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Common Witness of Churches in Germany Referring to Social Issues

Introduction

I have been asked to give a brief overview of joint efforts of the churches in Germany, especially, referring to social issues. In order to do that, first of all, I will briefly outline the church situation in the country and then move to the relations between the state and the churches in order to clarify the general conditions, which make joint efforts of the churches in Germany reasonably possible. Finally, in the third part, I will present the joint efforts at different levels and in different structures and provide some important examples. In the end, all will be then summarised again, and their impact will be evaluated.

1. The Church Situation in Germany

At the end of 2017, there were a total of about 47,25 million Christians in Germany¹. These are about 60 % of the population². Among them, about 21,54 million are members of the Evangelical (or Protestant) Church in Germany³ (EKD). 23,3 million belong to the Roman Catholic Church⁴; these are 28,3 % of the population. 1,5 million belong to the various Orthodox churches, the rest are the members of the Evangelical Free Churches and other Christian communities. This statistical survey makes it already clear that the Protestant Christians (Lutherans, Reformed, United), organized in regional or territorial churches, and the Roman Catholic Church are the two largest churches in Germany, compared to which all other Christian denominations play only a small role. These two, therefore, also have a long history in common with each other, while the other churches have slowly appeared in Germany only from the 19th century onwards. In order to better understand the ecumenical cooperation of the churches in Germany, the following should

¹ <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1233/umfrage/anzahl-der-christen-in-deutschland-nach-kirchenzugehoerigkeit/>.

² https://www.ekd.de/ekd_de/ds_doc/Gezaehlt_zahlen_und_fakten_2018.pdf.

³ The term „evangelical“ (in German: “evangelisch”) is used in Germany to refer to the traditional regional churches, which are either Lutheran, Reformed or United. See the following explanations.

⁴ https://www.ekd.de/ekd_de/ds_doc/Gezaehlt_zahlen_und_fakten_2018.pdf.

also be known: since the religious peace of Augsburg in 1555, the principle „*cuius regio, eius religio*” („*whose realm, his religion*”) was applied, which meant that the respective territorial sovereign (Germany consisted of different principalities and kingdoms at that time) determined to which denomination his subordinates belonged⁵. Thus, respectively, the lands of the German Empire were denominationally united. In other words, Lutherans, Reformed and Catholics lived on separate territories, and that meant, they lived nearby. Only after the Second World War, we could talk about something like the development of an ecumenical coexistence. That had to do with the fact that because of a huge movement of refugees from the former German areas in the East, a new denominational breakdown of population occurred, which was partially even politically driven: Catholic refugees were sent to traditional Evangelical areas and contrariwise. That led to the fact that since then people of different denominations lived on the same territory, thus, lived together and met each other in everyday life (school, work, etc.). I think it can be said that the so-called „mixed marriages” or „marriages between denominations” (therefore, marriages between Catholics and Protestants) that, hence, reappeared more and more frequently, have played a major role in the development of ecumenism and ecumenical cooperation in Germany.

2. Relation between State and the Churches

The historical development that I have just described and which has led to the everyday contacts between the churches is only one of the general conditions, in which today the churches in Germany bear witness together. The *second* general condition is the attitude of the state towards the churches, which I would also like to briefly describe.

Basically, church and state have been separated in Germany since 1919, as well as in most other European countries. However, the separation of state and church is organized differently in different countries. While, for example, there is a strict separation with the so-called laicist system in France, Germany has a model of cooperation between church and state. Principally, this is based on three points, namely: a) freedom of religion for citizens, b) the ideological neutrality of the state, and also c) self-determination and, respectively, equal rights for all religious communities.⁶

⁵ This was later changed so that when the ruler changed denomination (which in some cases happened for political or other reasons), all the people did not have to change denomination.

⁶ German constitutional law on religion is founded on the guarantee of freedom of religion (Article 4 para. 1 and 2 BL) and on the institutional constitutional law on religion according to Article 140 BL.

When the Weimar Constitution was adopted in 1919, i.e., when the separation of church and state was first introduced in Germany, the historically grown legal status of the churches was not supposed to be taken into consideration. Consequently, the churches were guaranteed a special organizational status under the name of a „public entity“. This status gives the churches – until today! – the possibility to build up their organization and actions under public law. This includes, in particular, the right to organize themselves, the ability to be an employer (i.e., to employ staff), parochial law (i.e.: the churches are allowed to determine the affiliation of their members through residence), and tax law (that is the right to levy taxes on their members). As all religious communities are treated equally, this status can be granted to all religious communities under certain conditions⁷.

In detail, the relations of the state with the churches are regulated by agreements; these are the so-called Concordats with the Vatican for the Catholic Church, and church agreements in effect for the Evangelical Churches. The following points are particularly important in them:

a) The self-determination of the churches, which can organize themselves and can also have their own labour law, which can be different from the state labour law; for example, this includes the right to employ only members of a particular church, or also the right of the Catholic Church not to employ women as priests.

b) Religious education: Religious education in Germany is the competency of the state, i.e., religious teaching must be offered at state schools. For this reason, (according to Article 7 Paragraph 3 of the Constitution) religious education is a regular subject at public schools in most federal lands⁸. However, this is not a privilege of the churches, but is subject to state law and control from the state. The state must – as for the other subjects as well – provide teaching resources and bear the costs. However, the churches and religious communities are responsible for the content of the lessons. This means that anyone who wants to become a religious teacher, basically, needs the consent of the church. And the churches also determine the content of religious teaching. Also, at state universities, the churches determine who will be a professor at a theological faculty.

⁷ „It needs an organizational structure with reliable representative bodies that will endure even after the change of the acting persons. Furthermore, there must be sufficient financial resources available (or at least foreseeable). The guarantee of duration can also be seen in the fact that a community has already passed the first generational change, i.e. after a period of about 30 years. A further indicator is the intensity of religious life practised. For the number of members a guideline value of one per mille of the population is assumed“, see Hendrik Munsonius, “Beziehungen zwischen Kirche und Staat in Deutschland und in der Perspektive der Errichtung eines neuen Europas“, <http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/pub/mon/goepr/2012-3-munsonius.pdf>.

⁸ There are exceptions for the federal lands of Bremen and Berlin, where the regulations are slightly different.

c) Church taxes: Church tax is collected for the churches through the state financial administration. In return, the state receives an administrative fee from the churches.

d) Military pastoral care: Pastoral care, as a form of pastoral care for people in special situations, has a long tradition in German armed forces. In 1957, the „Military Pastoral Care Agreement” was signed between the Federal Government and the EKD (Evangelical Church in Germany). Unlike in other countries, military chaplains in Germany have the status of civilians. They do not conform with any instructions from the armed forces and do not have to undergo basic military training. The costs of pastoral care in the armed forces are mainly borne by the state.

In this model, therefore, state and church see each other as independent bodies and have their own organisational structure. However, the organizational separation does not exclude cooperation between the state and the church. On the contrary, cooperation is rather necessary when a certain context of life concerns both state and church responsibilities. Thus, the participation of religious communities and communities with a certain worldview in state institutions is always necessary when religious-ideological questions are concerned. The state cannot act alone in such cases, because its ideological neutrality prevents it from identifying itself with a particular religion or ideology or even from forming a state religion or state ideology. The assessment of religious and ideological questions is not the responsibility of the state, but of the religious and ideological communities, and their members⁹.

The churches, therefore, take an active part in social life and represent their position on current issues, e.g. in an ethics committee or in the broadcasting council of public radio stations. Their opinion is also asked during hearings in the committees of the German parliament (Bundestag). However, this activity is not limited to expressing opinions only, but also to active diaconal work, i.e., basically, the sponsorship of kindergartens and hospitals. In Germany, the so-called subsidiarity principle applies here, which means that the state takes action only when the actions of independent, non-governmental sponsors are impossible. However, since these are state tasks, the church and the diaconical institutions are entitled to state reimbursement of costs and support. This means, for example, if the church runs a kindergarten in a certain location, the state will not set up an additional kindergarten, but will support the existing church kindergarten¹⁰.

⁹ Comp. <http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/pub/mon/goepr/2012-3-munsonius.pdf>.

¹⁰ Comp. <https://www.ekd.de/Aktuelle-Themen-zwischen-Staat-und-Kirche-11137.htm>.

So much about the general conditions, under which the churches in Germany are or can be active in the society.

3. Joint structures

What I had described so far, referred to each church as an individual institution. Thus, it was about the possibilities for each church to run operations as an individual organization in German society. However, in the time of growing networking, it is becoming more and more important to talk and act together within the society, as long as there are common ambitions and interests. In addition, since the beginning of the 20th century at the latest, the churches have realised that the Christian witness is only credible when the Christians speak with one voice, i.e. act together and represent together what they can represent together.

The following ecumenical structures have, therefore, been formed in this respect:

a) On one side, there are close cooperation and regular meetings between the ECG (Evangelical Church in Germany)¹¹ and the German Bishops' Conference of the Roman Catholic Church (GBC). Here, they exchange information, especially on social issues, and plan joint projects. For example, there is a number of joint statements on social issues: these texts are available online at <https://www.ekd.de/gemeinsame-texte-EKD-DBK-23016.htm>.

The first text, posted there, dates from 1985 and is entitled „Taking Responsibility for Creation”. Firstly, the environmental crisis and misguided developments in previous approaches to solving it are analyzed here, then the question of ecology as an ethical challenge is explained, and, on the basis of the Christian message of creation, redemption and completion of the world, common to both churches, demands for a new way of thinking and acting are set out. For example, a new way of thinking concerning a lifestyle, that also includes renunciation, is demanded, as well as ecologically compatible economic activity.

Very well known in Germany in the series of these collaborative texts is e.g. the text „God is a Friend of Life” from 1989, which is understood as an answer to the „Challenges and Tasks for the Protection of Life”. From this document one can learn quite well how the two churches, which have quite different opinions e.g. on the question when life begins, can vastly agree. For example, they both say “According to God’s will, no abortion should take

¹¹ The ECG (EKD) is the association of all Protestant regional churches in Germany. The regional churches are each independent in their internal administration and in their relationship to the respective federal land on whose territory they are located. But they have entrusted the ECG (EKD) with relations with the state at the federal level and ecumenical relations at the national and international level.

place”¹² and agree to offer counselling to affected women. Furthermore, this document also gives indications regarding measures in social policy, family policy and women's policy, which they consider as necessary ones.

Another important common text about the economic and social situation in Germany was published in 1997 under the title „For a future in solidarity and justice”. As a follow-up, in 2014, another common statement regarding economic and social issues under the title „Shared responsibility for a fair society” appeared.

Among the recent publications, I would like to mention a „Help and Form” for Christian patient care, a renewed version of 2018, which was jointly prepared not only by the ECG (*EKD*) and GBC (*DBK*), but also the Working Group of Christian Churches in Germany (*WGC*) was involved. This hand-out is about the disease-prevention service for elderly people. It is, mainly, about the question of what to do in situations when a person can no longer decide for himself or herself regarding what medical measures should or should not be taken on him or her. For example, people can decide – and there is a form for this purpose – that in certain cases no life-prolonging measures should be taken or who should look after them.

- a) Here I must explain now about another important institution for the common witness of the churches in Germany:

The „Working Group of Christian Churches” was founded in 1948 by the Protestant regional churches and some free churches. Its creation was connected with the foundation of the World Council of Churches (*WCC*) and was intended to be a „National Council of Churches”, the way such associations were called in other countries. Here, the idea of searching for unity was at the forefront. In 1974, the Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Germany also became members of *WGC (ACK)*. Today *WGC (ACK)* consists of 17 member churches and 6 guest members. It is, therefore, an institution which enables all churches in Germany to jointly influence the society.

The main projects, undertaken so far in this context, are:

- The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which is coordinated by the *WGC (ACK)* every year by publishing the worship and prayer texts (which are prepared by an international ecumenical group) and organizing a common ecumenical worship service at the federal level.

¹² https://www.ekd.de/gottistfreund_1989_freund6_2.html.

- The Day of Creation: Since 2010, the WGC (*ACK*) has been organizing annual ecumenical services on the Day of Creation at the federal level, the introduction of which is recommended by the WCC to its member churches upon the initiative of the Orthodox churches.
 - The Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace: Here the WGC (*ACK*) has taken up the idea of the WCC's Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace and organizes various events for this purpose.
 - The recognition of Baptism: In 2007, a written agreement was reached between a large number of WGC (*ACK*) member churches to recognize baptism. This was the result of a longer work, initiated by the WGC (*ACK*). The text was signed during a festive service. It must be said, however, that the Baptists and Mennonites did not sign it, while the Catholic and Evangelical churches, the Orthodox churches of the Byzantine tradition and some of the Oriental Orthodox churches did.
 - Patient care: I have already mentioned the text on patient care above.
 - Issues of inter-religious dialogue: Apart from that, the WGC (*ACK*) repeatedly takes up questions of inter-religious cooperation in Germany. For example, there is the project „Do you know who I am?“, which the WGC (*ACK*) carries out together with the two other major religions – Islam and Judaism.
 - Other social issues are often raised by the WGC (*ACK*) on one-time conferences.
- b) I would like to mention another example of the churches' joint efforts on social issues: Upon the initiative of the GBC (*DBK*), the ECG (*EKD*) and the Greek Orthodox Metropolis in Germany, the „Intercultural Week“ has been held every last week in September since 1975, with around 5,000 events in about 500 towns and communities. In the meantime, it is supported and preserved by various other organisations and also includes a „Day of the Refugee“.

4. Summary

I would like to summarize in the form of a thesis what I have presented in more detail above:

- The common witness of the churches in Germany is based on the basic conditions, established by the historical development and the form of government.
- Church cooperation has both practical and theological reasons.

- Common witness takes place at several levels: national, regional, and local.
- Common witness takes place, on the one hand, bi-laterally between the Evangelical and the Catholic Churches, but, more and more, also multilaterally, mainly at the level of the WGC (ACK).
- Common witness includes common attitudes as well as practical actions. The following questions are in the foreground:
 - Environment (protection)
 - Social issues
 - Migration/refugee issue
 - Dealing with life and death

At the same time, the question must also be asked how „effective” – if I may call it that – joint efforts are. I cannot offer a more in-depth analysis in the context of this lecture, but, in principle, the churches still have quite a large social influence in Germany. This is, particularly, true of the two big churches (the Roman Catholic and the Evangelical Churches), and, therefore, also of their joint efforts. How much the two are already seen as „one” church is shown, for example, by the fact that it often happens that people leave one of the two churches on the grounds that a scandal has taken place in the other church. However, it would be theologically desirable that the work on the WGC (ACK) level, i.e. the multilateral work, could have just as much influence. But that then depends on how much money the member churches of the WGC (ACK) make available for such common work. There is certainly still some work to be done here before the fourth commitment of the „Charta Oecumenica” is actually implemented. This reads: „We commit ourselves to act together at all levels of church life, where the conditions are right and the principles of faith or greater expediency do not contradict”.¹³ I would like to underline this commitment at the end of my presentation as an impetus for further contemplation about joint efforts and, thus, the common witness of the Churches.

¹³ The Charta Oecumenica is an ecumenical agreement at European level, which was adopted in 2001 by the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the Council of the Bishops’ Conference of Europe (Catholic). Guidelines for growing cooperation among the churches in Europe, 2001, the CEC (KEK) and the Council of the Bishops’ Conference of Europe, https://www.oekumene-ack.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Charta_Oecumenica/Charta_Oecumenica.pdf.