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Polarisation beyond the Pandemic? Fissures within the German Public and the Role of Public Theology

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Abstract:

After some initial background information on the relation of church and state in the German context, the article examines reactions by churches and other Christian groups in Germany to the Covid-19 containment measures. While representatives of mainline churches focussed on consolation in the crisis and support state measures, a minority of radical voices acted in a polarising way, offering interpretations in terms of spiritual warfare, betrayal of the gospel, and conspiracy theories, and regarding themselves as victims of health policy. It is argued that the Christian tradition is in itself ambiguous and can be used in destructive ways, and that clarification of concepts is a task of public theology. The paper concludes by pointing out opportunities for the contribution of religions to a critical assessment of the handling of this crisis in the state and society.

Keywords:

Covid-19 pandemic, containment measures, Christian fundamentalism, conspiracy theories, “Querdenker”

1. Prologue: the pandemic, the public, and polarisation

It was an attempt to regain public support. The ad campaign on billboards, in radio and TV spots run by the German Federal government before the supposedly last Corona winter was meant to feature people like you and me in order to encourage others to boost their Corona protection another time: On 84 subsequent days, starting in October 2022, a shop owner, a musician, a baker, and many others, completed the sentence “Ich schütze

mich, weil ...” (I protect myself, because ...).¹ However, reactions in the press and in public media were often sarcastic, implying that this was a last attempt to instill panic in people’s hearts. Government PR seemed to have lost touch with the public mood. This occurrence is characteristic for the public impact of government measures against the pandemic. Instead of strengthening an idea of togetherness, the debates connected with Corona measures have revealed an increasing polarisation in the German public, of which *Querdenker*-demonstrations (literally: “mavericks”, or “queer thinkers”, an appellation used for those who deny the danger of contagion or the use of vaccines) and Monday walks (belittled as “*Spaziergänge*”) organised by opponents of the measures are the most striking examples.

In this, Christian denominations, too, have played a role. Even in the German situation, where the relation between the Christian churches and the state is one of critically constructive cooperation, the pandemic has exposed fissures in this relationship. The hypothesis brought to test here is that such fissures cannot exclusively be attributed to the extreme situation of the pandemic, but rather, are indicative of underlying and persisting tensions within society, of which the churches are not exempt. In addition, and to the surprise of many representatives of the Christian churches in Germany, reactions of some Christian groups brought a dark side in the Christian imagery to the fore. In some cases, Christian interpretations of the situation made use of eschatological vocabulary in a polarising way, with clear-cut borders between “us” and “them”. In such a scenario, the Christian religion, rather than providing a basis for solidarity and togetherness, was used to drive a wedge between different groups in society, and thus played an ambiguous role.

In what follows, I will give a brief overview of the course of the Corona-related debates in Germany (2), followed by background information on the cooperation of church and state in the German context and on Christian denominations within this context (3). After some methodological warnings (4), I shall present a number of particularly extremist Christian

1 A download option for the first motifs and background information on the campaign can be found at <https://www.bundesgesundheitsministerium.de/presse/pressemitteilungen/neue-kampagne-gibt-84-gruende-fuer-corona-schutz.html> (last accessed Jan. 26th, 2023).

interpretations of the crisis, which I will contrast with more moderate voices (5). Finally, I will try to give an assessment of the effects of such uses of the Christian tradition for the role of religion in public and for public theology (6).

2. Phases

During the different phases of the pandemic, the fronts between defenders and opponents of government measures shifted.

1. During and after the first lockdown – which in Germany was the fiercest of all, with shops remaining closed and travel restrictions –, it was above all social and economical hardship that caused protests of people who owned small and medium-sized businesses. Protest was rarely outspoken; due to hefty fines, businesses, by and large, complied with measures. In the public square, police were enforcing existing regulations. In this phase, religious assemblies were (not without some reason) identified as potential hotspots. Consequently, church representatives had to balance support for the state measures with stating the importance of physical assemblies for religious communities.
2. In a second phase, the churches belonged to the few groups that were allowed to host public assemblies at all, even though under strict sanitary restrictions which were, by and large, observed.
3. When, in a third phase, vaccines came out, the debates centered about prioritisation of system-relevant professions and vulnerable groups. Since some tried to get to the top of the line, church appeals to solidarity, consideration, and attention to the interest of others were not uncalled for.
4. With the debate about obligatory vaccinations for certain professional groups, especially for those working in healthcare, sensitivities about physical integrity were spurred. The fact that the actual numbers of people willing to get vaccinated stayed behind the expectations, triggered debates about a moral obligation for vaccination. In this situation, a whole spectrum of positions could be observed. On one end of this spectrum, former President of the Council of the

Protestant Church in Germany, Wolfgang Huber, coined the term “vaccination is an act of neighbourly love”. On the other end, in contrast, among some evangelical and fundamentalist Christians polarising interpretations arose, combining scepticism against vaccines with concepts of religious salvation (“faith in Christ is stronger than vaccines”).

5. Since all containment measures were lifted in April 2023, the debates have subsided, and what was once debated so heavily seems like a distant past. Many, however, have demanded that a debate be lead about what went wrong in dealing with the pandemic – not only to be better prepared next time, but also to name wrongs and injustices in order to come to terms with them.² This, to me, seems to corroborate the above hypothesis that tensions persist.

In the course of these phases, the atmosphere of the debates started getting more hostile. This was exacerbated by the fact that for an increasing number among the population, the logic of the measures taken was not always transparent. Partly, this was due to the fact that infection prevention is a task of the federal states *Bundesländer*, or *Länder*. not of the federal government, and regulations were far from unanimous, with some of the Minister-Presidents clearly trying to make their mark. But part of the irritation was also caused by the fact that in order to have applicable regulations, certain lines must be drawn, which are always arbitrary to some extent.

Moreover, the two most important German councils for ethical advice, the National Ethics Council (*Deutscher Ethikrat*) and the Göttingen Academy of Science (*Göttinger Akademie der Wissenschaften*) published contradictory statements with regard to the measures that needed to be taken. Although conflicting views are a fruitful element of scientific discourse, this created uncertainty in a situation where politicians and the population alike were hoping for evidence-based politics. In the ensuing debate, protesters had to be reminded of the fact that scientific knowledge can help, but not replace political decisions.

² <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/corona-massnahmen-aufarbeitung-pandemie-lockdown-100.html> (last accessed Jan. 9th, 2025).

Finally, in the debate about vaccinations, it became clear that government – including the Ministry of Health – had knowingly overestimated the effect of vaccinations. While medical experts as well as the National Ethics Council had made it clear that vaccination is not an absolute protection, but reduces the risk for contagion and for a severe progression of the disease, the impression in the public debate was that vaccination amounted to an immunisation and was the ticket to avoiding other measures, like reduction of contact or wearing a mask. In addition, despite the warning of experts, many did not realise that the vaccine would have to be readapted to the ever mutating virus. Consequently, when the need for a booster was discussed in December 2021 and January 2022, and when, later on in 2022, even a fourth vaccination was recommended for vulnerable groups, people felt they had been fooled before (Kaube and Kieserling 2022, 132–134). In 2024, the wrangling about publishing internal protocols of the national Public-Health-Institute (*Robert-Koch-Institut*) lead to a resurgence of the debate.³

It was above all, but not exclusively, in the first and in the fourth phase that arguments of Christian groups started to played a role in the public discussion. These arguments, as well as the groups they came from, deserve a closer look.

3. The churches and the public

3.1. Church and state in Germany

Traditionally, in the Federal Republic, the Christian denominations have been a critically constructive partner for the German state authorities. This cooperation rests on treaties between church and state, dating back to the Weimar Republic and reinstated after World War II. For example, the German Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*) explicitly provides for religious education in public schools in accordance with the tenets of religious communities.

3 <https://www.aerzteblatt.de/nachrichten/156637/RKI-veroeffentlicht-restliche-Protokolle-des-Coronakrisenstabes> (last accessed Jan. 9th, 2025).

At the same time, it is important to note that “Christian denominations”, in the German context, normally refers to the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church in Germany with its different member churches (*Landeskirchen*). Even though many other religious communities are acknowledged as statutory bodies by the state,⁴ the “traditional” or “mainline churches” not only have far more members,⁵ but are seen as more influential for public life and as traditionally closer to the state than the supposedly more independent (Evangelical) Free Churches (*Freikirchen*). According to German church historian Gisa Bauer, this shows an implicit hierarchy in the public mindset regarding the relevance of the churches (Bauer 2021, 82). Still, in many cases, these Free Churches have the same overall attitude to the state, working constructively together for the common good.

3.2. Tensions

Christian reactions to the early phase of the pandemic have already been described and analysed extensively (Kunert 2020; Kurschus et al. 2022). Unlike in many other countries, Christian groups in Germany by and large complied with government regulations during the lockdown – although in Austria and Germany, there were a number of hotspots linked to pentecostal and evangelical⁶ churches⁷. Most church authorities did not want their congregations to become Corona hotspots. However, with the pandemic

4 See <https://www.bmi.bund.de/DE/themen/heimat-integration/staat-und-religion/koerperschaftsstatus/koerperschaftsstatus-node.html> for the legal implications of that state and for lists of the religious communities who hold it in the different Länder (last accessed: Jan. 26th, 2023).

5 While in 2020, the German Protestant Landeskirchen had 20.2 million members (Roman Catholics in Germany: 22.2 million), the membership numbers of the Evangelical Freikirchen did not exceed 1.8 million (https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Zahlen%20und%20Fakten/Kirchliche%20Statistik/Allgemein_-_Zahlen_und_Fakten/AH-325_DBK_BRO_ZuF_2020-2021_Ansicht.pdf, p. 71 and https://www.remid.de/info_zahlen/protestantismus/ (both accessed June 28th, 2023).

6 In order to distinguish the German terms “evangelisch” and “evangelikal”, both of which can be rendered as “evangelical” in English, I am using „protestant“ as opposed to „evangelical“, with the former term referring to the member churches of the Protestant Church in Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, EKD) and the latter to groups which either describe themselves as “evangelikal” or are termed so by others.

7 <https://www.nachrichten.at/oberoesterreich/coronavirus-freikirchen-cluster-bereits-mit-99-infizierten;art4,3271486> (last accessed Nov. 12, 2022); <https://www.domradio>

proceeding and containment measures looking increasingly haphazard, Christian reactions, too, became less supportive of state measures.

Thus, in the course of the pandemic, a well-established routine in the cooperation of church and state became precarious. In this process, some voices from the Free Churches, who, for the above reasons, do not normally get as much public attention as representatives from the mainline churches, and who were by no means representative for all of the Free Churches, came to the fore and had a somewhat bigger impact than they would have had without a situation of nationwide crisis. This was exacerbated by the fact that during the pandemic, voices from the political right (*Alternative for Germany*, AfD) and from other opponents of Corona measures caught a lot of media attention. Since there are Christians among these, their arguments sometimes aligned with Christian convictions (Fritz 2021a).

These debates, however, point beyond the Corona crisis which triggered them. For it was well before the pandemic that authors of the Christian right formulated a counter-consensus against what they termed a “leftist”, lukewarm mainline Christianity of the church establishment, arguing instead for Christian conservatism, patriotism and assertiveness (Dirsch et al. 2018; Dirsch et al. 2019). Some of the arguments brought forward within this movement, diagnosed by Martin Fritz as a version of identitarian Christianity (Fritz 2021c, 12f. 56f), reappear during the Corona debates (see 5.2, below). Thus, these fissures within Christianity seem to be brought to the fore, rather than caused, by the pandemic.

These findings are rounded out by recent sociological research. While, for Germany, there is no evidence for the formation of polarised blocs among the population, smaller groups at the political margins use a situation that is prone to polarisation to advance the thesis of a divided and polarised society (Kaube and Kieserling 2022, 128). At the same time, the pandemic *per se* is not the sole cause for the lack of trust sketched at the outset of this paper. Rather, the pandemic has become a “triggering point” (Mau et al. 2023) at which indignation and dissent, tinged with strong emotions, come to the fore. Thus, aided by media attention, radical voices which aim at

amplifying existing lines of conflict and controversy produce the passion for anxiety (“*Angstlust*”) they purport to diagnose (Kaube and Kieserling 2022, 9. 126).

This interplay of causes and effects deserves closer attention, especially since Christian voices have a part in it. However, when assessing the role of Christianity in this situation, a number of methodological precautions need to be taken.

4. Methodological reflections

When, in the following section, some of the more extreme arguments brought forth by Christian voices are dealt with, it is important to keep in mind that the groups these arguments come from represent a very small percentage within (protestant) Christianity in Germany. Nor can such arguments easily be attributed to one or several congregations exclusively. Rather, in many cases, the trenches run through denominations and congregations. As the case of pastor Bernhard Elser shows⁸, there are radical voices even within the moderate *Landeskirchen*. Among evangelical and pentecostal groups, there is a similar spectrum. While during the pandemic, some of their churches formed an initiative explicitly calling for moderation in the debate,⁹ others organised in a group of “Christians Resisting” (*Christen im Widerstand*), aiming at “resistance against the Corona-madness”.¹⁰ “Cooperation Worldviews” (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft Weltanschauungsfragen, AG Welt*), in contrast, a missionary work helping “victims of sects, cults, and worldviews [...] to find freedom in belief in Jesus Christ”,¹¹ does not seem to present a similar spectrum. Among the *AG Welt* publications consulted, all were on a extremist and radical side in their critical verdict on Corona containment measures.

8 <https://www.idea.de/artikel/fas-bezeichnet-evangelikalen-pfarrer-als-querprediger> (last accessed Jan. 28th, 2023).

9 The statement issued by the *Initiativgruppe* can be found at <https://www.bfp-aktuell.de/details/verantwortung-wahrnehmen-freiheit-gestalten> (last accessed Jan. 28th, 2023).

10 <https://christen-im-widerstand.de/ziele/> (last accessed Jan. 28th, 2023).

11 <https://agwelt.de/ag-kompakt/> (last accessed Jan. 28th, 2023).

Thus, in the analysis of the documents consulted, a number of precautions have to be taken:

While it is true that many of the more extreme positions are advanced by groups who describe themselves as “evangelical”, and that some of these positions are clearly fundamentalist, critical statements or even *Querdenker*-opinions must not be ascribed to evangelical or pentecostal groups by and large. Among evangelical and pentecostal groups, the views are very differentiated. On the other hand, opponents and supporters of anti-corona measures can be found in all groups, also, but not exclusively, among evangelicals, and not within evangelicalism as such (Fritz 2021a, 25).

Generally, in the German context, evangelicalism and fundamentalism must not be conflated with one another (Hempelman 2021; Fritz 2021b; Bauer 2021, 85f). In terms of doctrine, there is an overlap between certain views of evangelicalism and fundamentalism, such as an exclusivist understanding of Christianity over and against other religions or the inerrancy of Scripture, together with the rejection of historical criticism of the bible. Also, institutionally, there is an overlap in “evangelical” views held by some congregations within the *Landeskirchen* and some Free Churches.

For heuristic purposes, and following Martin Fritz, I understand fundamentalist views as characterised by

- a. claiming absolute, unassailable, “*objective*” *fundaments* of faith which, by virtue of their normative authority, are beyond doubt. In the orientation they provide for the believer, one might add, following von Sinner and Zeferino (von Sinner and Zeferino 2022), these *fundaments* are *not* tinged by *ambiguity*.
- b. These *fundaments* are meant to *secure faith* against all alternative worldviews that might threaten the believer’s convictions.
- c. Particularly, they are clearly *antimodernist*, denying a plurality of choices in worldviews.

- d. This leads the adherent of such views into *mental isolation* – an attitude that is accepted as the price to pay for certainty of one’s convictions.
- e. This isolation results in strong *dualisms*, such as true and false, we and they, believers and non-believers, connected with an *exclusivism of salvation* for the own community.
- f. This self-assurance rests on a *positivism of truth and revelation* which
- g. reveals a rather *cognitivist understanding* of religion: Religious belief consists in holding certain fundamentals to be true.
- h. In its antecedent decision for the fundamentals of faith and against critical reasoning, fundamentalism is characterised by *religious decisionism*.

This description entails the diagnosis that especially b and c are strongly defensive positions, resulting from the fear of one’s views being called into question. Moreover, f, g and h imply that the believer is, in a certain way, in command of God’s revelation, rather than being subject to it – an observation, however, that fundamentalist themselves would strongly contest by claiming that they are merely obedient to God’s commandments. In a critical vein, one might argue that the latter holds for all religious beliefs, following what Niklas Luhmann calls a process of invisibilisation (Luhmann 2000). Formally, this is not wrong. But generally, in religious belief, resorting to God’s revelation introduces a position from outside the believer which turns religious experience into a dialectics of being supported *and* being called into question – in Christian terms: of law and gospel. Thus, religious belief does not per se amount to self-affirmation. Rather, one might say that in Christianity, a critical self-assessment of one’s life in faith is rooted in the biblical tradition.

Still, while it is always tempting to view extreme positions as a deviation or a perversion of accepted standards – fundamentalism as a simplification of Christianity, or populism as a perversion of democracy –, these phenomena should be regarded within their own logic (Hedetoft 2020, 109). While it is certainly necessary to contrast extreme positions with different views within Christianity, it is equally important to understand the motives behind holding extreme positions. To do justice to this point, one would

have to conduct a qualitative empirical study on the Corona-related statements of Christian groups. This, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, the criteria according to which I interpret the material I consulted are derived from categories established within the dogmatic tradition and would have to be checked against categories developed from the material itself to gain a fuller perspective.

One more caveat is in place: Even though the arguments advanced by critics of Corona measures often present considerable overlap with those of populist movements, both phenomena should be regarded separately of each other.

Finally, I need to admit that the sources that I have consulted so far are rather diverse in nature (individual statements, church declarations, newsletters, sermons, and youtube videos). Consequently, the evidence produced in this article can only be regarded as exemplary.

5. Observations on theological arguments during the debates on Corona measures

The voices presented in this section are generally the more extreme ones, which, again, are not the majority. But their effect is amplified by media attention. To give an impression of the broad range of the debates, I will occasionally contrast these radical voices with more moderate contributions from other Christian groups.

5.1. Christian imagery:

- a. Typically, in fundamentalist interpretations, the situation during the pandemic is depicted in apocalyptic scenarios. For a “minority of evangelical Christians” (Fritz 2021a, 24), the worldwide containment measures show the work of the Antichrist. This eschatological figure is equated with a worldly system which leads Christians astray, with

the God of health,¹² with Big Pharma and the “satanic power of obligatory vaccinations”,¹³ or simply with wealth¹⁴.

- b. The dualistic element of the elect versus the mass of perdition is present in the gnostic view of the major part of humanity living in darkness or even imbecility (“geistige Umnachtung”)¹⁵. As I pointed out, this is a characteristic of fundamentalist tendencies that helps to create certainty in an uncertain situation: At least we know what to do and what to stay with, namely belief in Christ, not in a “religion of health”.¹⁶ – In contrast, the more moderate statement issued by the *Initiativgruppe* of evangelical and pentecostal communities encourages others “to more equanimity and faith in Christ” (Initiativgruppe 2020, 4).
- c. The certainty of belonging on the right side coincides with the claim to know the truth.¹⁷ Thus, religion is used to create the impression of an unequivocal situation, whereas in fact, the situation is fundamentally uncertain and Christianity, like other religions, ought to be understood merely as a different way of experiencing an unprecedented experience (Jüngel 2008).
- d. This certainty is undergirded with direct references to Scripture. As pastor Eberhard Kleina, member of the movement “No Other Gospel” (*Kein anderes Evangelium*) puts it: “I am surprised how much in the bible directly applies to today.”¹⁸
- e. Some of the scenarios depicted by radical voices seem grotesque, involving transhumanism as an element of policy or attempts towards

12 Thomas Schneider (newsletter AG Welt May 2nd, 2022).

13 Newsletter AG Welt, April 9th, 2022.

14 Thomas Schneider, sermon preached on Easter Monday, 2022 (newsletter AG Welt Apr 18th, 2022).

15 Newsletter AG Welt, April 18th, 2022.

16 newsletter AG Welt, April 9th, 2022.

17 Eberhard Kleina, newsletter AG Welt, June 2nd, 2022; “The truth will make you free” (Peter Hahne, newsletter AG Welt, Apr 18th, 2022).

18 newsletter AG Welt, June 2nd, 2022.

worldwide slavery¹⁹. Even though I have named mental isolation above as one of the traits of fundamentalism, it is hard to see how such views could be defended or what their point of reference in the Christian tradition is.

Psychologically, it is understandable that in a situation of unprecedented crisis in which routines of medical advice and treatment fail, people turn to oversimplifying explanations, hoping to regain certainty. This, however, creates problems on the level of religion and on the level of societal life. As for *religion*, a view is propagated which is free of ambiguities and denigrates rational, if falsifiable, solutions suggested by science and politics (von Sinner and Zeferino 2022). In their application of Scripture, these voices are free of hermeneutical considerations. Granted, as Martin Fritz points out, one must not deny that those who advance such opinions are driven by truly Christian motives, and that they, just like their critics, find themselves within the interminable debate about the essence of Christianity (Fritz 2021c, 56). But by extricating themselves from self-critical reflection on their use of Scripture, thereby claiming an unassailable stance, fundamentalist voices leave the common ground of dealing with “healthy” differences within the Christian tradition. Acknowledging the authority of Scripture is not to be conflated with presuming authority oneself (Zeller et al. 2020, 331). – On the *societal* level, religious convictions thus contribute to a polarisation within society, as shall be explored in the following section.

5.2. Christianity and society:

The statements examined here reveal an understanding of religious life in a pluralistic, religiously neutral society that is characterised by a strong opposition of “us” and “them” (with the identification of “them” changing, depending on the context). Moreover, the views expressed in these statements document a simplistic understanding of processes of opinion-forming within a highly differentiated society, and of the role of society for the formation of a personal identity as well as a group identity.

19 Eberhard Kleina (newsletter AG Welt, June 2nd, 2022); Newsletter AG Welt, Apr. 18th, 2022.

- a. Apocalyptic scenarios of spiritual warfare presuppose an oversimplified, dualistic contrast of “us” and “them”.
- b. The historical and political implications of such a warfare are clear-cut. While present-day Germany is viewed as a totalitarian state in the image of Nazi regime or present-day China,²⁰ those who understand themselves as resisting Christians (*Christen im Widerstand*) claim to stand in Bonhoeffer’s tradition of resistance against the Third Reich (Fritz 2020, 452), thereby implying a victimisation of their own stance.
- c. Interestingly enough, within the “us-them”-dualism, often the same categories of interpretation are used by both sides of the spectrum. While the containment measures are thought to be not only protective for the individual, but also an expression of solidarity and respect for others, opponents of the measures regard them as a tool of othering and ostracizing.²¹
- d. Likewise, even when the same facts are referred to in giving an assessment of the present situation, their framing with regard to religion and society is very different in the case of the mainline churches and of some of the more extreme fundamentalist voices. For example, the many deaths and the helplessness in view of the measures of contact restriction are interpreted as a cause for grief in the bishops’ sermons during the memorial service in *Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche* in Berlin (Bedford-Strohm 2021; Bätzing 2021). The newsletters of *AG Welt*, in contrast, place this in the context of conspiracy theories about elites aiming at a new world order. Thus, the contingency of life which in Christianity throughout the centuries has been addressed by calling God the Lord over life and death (1 Sam 2:6; Rom 14:8) or by distinguishing the earthly from the heavenly realm, is disambiguated by attributing death and danger to those who

20 Thomas Schneider (newsletter AG Welt, April 18th, 2022).

21 „Gemeinsam wenden wir uns [...] gegen diskriminierende, sanktionierende und einschüchternde Maßnahmen durch gesellschaftliche Gruppen, staatliche und kirchliche Institutionen gegen Menschen, die ihr Recht wahrnehmen und sich nicht impfen lassen.“ (<https://www.bibelundbekenntnis.de/aktuelles/zum-aktuellen-corona-konflikt/>, last accessed Jan. 28th, 2023).

are plotting against humanity, or, more precisely, against those who belong to Christ. Thus, again, the adherents of radical views depict themselves as victims.

- e. Unsurprisingly, revisions of scientific views and of the assessment of the situation are interpreted differently. *AG Welt* understands a re-assessment of the National Ethics Council's position as a turn of 180^o,²² whereas in statements by the Protestant Church in Germany, this is interpreted as careful consideration of the pros and cons of containment measures.
- f. The strategy of reversing accusations is also used when the positive counter-image of a life in harmony is depicted, together with the factors that might endanger it. Radical critics of corona containment measures, too, accuse their opponents of drawing a wedge into society and argue for harmony to be regained.²³ However, whereas the more moderate *Initiativgruppe* suggests that in retrospect, not all measures will prove adequate, and that especially restrictions of freedom will need subsequent discussion in society (Initiativgruppe 2020, 6.), radical voices are unambiguous as to where the cause of unrest lies. Government information is labelled as lies and semi-truths.²⁴ Unsurprisingly, the Protestant Church in Germany is accused of being “faithful to the government and one-sided” as Fritz reports (Fritz 2021a, 26) and, consequently, of spreading fake news about the efficacy of vaccinations. According to some conspiracy theories, the government acts as part of a worldwide National Socialist and Communist (!) network and the public media are part of Nazi propaganda²⁵.

As I pointed out above (3.2), such accusations – especially against a “leftist” course of the “elitist” mainline churches – are not novel, but were voiced already before the pandemic. The examples in this section show that

22 „[D]ie 180-Grad-Wende des Deutschen Ethikrates und der Bildungsalarm der Schulen schreien danach, die Kritiker der regierungsamtlichen Verschwörungstheorien zu rehabilitieren“ (Peter Hahne, Newsletter AG Welt May 2nd, 2022).

23 Peter Hahne (newsletter AG Welt, May 2nd, 2022).

24 Peter Hahne as quoted in Newsletter AG Welt, April 18th, 2022.

25 Newsletter AG Welt, April 18th, 2022.

what is going on here is more than a mere collision of opinions. Rather, the very mechanisms in which societal consensus could be reached – the well-balanced interplay of state, churches as statutory bodies, and public media – are at stake. This is typical for a situation in which the entire society is concerned: In such a case, government decisions trigger reactions from critics who, on a very fundamental level, oppose the way decisions are taken in modern societies (Kaube and Kieserling 2022, 135).

But here, too, the pandemic is only the trigger for polarising tendencies that could be observed before. The effects of social distancing were probably exacerbated by what Jürgen Habermas and others think to be a new structural transformation of the public sphere (Habermas 2023; Seeliger and Sevignani 2021; Bedford-Strohman et al. 2019). The digitalisation of society and the role of social media have changed the processes in which societal self-understanding is brought about, already before the pandemic. In many cases, the checks and balances within which arguments are tested against each other, have given way to filter bubbles and echo chambers. This structural transformation and the effects of the pandemic mutually reinforce each other.

As the examples in this section show, these developments also concern arguments that are brought forward from a Christian background. In the final section, I shall explore some of the consequences of this for public theology.

6. Consequences – state, church, and public theology

The German Basic Law provides for a stable interplay between church and state, founded on state-guaranteed activities without interference from the state. The same holds for the activities of public media – they are state-sponsored, but their content is relatively independent from both the state and the demands of the free market economy. These constructions stem from the experience of a totalitarian regime during the Third Reich. The intention of this constitutional construct is to decouple the forces that potentially influence public opinion; its effect over the past decades has been a critically-constructive partnership of church and state, and of state and public media.

However, the Corona crisis has brought fissures within society to the fore that imperil these achievements. The extreme case of a pandemic may be exceptional in scale, but with regard to the challenge it poses for society, it does not seem to be different from other crises. The war in Europe and the resulting energy crisis put societal cohesion and a sense of togetherness to stress in a similar way.

In this, the Christian tradition and the way it can be used in situations of crisis are by no means free from ambiguities. It would be misleading to attribute this only to possible misuse or an instrumentalisation, as the metaphor “hijacking Christian faith” suggests (Schmiedel 2022, 2). As we have seen, Christian texts can, by themselves, offer a reservoir for polarisation, for othering of opponents and for extreme eschatological scenarios. The dangers resulting from fundamentalist versions of Christianity are not restricted to countries like the U.S. (Pally 2022, 72–92) or Latin American states (Cunha 2020). While traditionally, in the German context, the interplay between religious agents and the state has been more carefully balanced, the present situation calls for readjustments of this balance.

What, then, are the consequences for Christian self-reflection and for the contribution of religion(s) to debates in the German public? I will sketch a number of provisional answers, indicating where further research is called for.

1. Recent developments show that is not sufficient to understand the contribution of religion to society within the framework of a theory of Christianity, as advocated by the late German theological ethicist Trutz Rendtorff. The same holds for a concept of “public protestantism”, as suggested by Reiner Anselm and Christian Albrecht (Albrecht and Anselm 2017). Both approaches assume that under conditions of modernity and secularisation, the century-long Christian formation of Western European societies has resulted in a broad overlap of the demands of societies and of the answers offered by Christianity. But the hope that an avant-garde of publicly minded theologians can help identify the former, has proved overly optimistic. In the light of the present distortions within society, the Christian

tradition is far from being unanimous in its stance towards religious extremes.

2. Likewise, however, the established programme of a “public theology”, eloquently advocated by the former President of the council of the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD), Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, falls short presenting the Christian voice in society and for society. The statements by the EKD published during the pandemic were seen by many as all too supportive of state measures. The role that public theology has often taken on, namely that of a counterpart to the state, became less visible in a situation of severe crisis in which activities of the Church itself were called into question. This might have contributed to the self-perception of some evangelical voices to take on a more critical role themselves, sometimes giving way to more extreme positions.
3. This situation highlights a development in Germany that was visible before but was rarely addressed. After World War II, and in the process of making the Federal Republic a democratic nation state, the churches were regarded as an important reservoir to draw on. Many of the initiatives opening up new fields of activity (protestant academies, university congregations, commissioners at the seat of the governments in the *Länder*, the Federal Republic, and the European Union) mirror the self-understanding of German protestantism as an avant-garde of societal development. This role has been changing, and not least the pandemic brought this to the fore.
4. This leads to a redescription of the role of public theology. Rather than understanding themselves as a moral authority providing orientation, churches and academic theologians should work towards being seen as experts for the role that (religious) beliefs play in present-day societies. This also entails drawing attention to a threefold notion of truth – a differentiation that has (sometimes deliberately) been glossed over in the debates about Corona measures: “Truth” is the aim of methodologically guided empirical science, whose hypotheses are always falsifiable. “Truth” can also be claimed as a strategy of immunisation by those who, in retrospect, knew it all along (Döring et al. 2023). Finally, “truth” can be a religious concept, calling for the

readiness to stand up for one's deepest convictions. Any critically responsible understanding of Christian belief will have to balance this fiducial dimension of truth with truth in the scientific sense, while avoiding the trap of self-immunisation. Pointing out these differences is an important task for public theologies.

5. At the same time, the mainline churches have to assess their relation to other Christian communities carefully. On the one hand, they will not want to be conflated with those holding unscientific and radical views. On the other hand, they have to identify themselves as particular voices among others within a (sometimes cacophonous) chorus of Christianity.
6. Government attempts to gain public support for the measures taken mainly rested on work of elucidation (*Aufklärungsarbeit*) and on clarification of concepts in epidemiology, hygiene, and public health. However, as the debates have shown, it would have been equally important to take the relevance of world views and deeply held convictions into account. To understand the way in which world-views structure the perception of reality, and to understand the role of religious beliefs, a similar, but threefold task of elucidation by Christian theology in public is called for:
 - a. *elucidation on the role of Christianity within society*: Constant clarification of Christian concepts for society is needed where Christian symbols and imagery are placed in the context of religious *Querdenker*-views. This also holds for concepts that do not seem specifically Christian, but are reconstructed from a Christian mindset. Concepts like happiness, generosity, freedom, or truth²⁶ can be used for various purposes, and whoever wants to defeat Christian *Querdenker* on their own ground must point out which of these purposes enable human flourishing in a liberal and religiously neutral society and which do not.
 - b. *pointing out the limits of elucidation*: At the same time, mere elucidation is not enough to counter some of the rather absurd elements of conspiracy theories. On the contrary: During the

26 Newsletter *AG Welt*, April 18th, 2022.

pandemic, the appeal to reason seems to have left opponents of government measures no other way than to resort to irrationalism (Kaube and Kieserling 2022, 135). Consequently, public theology, like all attempts to oppose such thinking, will also have to take the fears seriously that stand behind such views. To provide an alternative vision, the emotional side is at least as important as rational aspects (Prantl 2016; Wabel et al. 2018). An emotionally appealing answer, however, must not be confused with a one-sided, pleasant counter-story, for this would easily fall prey to populist warnings of being lulled in illusionary tales. Only when the ambivalence of a situation is named clearly, including past mistakes, can a counterimage hold what it promises.²⁷

- c. *elucidation and clarification of concepts within Christianity*: Finally, it has to be acknowledged that the Christian tradition is not only a potential source of cohesion in a pluralistic society, as it is often depicted by church officials. Rather, much of the imagery in the Christian tradition is deeply ambiguous and, when deployed, can play a destructive role for congregations and societies alike. Within the chorus of protestantism, even the hermeneutical basis on which the (sometimes dualistic) imageries of this tradition are deployed, is subject to interpretation. All of the voices that could be heard in the debates would claim that they are in accordance with the gospel, but some would accuse others of running counter to it. In the debate with those who regard themselves as faithful Christians, it is not sufficient to claim that faith is being misused for ends that are alien to it.

Thus, the post pandemic debates could be an opportunity to reassess the role of Christianity in public, as well as for a self-reflection within Christianity. Such reflection might aim at showing how, in a debate that has far-reaching implications for society, resorting to one's inner convictions in a responsible way could result in pointing out a way to change and correct the others' (and, possibly, one's own) views without changing their identity.

27 An impressive example of how this could be done were the two commemorative acts held in Berlin in April 2022: the memorial service at *Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche* and the commemoration in Berlin's *Konzerthaus* at the invitation of *Bundespräsident Franz-Walter Steinmeier* – for the latter, see Wabel 2024.

7. Epilogue: criticism and self-criticism

It could have been a start to regain public trust. “Our Corona mistakes” read the self-accusing title page of the most important German weekly newspaper, *Die Zeit*, a few months before the last Corona measures were lifted. Three years after the beginning of the pandemic, politicians, virologists, journalists and many others began to address the mistakes in healthcare politics over the past years, and did not evade self-criticism (Laschet 2023). This could have been a chance for the state to regain trust and public support among opponents of the measures, and for society to engage in a debate that is not lead by accusations and self-opinionatedness, but by openness, honesty, self-criticism, and respect.

Moreover, an empirical study conducted in ten countries in 2020 and in 2022/23 has shown that, near the end of the pandemic, people’s memories of the events have become distorted, depending on their self-identification with being vaccinated or not. Even the memory of their fears of contagion at the time of the pandemic turned out to be opinionated. According to the study, more negative assessments of political measures during the pandemic are also associated with a stronger desire to punish politicians and scientists for their actions during the pandemic and to dismantle the entire political order (Sprengholz et al. 2023). Such findings show that a self-critical public debate would be called for.

However, since this article was written and submitted in late 2023, the German debate has subsided. For most people, the pandemic is all water under the bridge now and they do not want to be bothered any more. Government had planned for a commission of inquiry in parliament, flanked by a process of dialogue with the citizens, but the attempts have petered out. Meanwhile, experts warn that the lessons from the past need to be learned in order to be better prepared for a next pandemic.

This does not only concern the work of epidemiologists and public health experts. According to political scientists André Brodocz and Hagen Schölzel, with the uncertainty of the situation during the pandemic, the unresolved scientific disputes and the imposed government measures, Germany has experienced a “democratic time-out”, during which collectively shared assumptions on how we want to deal with our conflicts were suspended (Brodocz and Schölzel 2024, 135). Thus, the democratic consensus itself

was called into question. This has led to political distrust, which, again, has given a boost to authoritarian voices (Brodocz and Schölzel 2024, 139).

In this situation, the relation between the state and church could prove its resilience by working towards a forum to rekindle the debate. It has always been an important task of religion to name ambivalences, and to encourage decision-makers to take responsibility without losing their face. A self-critical debate in a wider public might take the wind out of the sails of those who would like to keep polarising society. As it seems, however, an ad campaign will not be enough.

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