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WE ARE BECOMING FEWER, BUT: HOW SHOULD THIS HAPPEN? THE „CATALYST CORONA” AND CONTRARY SCENARIOS OF A MINORITY CHRISTIANITY

During the various lock-downs, it was repeatedly said that Corona was something like a catalyst or even an accelerant of dechurching or secularisation. The choice of words already reveals a preconception of what one thinks of the current transformations. Are they interpreted primarily as a loss or as a challenge? But what exactly are we afraid of losing? Social or systemic relevance, political influence, public presence?

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CORONA AS AN ACCELERANT OR CATALYST?

In this context, one attention was interesting. During the second Synodal Assembly of the „Synodal Way” in Frankfurt in autumn 2021, the discussions from the narrower Corona period played no role. Corona was only mentioned in the context of the elaborate protection concept. It was apparently thought to be behind them, as it was last year. This article comes at a time (November 2021), however, that shows the stark opposite.

It is unquestionable that the topic of dealing with abuse must have absolute priority, especially from a systemic or structural point of view. And yet the topics of the synodal assembly and at the same time the strategies for coming to terms with abuse remained conspicuously internal. It obviously mattered in which context all this was happening. The pastoral theologian wonders here whether the church, precisely because the secular public sphere offered and still offers the place of freedom that abuse was uncovered at all, can do all this on its own. In church dialogues on the future – whether in the Synodal Way or elsewhere – should not the contexts within which church life is constellated today and presumably tomorrow also be considered in addition and at the same time? Certainly, to demand this would be to overburden the Synodal Way per se. At the same time, this process seems to be accompanied here and there by the optimism that if the church really reforms itself, it can also find its way back to its old social significance or role.

In Germany, this has been described as a „cooperative separation” between state and church and has been practised successfully for decades.² Due to its special financial situation, which in turn is a consequence of the cooperative separation, the German Catholic Church has achieved a remarkable institutional presence more than in other European countries. Actually, however, this, as well as costly church events, is de facto maintained in Germany only because of a double

² Cf. Th. Großbölting, *Der verlorene Himmel. Glaube seit 1945 in Deutschland*, Göttingen 2013.

paradox: More than 90% of church members see their membership more as belonging to a club or pay church tax in the logic of a health insurance contribution: if I need a service, I know where to get it. In internal processes, including pastoral or synodal future processes, the majority of church members, their topics, relevance and perspectives are almost not mentioned at all – and vice versa. At the same time, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find church-affiliated staff in full-time and voluntary positions who, on the one hand, have an inner connection to the Christian faith (whatever that may mean in concrete terms) and, on the other hand, (want to) meet the high expectations of personal conduct of life on the part of Catholic moral teaching. In these contexts, the criterion of „churchliness” is more like a pudding that you nail to the wall. In the end, there is an empty formalism: whoever is in the church and then even knows a priest who is willing to give an expert opinion gets the job or the missio. But how does one want to adapt this institutional „dress”, which is becoming narrower and narrower and at the same time differentiating in a hitherto unknown way, and which in the meantime can be financed less and less even in Germany, to the real social situations and foreseeable coordinates?

If Corona really was or is a catalyst in the midst of this situation, which has been emerging for years, then the pandemic has only accelerated or even more visibly revealed processes that were already in place beforehand. A fine word that has been used in these contexts is that of weaning. As the experiences from and after the lockdowns have shown, one can get out of the habit of going to church on Sunday and of church life quite quickly. If the offer no longer exists, the rhythm is no longer given, then one apparently quickly forgets what was there. Or else one redirects the habit. However, this was also visible before the pandemic. In the Dutch community of Afferden near the border, for example, the Catholic community had sold its church to a Buddhist community for lack of money and members. The remaining parishioners now attended the meditation course offered by the new owners on Sundays instead of going to the Sunday Eucharist in the neighbouring village.

THE TREND IS SET: EMPIRICAL DATA BEFORE, IN AND „AFTER” CORONA

In 2020, the „Austrian Corona-Panel” determined for Austria how quickly this „changing of opinion” takes place. The survey divides three categories on the relevance of religion: „not important”, „partly important”, „important”.³ Since 1986, when 44% of Austrians found religion important and 35% unimportant, the situation in 2016 is as follows: 37% „important” to 47% „unimportant”. The leap after 2020 is now almost erosive and is comparable with other international studies, which since 2015 have found clear secularisation in all monotheistic religions almost everywhere in the world. Here the ratio has shifted within a very short time from „important” 37% and unimportant 47% (2016) to unimportant 68% and 19% important (2020). Corona experiences had already been taken along here. There is thus a clear drift towards the irrelevance of religion in lifestyles and this has already been the case for more than 35 years, within which the already accelerating tendencies seem to have been significantly reinforced once again by Corona.

In this context, another study, this time German, is interesting. It shows that religion did not become significantly more important for previously non-religious people during the pandemic than before. For people who were already religious, however, the importance of religion increased during the experiences of uncertainty and contingency that the pandemic brought with it.⁴ Interestingly, this can now be paralleled with values from central and eastern Germany, which were determined independently of Corona. The Leipzig sociologist of religion Gert Pickel analyses here that the minority congregations of East and Central Germany are stabilising. To put it succinctly:

³ <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/the-age-gap-in-religion-around-the-world> (12.10.2021).

⁴ https://www.uni-muenster.de/imperia/md/content/religion_und_politik/aktuelles/2020/11_2020/factsheet__religion_und_gesellschaftlicher_zusammenhalt_in_zeiten_der_corona-pandemie.pdf (12.10.2021).

minority congregations are not growing significantly, but they are not shrinking any further either.⁵

Finally, the study #projektion 2060, commissioned by the Protestant Church in Germany and the German Bishops' Conference, which focuses more on institutional commitment and the future of church finances, has shown that the number of church members in Germany will decrease by 49% by 2060.⁶ This means that in 40 years, in all likelihood, between 25% and 30% of Germans will still be members of a church at all, and Catholics will make up 15% of them at best. In addition, recent findings from the international sociology of religion show that religion does not, as was long thought, live on or even flourish outside of institutional references, but rather becomes meaningless even more quickly without a localisation in a group or

⁵ G. Pickel, *Zwischen Säkularisierung und Pluralisierung. Neue religionssoziologische Erkenntnisse* [in:] T. Kläden (ed.), *Kirche in der Diaspora. Die Keynotes der Pastoreale 2019 in Magdeburg*, (KAMP kompakt Bd. 8), Erfurt 2020, 49-63. Online: https://kamp-erfurt.de/fileadmin/user_upload/kamp_kompakt/Kirche_in_der_Diaspora_-_KAMP_kompakt_8.pdf (12.10.2021).

⁶ Cf. F. Peters, D. Gutmann, #projektion2060 – Die Freiburger Studie zu Kirchen Mitgliedschaft und Kirchensteuer. Analysen – Chancen – Visionen, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2019, as well as: <https://www.dbk.de/themen/kirche-und-geld/projektion-2060> (12.10.2021). Cf. comparably in view of the Corona pandemic data from the USA, where an average of 73% of worshipers in Protestant congregations came back to worship after the pandemic, and smaller congregations recorded the highest rate of return to attend services: <https://www.domradio.de/topics/world-church/2021-11-03/smaller-congregations-at-an-advantage-fewer-worship-attenders-attend-the-usa-st-attenders-at-usa-as-before-corona> (11/3/2021). These data allow to challenge the belief, that the United States, compared to other modern countries, are an exception when it comes to resistance to secularization.

congregation.⁷ It is therefore clear that secularisation is a megatrend, but not a universal trend.⁸

Unlike in other countries, however, there is still some time in Germany to think about the new role of one's own religious community within a non-Christian majority society. For this purpose, it can be practical to look at different scenarios or approaches to a minority Christianity. Corona can be the external, intensifying reason for this, but the reason or the tendency have been around for a long time.

SCENARIO 1: A „CREATIVE MINORITY” AND ITS VERY DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS

At present, Catholic Church leaders are increasingly resorting to the concept of the „Creative Minority”. For example, Benedict XVI during his visit to the Czech Republic, Cardinal Eijk of Utrecht in his vision for the Netherlands, Bishop Gerhard Feige on various occasions and Bishop Franz-Josef Bode in his New Year's Eve sermon in 2020. The first two in particular refer to the concept of the British historian Arnold Toynbee (1899-1975) from his opus magnum „A Study of History” (1934-1961). In it, Toynbee analyses the rise and fall of various civilisations throughout history. At certain points, all these civilisations faced new challenges that could not be solved with previous strategies (climate change, war, economy, pandemics). In the end, the resources of those creative minorities were often drawn

⁷ Cf.: D. Pollack, R. Rosta, *Religion in der Moderne. Ein internationaler Vergleich*, Frankfurt 2015; S. Hellemans, *De grote transformatie van religie en van de katholieke kerk*, Tilburg 2019; R. Inglehart, *Giving up on God. The global Decline of Religion*, in: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2020-08-11/religion-giving-god> (12.10.2021).

⁸ Cf.: continuation of my reflections in: J. Loffeld, *Schöne Grüße aus der Zukunft. Säkularisierungs- und Desäkularisierung im „Trendland Niederlande”*, online: <https://www.herder.de/stz/hefte/archiv/144-2019/12-2019/schoene-gruesse-aus-der-zukunft-saekularisierungs-und-desaekularisierungsprozesse-im-trendland-niederlande>; such as: *Der nicht notwendige Gott. Die Erlösungsdimension als Krise und Kairos des Christentums inmitten seines säkularen Relevanzverlustes*, Würzburg 2020.

upon to solve these new problems. However, this concept is very clearly determined by a cultural pessimism, not to say by the image of cultural decadence along the cultural-historical lines of Arnold Spengler. It certainly fits in with the image of the church hierarchy of itself and of others, as it has developed in the course of post-conciliar disappointments or non-conformities between the church and the worlds of life. For Benedict XVI, the „Creative Minority” is therefore the intermediate form of a new Christianisation (here we are explicitly not talking about evangelisation). On the one hand, it is designed to be diaconal, dialogical and educational, but with regard to the good of faith it is understood to be exclusive. The context does not play a decisive role with regard to theological insights. The current world situation of Christianity is rather understood as an intermediate station and exclusively the Catholic (!) Church as a storehouse that holds the necessary resources for the establishment of a new world society that will be necessary at some point. This raises the question of the role of the inclusive ecclesiological self-concept as laid down by the Second Vatican Council, especially in view of an ecumenism on an inner-Christian, interreligious and secular level.

This, however, is found within an interpretation of the concept of minority, which operates under the same concept, often then used in German: The „Creative Minority”. Bishop Feige of Magdeburg, taking up this term, describes his own pastoral experiences rather deductively and, if everything is not mistaken, applies the „Creative Minority” inclusively: „We want to be a church that is not sufficient for itself, but that gives all people a share in the hope that is given to us in Jesus Christ. His message promises people ‚life in abundance’, even when their own possibilities are exhausted. That is why we accept the challenge to be a missionary church in our diaspora situation.”⁹

⁹ Cf. G. Feige, *Schöpferische Minderheit. Statement bei der Auftaktveranstaltung der „pastorale!” 2019 in Halle*, [in:] T. Kläden, *Kirche in der Diaspora. Keynotes der „pastorale!” 2019 in Magdeburg (KAMP kompakt 8)*, Erfurt 2020, p. 26-34, 28. On the inclusive turn, see also *ibid.*, 30-32 under the heading. On the inclusive turn, cf. also *ibid.*, 30-32 under the heading: „Kirche auch anderswo sehen”. Furthermore, in

Inviting, open and ready for dialogue, we go into the future.”, as well as: „We are God’s witnesses here and now. As a creative minority, we implement our mission in an ecumenical spirit. [...] In doing so, we do not satisfy ourselves, but missionarily give all people a share in the hope that is given to us in Jesus Christ”¹⁰. The last sentences in particular clearly show the difference to the above concept: it is about dialogue, inclusion, listening and thus about a constructive connection to contexts and life worlds. It is indeed important to mark this difference and thus to note that when using the vocabulary „creative minority” one should listen very carefully and look even more sharply at what concept is actually hidden behind it.

Another, third religious, but non-Christian reference is found in Rabbi Jonathan Sacks from his Erasmus Lecture of 2013, describing that religious majority societies in the process of transformation into a minority position would have at least four alternatives to choose from: 1) religious liberalism; 2) religious extremism; 3) fragmentation; and: 4) a „Creative Minority”. On this he notes: “The fourth possibility, to become a creative minority, is not easy, because it involves maintaining strong links with the outside world while staying true to your faith, seeking not merely to keep the sacred flame burning but also to transform the larger society of which you are a part. This is, as Jews can testify, a demanding and risk-laden choice.”¹¹

On the one hand, this concept seems to stand between the two above, while also emphasising dialogue and a positive relationship between religious community and contemporary society. And certainly inclusivism in Gerhard Feige and others does not mean normativity

this volume, the Jesuit Philip Geister from Sweden describes holiness as an essential identity marker of a “Creative Minority,” since it directs the focus of Christianity in the diaspora more on the being than on the doing of the Christian. Cf. thus, Ph. Geister, *Schöpferische Minderheit – schwedische Erfahrungen. Vortrag bei der Auftaktveranstaltung zur „pastorale!”* 2019, op. cit., p. 35-48.

¹⁰ G. Feige, *Anders katholisch. Vom Mut zum kleinen Weg*, Freiburg im Breisgau 2019, p. 210. For the further vision, cf. thus, p. 210-219.

¹¹ J. Sacks, *On Creative Minorities – The 2013 Erasmus Lecture* <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/01/on-creative-minorities>.

of context, but rather, in the sense of conciliar inclusivism ready to learn, a discernment in the sense of what Pope Francis calls for a synodal shape of the church.

SCENARIO 2: „DIASPORA CHRISTIANITY” – INTERNATIONAL POSITIONS FROM THE EVANGELICAL FIELD

In 2012 the Community of Protestant Churches (CPCE) in Europe initiated a study process on the concept and phenomenon of diaspora. In this process, an international and interdisciplinary theological conference, which was to examine the theological connectivity of the cultural-theological concept of diaspora, conferences on church self-interpretations of minority and diaspora situations led to the publication of a study under the title „Theology of Diaspora”¹². As a result, this document formulates, among other things: „Diaspora means being called to the shaping of relational fullness in following Jesus. One’s own church can be experienced as part of a wider community with common roots. [...] In this way, the concept of diaspora can contribute to a renewal of evangelical identity in ecumenical openness: for a church that understands itself as interspersed in the diverse soils of this world.”¹³ It thus seeks to be a „community of witness and service” especially in the diaspora.¹⁴ Such a relational understanding of diaspora (described above under the notion of inclusivity), is finally determined by the notion of strangeness inherent here:

„The concept of ‚strangeness’ can be understood as a dimension of diasporic existence. A church that is aware not only of its dispersion and minority existence, but also of its foreignness, realises that it must

¹² Cf. *Theologie der Diaspora/Theology of Diaspora. CPCE study document to the define situation of Protestant churches in a pluralist Europe. Studiendokument der GEKE zur Standortbestimmung der evangelischen Kirche im pluralen Europa, EPD*, Wien 2019.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. IV.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. V.

always be a matter of finding a bridge between its own (ecclesial) language and the language of the respective society in order to do justice to the mission of the church to publicly proclaim the gospel. The term bridge implies an ambiguous experience here, implying both strangeness in the sense of separateness and connectedness.”¹⁵

Important bridge pillars are worship, church holidays and buildings, finally the educational activities of the church, the effort for reconciliation, pastoral care and diakonia. Theologically, the concept of a „public theology” is invoked to „reflect theologically on these diverse references and different contexts of church and to make them fruitful for the work of CPCE as a whole”. It „contains the hope that God also works beyond the churches in the world and society”. A theology of the diaspora designed as a public theology therefore „understands modern pluralism not only as a doom, but as a fruit of Christianity.” Socially, one wants to take positions in this way „without demanding a privileged status that is to be prescribed for all citizens with the help of state power or legislation.”

This evangelical concept of diaspora thus seems to correspond to the second inclusive variant of a „Creative Minority”. It wants to perceive a clear mission in the „here and now” and that in a profiled assignment to the respective contexts. In contrast to the first perspective along Toynbee’s or Spengler’s lines, Christianity here retains a world and time mission in the present and serves less as a storehouse of resources for a projected and, at least according to all predictive power, certainly not near future.

DISCUSSION AND OUTLOOK

The different concepts point centrally to the questions of church self-determination and identity in the face of urgent questions about the future. Similarly, as the Archbishop of Paderborn, Hans-Josef Becker, put it for the future process in his own diocese: „What are you there for, Church in the Archdiocese of Paderborn? For this

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

purpose, such a self-conception must certainly be oriented theologically on the part of the Catholic Church as a criteriology of content to Vatican II and its systematic as well as practical-theological reception (Key words: church as „sacrament of salvation”; „inclusive ecclesiology”) and could also learn along this line from a „theology of the people” according to Pope Francis. This is an open, future-oriented and decisive field in which, among other things, questions about the relationship between normativities (theology/practice; descriptiveness and normativity) as well as Christian universality and particularity would have to be balanced. Therefore: the issue arises and the Catholic Church is also faced with the decision whether to simply let such transformations happen or to interpret them as „signs of the times” with the help of a spiritual-theological reflection process. After or rather in the midst of Corona, the urgency becomes particularly apparent, because in all likelihood there will be no return to the pastoral or parish agenda. Unless, of course, the displacement strategies of a „dinner for one pastoral”, which already existed before, are sharpened.

Perhaps a reference in the early church will help in this situation. Certainly, history does not repeat itself and even more certainly it was a different time, precisely because religion had a completely different social and personal meaning. The heaven of gods was full, as we know. It was more a matter of religious plurality than secularity, which (has) got rid of religion or any transcendent reference point for various reasons. And yet the social situation was quite comparable in terms of social form, especially with regard to the questions it raised: How do we position ourselves vis-à-vis other religious communities and especially vis-à-vis a majority society that is above all different: lives differently, believes differently, shapes its life and time, structures itself, etc.? In the transition from the 3rd to the 4th century, Christians made up 6 out of 60 million people scattered throughout the Roman Empire. They were based on the following self-concept, which Christoph Marksches describes:

When they [the Christians at the turn of the third and fourth centuries; J.L.] looked into the future, they could not yet imagine that Christianity could become a majority religion. They had always claimed that Christianity was a ‘universal’ religion, but by universal they meant that anyone could become a Christian anywhere. They were proud that Christians could now be found everywhere. However, that did not mean that they actually expected everyone everywhere to become a Christian. Or in Claire Sontinel’s words, Christians of that time could imagine ‘a Christianity that was present in all parts of a [social; J. L.] universe, but not a social universe that was exclusively Christian.’ That idea came later. But it did come.¹⁶

In the context of the above distinctions and considerations, this statement or reference from the early church offers an interesting perspective. It does not start primarily after the question of a social formation or even with structures (as is currently happening almost without exception in the pastoral landscape of the German-speaking world), but with the inner self-image and spiritual attitude of Christians and thus of congregations. Universalism is interpreted completely differently here than we are used to in the centuries after Constantine and the formation as majority Christianity. Not everyone has to belong, not everything has to be Christian or become Christian sooner or later, but Christians experience and fulfil their mission in the pro-existence of their lives. In being salt or leaven, in contrast and assignment at the same time, possibly in an inclusive and discursive prophetic basic orientation. Finally: in vicarious prayer and in keeping heaven open in this sense in times when this dimension of life no longer appears to many as enrichment at all, but more and more fails all along the line.

¹⁶ Ch. Marksches, *Von der Mitte des 2. bis zum Ende des 3. Jahrhunderts*, [in:] B. Möller (ed.), *Ökumenische Kirchengeschichte*, Bd. 1: *Von den Anfängen bis zum Mittelalter*, Darmstadt 2006, p. 59-98, 60.

So, in approaching a minority situation, in the development of which the pandemic has obviously taken on the role of an accelerator, it could above all be a matter of clarifying inner images: How do pastoral teams, diocesan or parish committees relate to the keyword „universality”, in the sense of: do we really have to „reach” everyone? What do we want to reach people with or convince them of? Do they perhaps also have something to say to us, possibly even to tell us about God? Are we at the same time prepared to accept the secular sphere’s own laws or do we, as a church, act like a 19th century „state within a state”, as a church that thinks it can or must place its own laws above those of a democratic legal system?

The path into a minority situation thus radically throws us all back on ourselves and thus on our own self-images, church experiences, theological paradigms, etc. We need to talk about this and please do so. This needs to be discussed, and please not only when the pressure to act is too great and there is no time left. Adversity certainly teaches many things (praying, by the way, no longer does, as the above-mentioned data from the Corona period clearly showed), but it also often leads to decisions and actions for which one should have taken more time. Therefore: there would still be time to talk about these questions. The most important one would be: which minority do we want to become?

Key words: pandemic, COVID, Church, missio

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