

Michael Bünker:

## Religion and Europe

Introductory statement to the STANDARD Matinee in the Burgtheater, Vienna  
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am grateful for the invitation to take part in this forum. I do so in my function as General Secretary of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE), a fellowship of more than 100 Protestant Churches on the Continent, which has been growing since 1973, the year in which it was founded. In numerical terms, most of these Churches are minorities, like the Lutheran Church in Austria, of which I am Bishop. As far as I can see I am the only one here who represents a religious institution, a Church. Perhaps this can also be seen as an illustration of my first point.

### **Religion is Back on Stage**

All the predictions that religion would disappear as a result of progressive secularization have proved false. At the latest since the 1990s, but definitively since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 it is clear that religion has not disappeared, nor has it withdrawn from the public sphere or allowed itself to be forced into the sphere of private life. Since the 1990s we have been experiencing "*la revanche de Dieu*", as Gilles Kepel put it.

That is true of all continents in the same way. But Europe is a "secular universe". This is true, even though a majority of Europeans claim Christian convictions. So Europe does not have to go the same way as other continents. That would be a false expectation. Particularly where religion is concerned it may, indeed it must, go its own particular way. But what is this way? The question immediately arises how Europe is to be defined.

### **Europe – the Stage**

What is this stage? What do we understand by Europe? Here we get into our first difficulties. Europe cannot be understood without a geographical and historical definition. No one can say precisely where the boundaries of Europe run. But at the same time no one doubts that there are such boundaries. Nor can Europe be defined just by the values of the Enlightenment and the bourgeois revolution. Of course these values provide the basis for present-day Europe, especially the EU. The Union is built upon the basic principles of democracy: political pluralism, basic (human) rights and the rule of law. But these values are not exclusive to Europe, they are universal. They do not define Europe e.g. compared to India, Japan or New Zealand. There must be something different. Europe can be defined in a distinguishable way in the light of its history, which has been shaped by the Wars of Religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the manner in which they were overcome, then by the two World Wars, the Holocaust, and experiences with totalitarian regimes in the Twentieth Century. Europe today is distinct from the Europe of yesterday. It is a continent that – as Joschka Fischer once put it – is in German "*aus Schmerz geboren*", literally translated "born out of pain". The spiritual and cultural dimension must be measured by the success with which this Europe overcomes the past. The present and the future Europe must be different from its past, from yesterday's Europe. Only then it will have a specific, distinguishable spiritual and cultural dimension.

### **The role of religion**

What role does religion have in the history played out on this stage? Too often religion is seen as part of the problem. From this perspective we often hear the allegation that monotheistic religions are innately violent, resulting in a political notion, that religious matters are matters of security. I am aware of this problem. But precisely for this reason I would argue that religion should not first – primarily - be seen as part of the problem. It can be seen just as well, indeed even better, as part of the solution. In Austria – to give one example – a few weeks ago a joint statement and proposal was issued by the communities of the five Great Religions, the Jewish community, the Muslim community, the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church and the Protestant churches, on common measures as to the question of integration of immigrants in our country.

### **The Religious Dimension in Intercultural Dialogue**

I would like to draw your attention to the EU and Council of Europe initiatives towards intercultural dialogue. The Council of Europe emphasizes that intercultural and inter-religious dialogue are not two separate spheres but that “*religious convictions and traditions – like agnostic, atheist or secular convictions – represent a dimension of culture*”. In this connection the Council of Europe refers to Articles 9 and 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights and to the way, not only language, historical and cultural heritage, but also religious convictions are among the sources of personal identity. The Council of Europe is striving to define the core elements of the European model of society, which should apply to all citizens irrespective of social, cultural and religious differences. These core elements are:

- The universality and indivisibility of human rights
- democracy
- the rule of law

The Council of Europe emphatically rejects the claim that there is a “clash of civilizations”; on the contrary, it states that in particular “greater involvement in cultural collaboration – in the broad sense of the word – and in intercultural dialogue will promote long-term peace and international stability”.

Historically the EU has emphasised the importance of economic community. Things look different in the Reform Treaty signed in Lisbon on 13 December 2007. Here the preamble already recalls the “*cultural, religious and humanistic heritage of Europe from which inviolable and inalienable human right such as freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law as universal values...*” Article 16c states in respect of the special significance of the churches and religious communities: “*In recognition of their identity and their special contribution the Union cultivates an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and communities.*”

### **What is Expected of Churches and Religious Communities?**

What is the role of the Churches and religious communities in a present-day Europe as it grows in size and unity? Here I quote from a speech given by the President of the EU Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso, at the Third European Ecumenical Assembly in Sibiu/Hermannstadt in Romania last September. Barroso sees a close connection between unity and orientation in terms of values: “*A union which is reduced to its geographical and economic dimensions lacks unity. Only participation in common values could give substance to a political entity such as the EU...*”

Churches and religious communities have the responsibility to contribute to better mutual understanding and promoting better mutual respect within the common basic values. In numerous societies religion is an increasingly important facet and source of values for individuals. It can play a decisive role in promoting the recognition of other cultures, religions

and lifestyles and foster harmony between them. Barroso concludes: “*I am certain that Europe can count on your contribution in order to overcome its divisions and reach the desired unity in diversity or, to return to an expression frequently used in the ecumenical context, ‘reconciled diversity’.*”

## **The Contribution of the Protestant Churches to the Future of Europe**

### **- Reconciled Diversity**

The phrase “unity in reconciled diversity“ defines the Protestant Churches of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE), their ecumenical model of unity, and the fellowship of churches. From a history of centuries of repudiation and rejection, a community of churches has come into being which has found its way towards reconciliation. The Protestant churches can and want to contribute to the future of Europe drawing on their experience in this approach to reconciliation. The Protestant Churches in Europe are trying to contribute to dialogue and reconciliation, to promote understanding and respect amongst people of different cultures, and to exercise greater sensitivity in dealing with religious feelings.

### **- Concern for minorities**

In the *Charta Oecumenica* the European Churches have committed themselves to promoting the integration of the European continent. Here the Churches can bring in the special way in which they can be close to places and peoples. This includes their special concern and involvement for minorities and the socially outcast. Since they know the dangers of the pressure of assimilation, they support an integrative society granting rights and suitable opportunities to minorities. It is part of the authority of the Protestant Churches derived from the Reformation to criticize institutions that become too far removed from ordinary men and women.

### **- Freedom and Responsibility**

It is a Protestant understanding that freedom is never without commitment; it is associated with responsibility and love. In the words of Martin Luther, a Christian is on the one hand “a free lord over all things and subject to nobody” and on the other “a ministering servant to all things and subject to everyone”. How do we understand this apparent contradiction? We do this by looking for what serves the best interests of one’s fellow human beings, goodness and peace.

### **- Europe as a Future Project**

As I said at the start, present-day Europe and future Europe differ from the Europe of the past. But Europe is never just a backward-looking project. For the Protestant understanding there can be no question of a restoration of a Christian West. Europe has promise only if there is a new start in which the guiding vision is not some past reality, however respectable. The Churches will introduce their Christian values on the way. But others will also introduce their values. Europe will emerge from this exchange strengthened. The decisive thing is that all should observe the “house rules”, which are not open to negotiation. These include the inalienable dignity of the individual before God, human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

When the fiftieth anniversary of the reopening of the Burgtheater was celebrated here in this marvellous building on 14 October 2005 the ceremonial address was given by Navid Kermani, an Iranian, a European, from Cologne. He gave it the title “Towards Europe” and in it sharply criticized the asylum and refugee policy of European countries. In his address

Kermani explicitly quoted at length Austrian poets who had had to flee before the Nazis or be exterminated by them. Like Stefan Zweig.

In 1932, in a clear analysis of the political situation and the developments to be feared after the “madness of the war and the lunacy of the post-war”, almost in desperation Stephan Zweig directed his hopes to Europe. According to Navid Kermani his plea for Europe was not realistic, but messianic. Zweig believed in Europe, as he himself writes, as “in a gospel” and saw the opportunity of experiencing the diverse world of Europe from within as a unity despite all the existing frontiers.

History has proved Zweig’s fears true and indeed far surpassed them in criminal reality. It is the duty of European politics today to see that his fears were not misplaced and his vision is becoming true. Religion properly understood and lived out makes an important contribution to this. If the Church model of “unity in reconciled diversity” is also appropriate for the Europe that is unifying, I shall be delighted if in this sense Europe is somewhat Protestant.

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### **Churches and civil society “White Paper on European Governance” 2001**

For the first time the importance of civil society and especially also the churches and religious communities for the development of Europe is explicitly recognized in an EU document:

*“Civil society plays an important role in giving voice to the concerns of citizens and delivering services that meet people’s needs. Churches and religious communities have a particular contribution to make. The organisations which make up civil society mobilise people and support, for instance, those suffering from exclusion or discrimination. The Union has encouraged the development of civil society in the applicant countries, as part of their preparation for membership. Non governmental organisations play an important role at global level in development policy. They often act as an early warning system for the direction of political debate.”*

### **The Religion of Europeans**

Three out of four Europeans say they are religious persons.

About half of all Europeans pray or meditate at least once a week.

### **The state of the churches**

Most European churches attract fewer believers every year.

Although confidence in church is low in the Western part of Europe, all over the continent a high percentage of people say they appreciate a religious service on moments of great importance in life such as giving birth, marriage, and dying.

Only in the Czech Republic and the Netherlands do less than half of the population appreciate a religious service.

Conversely, in Poland, Croatia, Ireland, Romania and Malta more than 90 percent celebrate key moments in life in church.

Nearly 40% of Europeans attend church only on special occasions.

30% attend religious services regularly.

30% never attend religious services.

75% find a religious service appropriate at birth, marriage or death.

**Data about believing without belonging (Grace Davie)**

People who consider themselves as atheists are a small minority, except in France, where almost 15 percent say they are atheist.

But all over Europe there are more people who consider themselves to be religious than there are people who go to church.

**What Europeans believe**

Many believe in non-Christian concepts like reincarnation, lucky charms and telepathy.

Religion does not exist only in the classical churches.

Europe's religion is like a salad bar.

People pick and choose religious beliefs. They mix and match doctrines and practices

.Sociologist talk about this as a "cafeteria religion" or as "church-free spirituality"

**Is modernity the reason for secularisation?**

No, that cannot be the case, because the most modern nation state, the US, has remained very religious.

What is the reason?

Some say the reason is the fact that in the US religions have to compete with each other in a "market place". So they are eager to know the religious needs of the people.

### **The religious landscapes in Europe**

There is a big gap between the most secularized north-west and the more traditional south-east.

“Reformed” Catholicism (particularly where Catholics are a minority) – embedded folk Catholicism – Anglo-Dutch Protestantism – German-Scandinavian Protestantism – successfully secularised countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, Eastern Germany, France, Bulgaria).

### **The rise of Islam in Europe**

There are about 17 million Muslims and the number is increasing. Their birth rate is far beyond the moderate birth rate. Many Muslims still move to Europe.

Their number will also increase by converting non-Muslims.

A young person, brought up in a lukewarm Christian family, visiting half-empty churches, having doubts about all old certainties, meets young Muslims, whose faith is hot, whose mosques are full, and who do not have any doubt about their religious beliefs.

The more powerful and numerically strong a religious movement is, and the higher the price you have to pay to join it, the more attractive it will be.

### **Post-materialism**

Post-materialistic attitudes and values like environmentalism, gender equality, fair trade, minority rights and more.

Ronald Inglehart has distinguished between materialistic and post-materialistic societies.

**Solidarity and tolerance**

Social networks and participation in the political process.

In the Netherlands and Sweden more than half of the inhabitants are members of some kind of social organisation, in Russia less than 5% belong to an association.

**How can tolerance be measured?**

People were asked to indicate who they didn't want as a neighbour. 97% of the Swedish said they didn't object to foreign neighbours. In Turkey only a tiny majority of about 52% didn't object to living next to foreigners.

**Europe: tri-polar**

Michael Mertes of the Rheinischer Merkur does not see the future situation as bi-polar, Europe versus Islam, but rather as tri-polar. In this view in future there can be the following constellations for conflicts:

- 1) Christianity and secularism versus Islam (acceptance of separation of church and state, freedom of expression, art and belief, Theo van Gogh, Salman Rushdie ...)
- 2) Christianity and Islam versus secularism (together against the ideology of secularism, a warning against a "secular fundamentalism")
- 3) Secularism and Islam versus Christianity (against the "Christian club")



