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Each One Is a Particular Case. Aspects of the Transformation of Christianity in Global Modernity

Abstract: This paper draws a comparison between the situation of churches in Europe and their situation worldwide. Christianity takes its meaning from the relevance it has for the life course of individuals. Christian churches in Europe and Germany, too, will have to accept the transformation Christianity is undergoing and which has to do with the Protestant principle of autonomy. The success of Christian churches worldwide, with special mention to the so-called African Independent Churches (AIC) in South Africa, is due to the fact that they respond to the needs of their followers by focussing on spiritual experience rather than asserting rigorous moral claims. In Europe, the mainline churches should try to answer the growing need for spiritual and moral orientation.

Key words: Church crisis in Europe, globalization, transformation of Christianity

1. The European Crisis of Churches

The present number of church members in Germany shows that the loss of members which has been observed since the 1960's did not yet come to an end. The two mainline churches have lost one third of their members during the last forty years and both are expected to lose one more third until 2030. Is this the ultimate answer to the question which future prospects Christianity does have? It could be so. For almost 200 years it has been stated that in Europe Christianity has lost its power, or: that we are moving towards a post-Christian age, that the modern world, being focussed on scientific and technical

rationality, is going through a process of secularization. A popular theory says that in secular Europe religion, having lost its influence in public has become a private affair.

I am quite sceptic about complaints of this kind. At least as many observations can be made that can be used to argue that religious movements are being appreciated more than in the past and that Christianity and Christian churches are gaining a new kind of public influence. This is also true for Europe, not only for other continents. I am going to collect such observations showing that Christianity does have a future, although this future might not meet the expectations or desires of many. I am going to add some considerations regarding the future role of the Church in the world and the recent challenges Christianity is facing.

2. Christianity and Globalization¹

Reflections on the future of Christianity have to include developments beyond the geographical borders of Germany or Europe. Religions have been gaining a new social and political relevance worldwide. The media are concentrating again on the issue of religion. Speaking of a "comeback of religion" might confuse matters insofar as religion has never vanished at all, not even in secularized Europe - if "secularized" is an adequate term here. But speaking of a "comeback of religion" implies that the presence of religion - and its global future, too - are being discussed publicly in a new way, and rightly so.²

If we try not to limit our diagnosis to a Eurocentric perspective we must acknowledge that there is no decline of religion at all, least of all a decline of Christianity. When referred to a worldwide context neither religions in general nor Christianity in particular can be said to be losing adherents - in fact, they are gaining new ones. Especially

¹ Hans Joas is arguing for a less narrow and less Eurocentric point of view, see his speech titled "Über die Zukunft des Christentums," which he held at the Protestant Church Congress in Cologne in 2007. A revised version is available in: *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 2007, Nr. 8, pp. 976-984.

² Cf. Friedrich-Wilhelm Graf, *Die Wiederkehr der Götter. Religion in der modernen Kultur*, München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2004.

charismatic and Pentecostal churches are growing fast in Africa, Asia, North and South America, caused by higher birth rates as well as by missionary activities. The demographic factor is not only relevant for Islam. Several countries with a living Christian tradition – like Brazil, or the Philippines – have nearly doubled their population during the last forty years, and Christianity has benefited from this demographic development.

Religious developments in Africa are of special importance. Christianity was spread here to a great extent but not before the end of colonial rule in the 1960s. During the last fifty years the number of Christians in Africa has more than doubled and Christianity has been gaining more adherents than Islam. But this growth does neither include the old European mission churches nor – at least not predominantly – those Pentecostal churches that are being financed by US mega churches. Approximately 50% of all Christians in Africa now belong to the so-called African Independent Churches (AIC), which are independent basis churches. The number of AIC cannot be counted, as they are growing with breath-taking speed. In South Africa there are presently more than 1,000 AIC.³ Recently I have been invited to visit some of these congregations in South Africa.

For them it is characteristic that they are only loosely associated on an organizational level. Local congregations are highly autonomous. A congregation is gathering around a charismatic leader who usually comes from the same village or township. A theological education is not required but first of all the staying power to hold the weekly service on Sundays which can last up to four hours. The service includes native African traditions in its rituals. Liturgies focussed on ecstatic spiritual experiences are mainly important. The congregation, that is, each member, undergo processes of self-transcendence within a spiritual dimension, and are called to believe in the glorious second coming of Christ who is present in the Spirit. The message says: If you believe firmly enough you will achieve the crown of life.

³ Cf. David Chidester, *Religions of South Africa*, Routledge, 1992; Martin Prozesky & John de Gruchy (eds.), *Living Faiths in South Africa*, Hurst & Co., 1995; Allan H. Anderson, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century*, Africa World Press, 2001; Gerrie Ter Haar, *How God Became African*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.

The belief in a transcendent reality and in its healing touch is powerful within those congregations. The biblical belief in the Holy Spirit through whom God's creational power becomes effective in our weakness is connected with African ancestral beliefs. As the ancestors' spirits are believed to possess healing power, African Christians experience healing through spiritual power in their praxis of worship. Initiating healing experiences of that kind is a central aspect of their liturgy. Such spiritual experiences are connected with ecstatic dancing in circles practised for hours.

Charismatic congregations on the basis of African Churches depend on their rituals which actively include all members of the community. Those congregations reproduce themselves not only through socialisation processes but through conversions, too. As the AIC congregations do not have much money at their disposal they cannot finance costly missionary activities. The Pentecostal churches are mostly financed by the USA so this makes quite a difference. Pentecostal churches with their gospel of social and economic success are frequented by those who are socially upgraded while the AIC congregations address those at the bottom. The charismatic AIC congregations are expected to provide healing in a universal sense. And their members do experience a protecting and healing community through the Holy Spirit.

In a global context, different types of charismatic congregations and Pentecostal churches with their Protestant understanding of autonomy have succeeded in making Christianity grow quickly, perhaps more quickly than all other religious communities in the world. In Latin America, too, their concept with its focus on spiritual experience as well as on moral claims is greatly successful, and challenges the Catholic Church. AIC as well as Pentecostal churches are flexible when it comes to matters of faith. They do not possess a differentiated systematic theology, a fact that supports the fusion of Christian traditional beliefs and native religious symbols and rituals.

Within academic theology and sociology of religion a vivid debate has emerged, as research on this newly discovered global dynamics has called the secularization thesis into question.⁴ The term "seculari-

⁴ Cf. David Martin, "Secularization and the Future of Christianity," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 2005, vol. 20, pp. 145-160; Hans Joas, "Einleitung," in: Hans Joas

zation" cannot be understood in the sense that there is a general decline of Christianity and churches, caused by the Enlightenment, by modernization, technical development and science. Researchers on religion agree on this point. To mention one example, the USA is one of the most highly developed nations in terms of science and economy. However, Christianity is flourishing there also in a plurality of Protestant denominations and communities. The ongoing decline of institutionalized Protestantism in Germany and other countries in Northern Europe - where Protestantism has its very roots - is historically speaking a special case, as experts agree. They state that the situation in Europe and Germany should not lead to general conclusions about a decline of religion that could be expected for other parts of the world, too.

3. Plural Forms of Implicit Christianity⁵

Regarding the situation of Churches and Christianity in Europe the secularization thesis is challenged, too. The fact that the mainline churches are losing their members is a global phenomenon. So for Europe the loss of church members should not lead to the conclusion that there is a general decline of religion. People are not caused to leave the church by a loss of faith - rather they are motivated by economic reasons. But first of all - and this is true for Europe and for Germany, too - there is a wide range of new forms of lived religion that share a Christian origin or imprint. Put into sociological terms, a de-bordering within the field of religion is taking place, with a variety of new religious agents appearing. New spiritual milieus are emerging, especially forms of implicit religion. New forms of lived religion are not self-referential, people do not call themselves religious but their social praxis has a religion-like impact on their lives. If, as one example, a football fan identifies with his football club he

und Klaus Wiegandt (Hg.), *Säkularisierung und die Weltreligionen*, Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2007, p. 943.

⁵ For further discussion on the transformations mentioned here see my book: *Sinnfragen. Transformationen des Religiösen in der modernen Kultur*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006, esp. 5573.

attaches great value to this relationship – success and failure of the club has become success and failure of his life, too. The fan club provides social bonds and a feeling of community. More sublime forms of media religiosity are to be considered when films like *Titanic* or *Avatar* achieve cult status. Some viewers use to see their personal cult films ten and more times because they help them to transcend their own reality. Films may create religious feelings when viewers encounter their personal saviour. Film stories do have a Christian background – for example the narration of the saviour, the final battle between good and evil, exorcism of demonic forces and reconciliation with nature are all aspects of the story that the film *Avatar* tells by using impressive pictures.

4. The Dispersal of Confessional Milieus

However, the traditional confessional environment is dissolving and thus losing its influence on daily life. The question of being a Protestant or a Catholic does not count much in politics or culture. An inter-confessional marriage rarely provokes any family conflicts or long lasting discussions within the family circle. There is still a difference – from time to time it is noticed that Angela Merkel has her roots in a Protestant pastor's family. But for this being remarked there has to be a particular reason, for instance Merkel's critique concerning the Pope's conciliatory attitude towards a priest who has denied the holocaust. During elections the candidates' confession is usually not considered to be of any importance.

5. The Personalization of Christianity

In the media the Christian Churches are rarely mentioned in connection with the Gospel as their message. On the contrary, discussions are provoked when high representatives of the Churches comment on political or moral issues. It is not their very cause – God – which marks the Churches' relevance in the eyes of the public but the persons that represent them by making political statements. Whatever

the result, negative or positive, the conduct of professionals who represent the Churches is of public concern – whether pastors or bishops act convincingly as representatives of Christianity or whether they fail to do so. This is the same in the sphere of politics. The laws of the media society seem to require a personalization and also a moralization of Christianity. Anyway, moral claims have much more weight in Christianity, when compared to politics. The Churches' representatives are expected to lead a holy life, so to speak. It is not the office which bears the person but the person who bears the office, expected to care for its public resonance, reputation and acknowledgement. If an office holder commits a mistake, missing his or her exemplary function, the Church as a whole is questioned regarding its function of moral orientation.

6. The Individualization of Religion

What makes the Church an object of interest for the media sometimes hasn't much to do with the expectations of those who are searching for answers. However, people at the basis have a desire to find their personal belief. Especially those who are searching for answers are not satisfied when they are confronted with what Church traditions and traditional liturgies provide. Their subjectivity and also their personal experience and insight form the eye of the needle the Church's message has to pass through in order to be accepted. Even if this might be a rash comparison I tend to draw a parallel here, referring to the weakness of the mainline churches in Africa, Asia, North and South America. Everywhere the so to speak official model of traditional religion is losing its function of producing religious meaning. In Germany, too, we can observe that people are having it their own way when religion is concerned. In my view, the only difference when compared to the basis congregations in Africa seems to be the fact that in Germany and other European countries the process of individualization is more intense and therefore the level of religious differentiation is much higher. Here in Germany each one is a "particular case" in terms of religion ["jede(r) ein religiöser Sonder-

fall"] – see the title of a Swiss publication on the condition of religion in Switzerland, published some years ago.

7. The Claim of Religious Autonomy

Many people consider the institutionalized Churches to be less important for their spiritual well-being. They don't experience them as having any healing influence on their lives and therefore do not expect them to provide salvation. Especially the Roman Catholic Church with its great institutional power is suffering a decline of religious and moral authority. The Pope may transform into a pop star or an idol at the World Youth Day in Cologne. But it is the person which is celebrated, one single person incorporating the Holy as something that can be touched, not the Church itself – neither with its religious and moral authority nor with its institutionalization of salvation, which is the function of the sacraments. The Church's doctrines of faith and moral claims are less and less acknowledged, if their content is known at all. Young people's cheers may accompany the Pope's visits in Germany, but the same young people have no intention of sharing the Church's attitude to morality or attending the service on Sundays. The conclusion should not be that young people don't see a need for moral obligations. They are uninterested in the Church's confessions and moral doctrines but they do look for authority – which they are trying to find in religious events, Church Congresses, World Youth Days, or by spending some time in the Community of Taizé. They come to conclusions about what is good or bad and what has to be named as sin. The most valuable thing for young people of today is confidence. A breach of confidence is considered to be a great sin. The Catholic youth claim moral autonomy but the rules they have established themselves are meant to protect the sphere of personal relationships.⁶

⁶ Cf. Andreas Feige, Carsten Gennerich, *Lebensorientierungen Jugendlicher. Alltagsethik, Moral und Religion in der Wahrnehmung von Berufsschülerinnen und -schülern in Deutschland. Eine Umfrage unter 8.000 Christen, Nicht-Christen und Muslimen*, Münster u.a.: Waxmann, 2008.

Church life in its former sense seems to be acceptable as tradition only within the frames of a small minority. When the mainline churches lost their status of religious and moral monopolists the established borders of religion began to dissolve. Presently the main characteristics of Christianity in Europe are dominated by fragile church commitment, by the fact that nobody seems to be interested in 'normal' services on Sundays, by the weakening of a general interest in 'parish life' and community life within in the Church. Not predominantly - as in other parts of the world - but with growing success Pentecostal, charismatic and evangelical churches are trying to establish themselves in Europe, too. Their services succeed to evoke religious feelings. They provide experiences of community with others and with God.⁷

In addition to the plurality of implicit forms of religion witnessed in Germany and Europe, a pluralisation of explicit forms of religion is taking place. Whoever leaves the Protestant or Catholic Church has the opportunity to join other Christian congregations that may fulfil his or her expectations more adequately.

8. Chances for the Mainline Churches

Anyway, the established Catholic or Protestant Churches don't have to be afraid that their end is near. If they manage to adapt to the transformations of Christianity as mentioned above their future prospects will be great. There are some parishes which have already reacted to the challenge. The mainline churches find themselves undergoing a process of liberalization as well as they experience an imprint of charismatic tendencies. One could say that they are undergoing a process of continued reformation - Protestantism in its consequence, as a process of "Evangelization." The Catholic Church, too, is taking part in this process, becoming more and more evangelical, at least the basis with its "we are the Church" movement. Due to its reformatory roots the Protestant Church refused to become a power-

⁷ Cf. Friedrich Daniel Eisenlöffel, *Freikirchliche Pfingstbewegung in Deutschland. Innenansichten, 1945-1985*, (Kirche - Konfession - Religion Bd. 50), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006.

ful church, a pastors' church – but it did, in the course of history. However, the process of Reformation is going on, and Martin Luther's notion of the priesthood of all believers [Priestertum aller Gläubigen] is truly evangelic. Luther envisioned church members reading in the Bible in order to be educated and to learn about their relationship to God, and afterwards coming together in a community of the faithful, listening to the Gospel.

We can call the global individualization and differentiation of Christianity its Evangelization. The growing churches are experienced as healing communities. They can – truly evangelic – be identified with a community of the faithful, who feel close to each other and to God while listening to the Gospel. The global Evangelization of Christianity weakens church hierarchies. Theologically speaking, a church that tends to burden people's conscience and to rule over them contradicts the freedom granted by the Gospel.

Freedom is always the freedom of a single person. If a person decides herself in which kind of community she wants to live her Christian faith, she acts as it is the Gospel's intention.

Two thirds of the German population are still members of one of the two mainline churches. But during the last decades changes have occurred in the way people understand and practice their church membership. Predominantly the Church is needed when passage rites have to be celebrated – special occasions like marriages, or feasts in the course of the ecclesiastical year. The Churches therefore have to respond to people's needs in a differentiated way.

The form of passage religiosity predominant in our so-called People's Churches [Volkskirchen] is characterised by the fact that church commitment, missionary activities and Christian universalistic claims are weakly represented. The ability to reflect on one's own belief and conviction is strongly developed, in turn – which means openness towards others' convictions and secular world views, too, as well as tolerance towards others' religions.⁸ The Church and services on Sundays remain relevant for Christians who belong to the People's

⁸ Cf. Petra-Angela Ahrens, Claudia Schulz, Gerhard Wegner, „Religiosität mit protestantischem Profil,“ in: *Woran glaubt die Welt? Analysen und Kommentare zum Religionsmonitor*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2008, pp. 533–553.

Church. They turn to the Church in order to cope with transcendent aspects of their daily life, biographic discontinuity, crises in their personal or social life, and when they are confronted with the fragility of our life.

9. Longing for Authentic Forms of Lived Christian Faith

Forms of religious meaning and their communication are present in society not only through denominations and churches but also in the mass media. In terms of religion society has become very complex and confusing. People are therefore looking for alternative forms of religion. If they comment on issues like God, life, happiness, suffering and death they scarcely refer to general or objective positions. They don't make use of church doctrines or anything a pastor or bishop has said in order to contrast their personal belief or non-belief with it, in agreement or disagreement. Those matters of faith which are communicated by churches, religions or world views have become – if known at all – part of a collection of symbols that can be combined freely. People combine as they like quite divergent ideas, fragments derived from a variety of religious symbolic backgrounds. They may connect their religious constructions of meaning – “religious” means here: aiming at unity – also with elements of secular or atheistic world views.

Demands of consistency like those which theological doctrines are intended to fulfil are no longer retained in view.⁹ What is crucial about religious communication is that statements are expected to be authentic: 'I believe that it is so.' 'I consider things to be like that.' 'It is my conviction that...'. And a person who is highly religious¹⁰ might say: 'In my experience things are like that.' 'I witnessed it.'

The fact that the individual feels addressed personally is important for religious communication. The need to find personal and au-

⁹ Cf. Armin Nassehi, „Religiöse Kommunikation: Religionssoziologische Konsequenzen einer qualitativen Untersuchung,“ *ibidem*, pp. 169–204.

¹⁰ Cf. *ibidem*.

thentic forms of Christianity within the Church does not automatically contradict the Gospel. One can say that the Protestant principle of the autonomy of conscience has gained acceptance, in connection with a critique of traditional or institutional authorities. Anyway, focussing on personal convictions often leads to a renunciation of the universalism of faith, including the danger of religious arbitrariness. When Martin Luther criticised the Pope's Church he did not only refer to his own conscience but based his critique on the Holy Scripture as the highest authority of doctrine. Those who make religious statements today do not trouble to struggle with the Bible, with church doctrines or confessions, with general claims of truth or paradox theological ideas. They do not match the Church's authority and preaching. In contrast, they attach great value to the authentic representation of their own subjectivity respectively of their religious experience or convictions.

10. The Role of the Mainline Churches in Europe

10.1. Contributing to the Emergence of Personally Certain and Responsible Forms of Faith

The People's Churches will have to continue to pass on the Christian belief by supporting critical and reasonable forms of theology, informative religious education, a way of preaching the Gospel that encourages religious and moral development, and agreeable services. The Catholic Church, too, will have to open up itself and to reduce its authoritarian system of power. Whoever visits church congregations or religion classes at schools in Germany realizes that at the basis there is not such a big difference between Catholic and Protestant faith. Lived forms of Christianity have become more Protestant, non-hierarchical, basic, built upon the participation of everybody, in need of the so-called lay persons. However, within the Protestant Church there are no lay persons at all, if the priesthood of all believers [Priestertum aller Gläubigen] is taken seriously. But the Churches did not derive much benefit from their Protestant freedom so far, concerning their organizational and institutional stability. The freedom

granted by believing and the freedom to believe, as communicated by the Church, are both interpreted and used as a chance to leave the Church – in order to be free from the institution. This should neither lead to the conclusion that the Churches are expected to give up their openness towards different forms of Christian faith, nor that they should stop reflecting critically on matters of faith or restrain their tolerant attitude concerning other churches, religions or religious movements. Quite often it is said that the Church should make its position and claims more clear. Usually this critique relies on a comparison with Pentecostal or evangelical movements and congregations. But those who say so do not see that being liberal and open is a great resource for the Churches in Germany because people are able to experience the freedom of belief. The Churches are becoming places of openness, encouraging people to live their personal freedom and to be tolerant towards other forms of religion and faith.

10.2. Encouraging Non-Dogmatic Forms of Christianity in Ecumenical Openness and Community

In Germany, the Protestant Churches as well as the Catholic Church are known for accepting a variety of religious forms and for encouraging autonomy of faith and life. For instance, they do not devalue distanced kinds of membership, even if contact is established only through passage religiosity.

Despite of their loss of members the Churches are strongly present in society precisely because of their openness, their tolerance and their social and charitable commitment. But very often they do not feel comfortable about it, at least not concerning their openness and tolerance. Especially the charitable praxis is often considered to be secondary, while the spiritual centre of the congregation is expressed by word and ordinance. The Churches do not defend strongly enough what they support in fact and what has a great effect in public, too – their openness and tolerance, their ability to self-reflection and charitable commitment.

There is one more task that is going to gain much more relevance in the future: acknowledging others' freedom and right to be different

in terms of religiosity. People do not have to interpret and live their Christian faith in a uniform way. We don't need a standard church, and it will never exist. Religious trends are pointing to an ongoing differentiation of churches. Differences between churches do not refer to ancient theological controversies like the quarrel about the doctrine of Trinity, the human and divine nature of Christ or the Eucharist.

This is not meant to say that theological doctrines should not have any significance at all for the churches. But those who are responsible should know that their task is first of all to interpret traditional Christian beliefs in their relevance for the reality of life today and in the future. If the question is raised what the Gospel is meant to signify today the differences between the churches are minimized. The challenge is an ecumenical one: Christianity represents an important position among the variety of world views of our present time, and it has to be supported as one of the essential forces in future struggles, when the existence of mankind will be at stake.¹¹

11. Global Challenges to Christianity

Christianity is a global player. It is an active factor in processes of globalization, which imply great economic and political challenges for all countries. Christianity is certainly not consistent in itself. It is divided into a multitude of churches worldwide and is spread further on with great speed. But something is there that connects Christian believers in spite of institutional differences. They all believe in the triune God, incarnated in Jesus Christ, being effective through the power of the Holy Spirit, freeing human beings to live and finally even overcoming death. The fact that God became human and that this human God is to be identified with the power to cope with life, present in every human being, defying the power of sin, death and the devil – this is the Gospel of freedom, which fascinates people of all continents and will continue to do so in the future. This Gospel of freedom is going to exert its attractive power further on. However, if

¹¹ For further details see my paper: „Was bedeutet liberales Christentum im 21. Jahrhundert?“ in: Werner Zager (Hg.), *Liberales Christentum. Perspektiven für das 21. Jahrhundert*, Neukirchen – Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2009, pp. 1–18.

I have observed rightly there are three main tasks the churches will have to perform in the future. One of them is relevant for Christianity and its different forms, the two others are concerning its public perception.

11.1. Realizing an Ecumenical Community within Christianity

Christianity has got the task to support ecumenical life much more than this has been practised so far. More emphasis has to be put on the question what holds together the variety of small and great churches in the Spirit of Christ, instead of quarrelling again and again over ancient issues of doctrine that can be understood only by experts, frankly speaking. It should be a matter of course – as it is a question of hospitality – that in any Christian church Christians of any denomination should be invited to the table of their Lord Jesus Christ. If the churches offer each other full hospitality differences referring to liturgy and order may be perceived as enrichment.

11.2. Striving for an Ecumenical Community of all Religions of the World

There are two tasks for Christianity regarding its global context: Firstly, it should strive for an ecumenical community of all religions. Christianity is not the only global player within the religious field. Islam and Buddhism are there, too, just to mention two other religions with global influence. In a world that is going to be united in terms of economy, technology and politics, religions have to give way to a peaceful and constructive competition of their world views and the certainties of orientation connected with them. As there will be no standard church, there will be no standard religion or world ethos either. If the diversity of religious cultures is meant to persist this is not a disadvantage as long as they are competing peacefully and in a constructive way. If they all strive to present the best concept of what the future of the world should be like the diversity of religions will contribute to the cultural capital of the global society.

11.3. Defending the Reasonableness of Faith in the Secular World

Secondly, Christianity is challenged by the secular culture and its rationality, which has become a point of reference especially for the world views of the modern western world. Because of the great impact modern secular culture has had there are many people who have no sense at all for the significance of religion or Christianity. For them, there is nothing they would call holy, they do not experience transcendence or a world beyond society, they are not aware of the resources Christian faith provides for living their lives. Nobody can be persuaded to a Christian belief if he has not experienced the power of faith, endowing the certainty that life has a meaning.

However, Christians can try to lead their lives in such a way that the attractiveness of Christian belief becomes visible, and they can attempt to bear testimony to the source of certainty within them - in a reasonable way, which means: claiming that it is true.