**

*Intervention at a seminar of the European Ideas Network  
and centre-right think tanks and political foundations in Europe*

Mr Chairman,  
respected members of the House,  
ladies and gentlemen,

### **Introduction** <sup>(1)</sup>

First of all, let me express my gratitude for this seminar and the opportunity to address you on the issue of “*religion in the face of social change and crisis*”. This is very apt timing. Firstly, we are witnessing a crisis in progress – or rather a crisis fanning out into several crises: A crisis of the financial markets has reached the “real economy”, markets punish states for overwhelming debt and austerity measures alike, the Euro-crisis might still turn into an EU-crisis, with governments increasingly looking for national solutions first. Secondly, we also witness a profound change in the public and scientific perception of religion. While the sociologists of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century still believed that secularism was an ongoing and inevitable process ultimately leading to the extinction of religion, at least as a significant factor in (European) societies, we now realise that religion is by no means on the decline – to the contrary: we observe its rise globally and at least an increase of attention also in Europe.

We might simply take note of these two developments, we might also speculate that there is some relation between them: As people realise that the hopes they have set in growth and wealth are exposed as fragile, they might be looking for more sustainable objects of hope. As people realise how our present economic system increasingly exploits and exhausts all sorts of resources, natural and human alike, they might ask for a readjustment of this system from a perspective that puts the human being first and at the centre, giving more weight to the non-economical aspects of the human existence be they social, cultural or spiritual.

Whether we make these assumptions or not – it is quite clear that the churches with their tradition of social ethics have something to offer in this present situation. In order to activate the possible contribution of their line of thought, we must first of all admit the depth of the current crisis. It will not do to deal with its symptoms only, we need to address the roots.

Tackling the underlying problems of our present crises will require that we revise our priorities. This profound paradigm shift and the practical measures discussed in our parliaments now are not mutually exclusive. Present ills must be redressed presently, but at the same time we must pave the way for a change of mentality lest a similar crisis happen again. Forthcoming measures need to be embedded in a long-term concept for a renewal of the social fibre. Unlike the political and economic tools politicians have at their hands to avert the *imminent* economic and social threats, these changes will not be brought into effect by laws or regulations, but they will need the effort of society as a whole, they will need to be coherently implemented on all levels from the personal to the international, and they will need time and they will need patience. Their results will not be visible and tangible very soon, so the benefits in terms of elections or balance sheets are limited. Politicians and economic leaders who endorse them will, therefore, need some real statesmanship not to be deterred when short term results seem disappointing.

After this more general introduction, I will immediately become more concrete.

1. I will at first present you an analysis of what we, as Christians (assuming, overall, an ecumenical consensus) see as the true roots of the current crises.
2. I will then introduce an outline of the deep change of attitude we deem necessary, and how religions can contribute to it.
3. And I will finally, and probably the most concrete, inform you about some measures that my church, the Protestant Church in Germany, together with the Catholic Bishops in Germany and our two confessional social agencies, Caritas and Diaconia, have proposed in a common statement for the European Commission's consultation on the post-Lisbon strategy "EU 2020".

### **The roots of the crisis** <sup>(2)</sup>

So, firstly, let us look at the roots of the crisis. The market economy is probably the economic system best fitted to human nature, making use of incentives and the striving for improvement. It does not assume absolute equality, but, as a social market economy, as described in the Lisbon Treaty, it also takes account of the needs of the weaker members of society.

However, in the last two decades, capitalism and the market have ceased to be economic systems only, but have become the predominant paradigm of Western society. Almost all areas of life have become subject to the logic of competition and growth, sidelining other characteristics of the human community. At the same time, economic planning has become very short term, with long term returns being appreciated less than short term profits. Sustainability and intergenerational justice were the losers.

By the same token, there has been a tendency to confuse value and price – both in the sense that prices have become detached from the actual value of an asset (like the real estate bubble triggering the original financial crisis), but also in the sense that other values have been sacrificed in favour of high profits.

The value that suffered most was responsibility. But responsible behaviour of economic actors, personal and corporate, is the foundation both of economic stability and social peace. If I act responsibly, I will assess risks profoundly, seek economic and ecological sustainability and feel solidarity with those whose performance is lower than my own, and with later generations. To act responsibly implies that I do not do everything that I could possibly do to enhance my own position, but only such things as are compatible with the common good and not detrimental to other people.

In other words, responsibility is the central element in the checks and balances individual freedom needs if it is not to turn into pure, destructive egotism. The sole focus on myself blinds me not only to the needs of others, but also to the realities of the world. Martin Luther described “sin” as nothing other than such an “*incurvatio in se ipsum*”, a curvation in oneself. Focused only on myself, I cannot stand upright and face the others – also a key definition of the *citoyen*.

Freedom detached from responsibility ultimately leads to its own destruction; freedom embedded in responsibility helps achieve also what is in my own, true and long-term interest – which might be quite different from short term profit.

### **A change of mentality and the religious contribution to bringing it about**

Obviously, to achieve the right balance between a too narrowly defined self-interest and the common good, legislators have to introduce control mechanisms, including threats in cases of non-compliance.

However, even if some such mechanism have been lacking in the period before the crisis, legal measures alone cannot sufficiently solve the problem. We need a change of mentality. And that is where religions come in – in particular Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

The three major, monotheistic religions in Europe have one common basis in that they are community religions. To care for one’s neighbour, to organise society from a clear cut set of values, to view the individual as part of a greater whole is essential to all three of them. The New Testament says that God judges our relation to him from our treatment of the weakest in society. Violence as a means of social interaction is banned, and that does not only entail physical violence.

In families and communities where religion is alive, these values are fostered and young people are brought up with a sense of their responsibility towards the others. As the state cannot impose these values on the citizens, it has to rely on them being alive among them. The state needs the communities that promote them, because they create the foundation on which the state itself is based <sup>(3)</sup>. This contribution is not restricted to responsibility and solidarity alone, but also lies in the spiritual values that go even deeper than these and bring them forth:

The strength to admit to one's wrongdoings,  
the readiness to repent and make a new start,  
the grace to forgive,  
the willingness to listen to the needs of others,  
the power of hope,  
the sovereignty to know that I am more than what I achieve,  
and the courage and composure this creates

– all these have a unique soil in religion.

The task of organised religion, i.e. of religious communities and churches, is twofold: They are the guarantors of the transgenerational transmission of the systems that generate values. Religion can easily become prey to the trend of individualisation that has our societies in its grip. But religion is no supermarket where I can choose what suits me best. Such an approach would eliminate those aspects of religion that remind me of my weaknesses and that demand something of me. Of course religion is very much alive, its interpretation is changing and must be changing in order to adapt to the present situation and context, but this process must be a common one, with the community and its representatives at its core. Some organisational and institutional constancy is the precondition that there is a knowledgeable discourse on the meaning of Scripture and Doctrine and that conflicting needs and opinions are balanced. Religious organisations open up rooms for free thought and speech, under liberal and oppressive political conditions alike.

But religious communities do not only have a responsibility towards their adherents, but also towards wider society. Much is achieved if children are brought up to respect and to endorse values, much is achieved if many people live according to their convictions. But even more can be achieved if whole communities get engaged, and try to influence the way a society takes.

To what extent they are able to do so also depends on the legal framework in which they operate. In Germany, this framework is very favourable to social engagement of religious communities and other societal actors. The principle of subsidiarity is applied especially to public social services. Therefore, the vast majority of welfare institutions from kindergartens to homes for the elderly are operated by churches, the Red Cross or other civil society organisations. The state only steps in where there is no sufficient coverage by these groups. Every citizen has the right to choose from a variety of providers, ensuring a pluralistic system.

In other countries, churches have less opportunity to get engaged on such a broad scale, but rather cover gaps in the public systems, catering for those who would otherwise fall through the official social security net.

Personally, I strongly believe that it is an expression of a free society that citizens are the agency on which the social system primarily relies. Private institutions are usually much faster in adapting to the changing needs of the people and are closer to those they are there to help. The state, however, is needed to set a legal framework that ensures reliable conditions for those getting engaged and a high quality of services for the general public.

We view with some misgiving that there is no political consensus in the EU to exempt social services from the rigid logic of the (internal) market. Rules must be established to ensure the *best value for money principle*, but the care for the needy should not be viewed as yet another area of competition, because it should follow non-profit principles.

With this in mind, for us, it is not enough to only help those who already rely on social assistance. The diaconical task also entails the concern for the system itself. It must be fair, it must be centred on the needs of the needy and it must be shaped in a way that as few people as possible are forced to call on the help of welfare organisations.

Hence, my church has always felt a political vocation. Our task is not to make politics, but to make politics possible. We give advice from our experience “on the ground”. Our counsel is based on our values, convictions and beliefs. We try to bridge gaps between parties and political families. We remind government and opposition that their joint task is the common good and that compromise is usually the best way to reach it. We are uncompromising, however, where we see the dignity of the human being endangered or violated.

For over 20 years, we have had the office in Brussels. Convinced of the historic chance and duty towards European integration, we take part in the discourse on how best to legislate for the peoples of Europe. With Art. 17 III of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, our contribution has been recognised in primary law: Churches and religious communities are now official dialogue partners of the European Institutions.

#### **Concrete proposals for the EU 2020 strategy** <sup>(4)</sup>

This dialogue has many facets and is conducted on different levels and in manifold ways <sup>(5)</sup>. One such way is to take part in the consultations of the European Institutions. Together with the Catholic Bishops in Germany and our social agencies, Caritas and Diakonia, we have issued a statement for the European Commission’s consultation on the post-Lisbon strategy “EU 2020”.

We start from the premiss that economy and growth are there to serve the people, not vice versa. Not all areas of existence can be subjected to the logic of economics. A prospering economy must follow certain rules that serve higher aims: social inclusion, justice and participation, sustainability.

We recommend that we employ indices that reflect these aims: Going beyond GDP, including more diverse indicators to measure growth and prosperity, is a very practical issue that would do much to change our perception of where we stand and where we need to go. Such an analysis would already be a first element in convincing the public of the change of direction we need. Growth is a matter of quality as much as of quantity.

We endorse the aim to raise employment levels, but warn that precarious employment neglects these other aims. We have to start from the individual person: higher educated, well-off people have naturally a higher flexibility and mobility than unskilled workers. Singles are more flexible and mobile than families, especially when both parents have to find a job in the same region. Blanket descriptions of the ideal worker do not fit reality. Thus, Flexibility cannot only refer to the workers, but must include more elastic structures adjusted to such needs. The flexicurity concept of the European Commission, however, focuses merely on individual mobility.

One key element in our proposal is education. We share the notion that education, from early childhood to life-long-learning, is crucial for a modern knowledge-based economy, prospering societies and social inclusion. However, recent reforms of the educational system in Germany and the EU have laid the emphasis on making young people fit for the labour market. This is certainly important, but not the sole purpose of education. Art, music, drama and literature, religion, ethics – all these are vital to the formation of personalities our societies need. Young people must be enabled to form their own opinions, to reflect on the consequences of their behaviour. If I said earlier that it is the families and religious communities that lay the foundation on which our democracy rests, and not the state itself, this does not exclude a contribution by the state: Public schools and universities are the means by which the state can take its share in the promotion of values. By reducing education to the acquisition of formal knowledge, the state fails this duty! – Also, I believe, such an understanding of qualification is much too narrow even for the labour market. We need people with a creative and enterprising mind, we need people who can make an objective assessment of the consequences of their acts, and we need more of the urgently.

Responsibility, and with this I return to my point of departure, responsibility needs method: To act responsibly, I need to know what I am doing and what the effects of my doing will in all probability be. Values and understanding go hand in hand. Therefore, a broader definition of education, starting from individual needs and potentials, is the first step in changing course and laying the foundation for a system that is less prone to fall prey to crises like the present.

My church, and I am sure my esteemed friends from the other denominations and religions would say much the same, my church is prepared to take its share in this common task, both by upholding and promoting our values and by engaging actively in society and in dialogue with the political institutions.

Thank you for your attention.

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- (1) The speaker is Legal Advisor and Deputy Head of the Brussels Office of the Representative of the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany to the Federal Republic of Germany and the European Union.
- (2) Cf. especially: *Wie ein Riss in einer hohen Mauer. Wort des Rates der EKD zur globalen Finanzmarkt- und Wirtschaftskrise* ([http://www.ekd.de/download/ekd\\_texte\\_100.pdf](http://www.ekd.de/download/ekd_texte_100.pdf)); cf. also: Bischof Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Huber, „Freiheit braucht Verantwortung – Verantwortung braucht Vertrauen. Wege aus der Krise“ – Rede zum Johannisempfang in der Französischen Friedrichstadtkirche zu Berlin ([http://www.ekd.de/vortraege/090702\\_huber\\_berlin.html](http://www.ekd.de/vortraege/090702_huber_berlin.html)); cf. also: „Wirtschaft muss den Menschen dienen“, Beschluss der Synode der EKD vom 5. November 2008 ([http://www.ekd.de/synode2008/pm289\\_2008\\_synode\\_finanzmarktkrise.html](http://www.ekd.de/synode2008/pm289_2008_synode_finanzmarktkrise.html)).
- (3) Cf. Böckenförde, Ernst-Wolfgang, *Staat, Gesellschaft, Freiheit*, Frankfurt a.M. 1976, 60.
- (4) Cf. Gemeinsame Stellungnahme des Bevollmächtigten des Rates der EKD, des Kommissariats der Deutschen Bischöfe, des Diakonischen Werks der EKD und des Deutschen Caritasverbandes zur Konsultation „EU 2020“: <http://www.ekd.de/bevollmaechtigter/stellungnahmen/2010/68769.html> or [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/secretariat\\_general/eu2020/docs/ekd\\_de.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/secretariat_general/eu2020/docs/ekd_de.pdf).
- (5) Cf. Katrin Hatzinger and Patrick Roger Schnabel, „Religions and the European Union: A partnership in the making“ in: *Derecho y Religión*, Vol. IV, Madrid 2009, pp. 45-58.