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## Religion in the Pandemic: Reflections on the Central Event in Memory of the Victims of the COVID-19 Pandemic and its Implications for Development Policy

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### Abstract:

On 18 April 2021 a memorial event was organized in Berlin by the Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier in order to commemorate those who died of COVID-19. On the morning of the same day an ecumenical service was celebrated together with representatives of Jewish and Muslim communities. The two events took place at different venues. The separation between state and religion was clearly visible. Yet both events sent out the same message to the bereaved: that they are not alone in their grief. Unlike the service, the state memorial event was not embedded in a specific religious community. Nevertheless, the state memorial event also made reference to religion. It explicitly aimed to give support and provide meaning. While preserving the separation between religion and state, it became obvious that religion is not seen as the opposite of the secular state but can become an important aspect of state actions and work for society. Looking at this religious dimension also of state acts could provide an impulse for development policy, particularly as cooperation with religious communities has become a focus in this field. Especially in countries where religious belonging plays a much more important role than in Germany, the question is not only how cooperation with religious communities can be possible but moreover to see how religion as an aspect of daily life can be integrated at different levels of development policy.

# Religion in the Pandemic: Reflections on the Central in Memory of the Victims of the COVID-19 Pandemic and its Implications for Development Policy

## Religion in the pandemic

Religion fulfils an important function in the current crisis in terms of coping with contingency when dealing with the existential insecurities that the pandemic imposes on most people around the world. A study by the economist Jeanet Bentzen shows that Google searches for prayers increased significantly worldwide during the first wave of the pandemic in 2020.<sup>1</sup> An empirical study by the University of Münster concluded that the faith of people in Germany who belonged to a religious community has increased and that “religion is fulfilling its genuine religious task of ‘dealing with contingency’” during the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> Especially in other regions, religious communities often assume further important functions related to the pandemic beside this task. They also offer financial support, or donate food or hygiene articles. With regard to countries in Africa and the Middle East, the study *Religious Leaders’ Perspectives on Corona* shows that the societal role of religious leaders increased especially in countries where less trust is placed in the state’s response to the crisis.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, it can be said that, at least in Germany, little has recently been heard from the churches about the pandemic – and rarely anything that had not already been said by others. What was said was important and helpful – and following the spirit of Christianity – concern for those in need, calls for solidarity, encouraging confidence. However, religious communities do not seem to gain an authority of interpretation of the current disaster here anymore, even though this used to be their main contribution in earlier times. Today, the answer to the question how we could have come to this terrible situation falls to the scientists, above all the virologists and epidemiologists. Those for whom their sober answers, emerging from laboratories and computers, are unsatisfactory, those who hold on to the question “Why?” and search for meaning even in disaster, are at risk to land amongst conspiracy theorists.

## The central event in memory of the victims of the pandemic

On 18 April 2021 on the suggestion of Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier a memorial event for the victims of the pandemic took place at the Konzerthaus Berlin.<sup>4</sup> With an address by the Federal President, personal speeches by relatives, music from Brahms’ *German Requiem*, a procession and the lighting of candles, all elements of a religious ceremony were included.

Earlier the same day an ecumenical service was celebrated at Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin on the initiative of the Church.<sup>5</sup> Most people invited to the state memorial event also took part

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanet Bentzen, *In Crisis, We Pray: Religiosity and the COVID-19 Pandemic*, CEPR Covid Economics 20, 2020. <https://cepr.org/sites/default/files/news/CovidEconomics20.pdf#Paper2>.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.uni-muenster.de/Religion-und-Politik/aktuelles/2020/aktuell/News\\_Corona\\_und\\_Religiositaet.html](https://www.uni-muenster.de/Religion-und-Politik/aktuelles/2020/aktuell/News_Corona_und_Religiositaet.html), see also: [https://www.uni-muenster.de/Religion-und-Politik/podcastundvideo/Corona\\_und\\_Zusammenhalt.html](https://www.uni-muenster.de/Religion-und-Politik/podcastundvideo/Corona_und_Zusammenhalt.html).

<sup>3</sup> Sonntag, Frost and Öhlmann, *Religious Leaders’ Perspectives on Corona – Preliminary Findings*, Policy Brief 03/2020, Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development, Berlin 2020. <https://www.rcsd.hu-berlin.de/de/publikationen/pdf-dateien/religious-leaders-perspectives-on-corona-preliminary-findings>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/zdfspezial/gedenkfeier-fuer-die-verstorbenen-in-der-corona-pandemie-100.html>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://rundfunk.evangelisch.de/kirche-im-tv/ard-gottesdienst/oekumenischer-gottesdienst-trauerfeier-opfer-der-corona-pandemie-11739>.

in the service – family members of people who had died in the pandemic, as well as the highest representatives of Germany's constitutional bodies. The ecumenical service was arranged by leading figures of the evangelical, Catholic and Orthodox churches, as well as leaders of Jewish and Muslim communities. They were not present at the state memorial event.

The state memorial event and the religious ceremony took place at different locations. One was conducted by the highest representative of the state, the other by representatives of the religious communities. The separation of church, or more specifically the individual religions, and state was clearly visible through the separate events. However, it was also noticeable how the church and state events related to one another in their form and content. The ritual staging drew on related methods, but also the message of the two events was similar. It was directed to the relatives of the deceased, but also to all the living, and said: you are not alone.

Of course the state event avoided biblical references. All the more noteworthy was the fact that the central symbolic action performed in the large auditorium of the Konzerthaus, was a scenic realization of the very biblical narrative that was the focus of the religious ceremony. It was the story in the Gospel of Luke of the unknown who accompanied the desperate disciples on their journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus after Jesus' death on the cross. Retrospectively, says the biblical narrative, they recognized the accompaniment by the unknown as a sign of God's closeness and assistance in adversity.

During the state ceremony, family members honoured their dead relatives with a few words, also in commemoration of the many others who died in the pandemic. They then lit a candle and carried it to a table which had been placed in the centre of the auditorium. They did however not have to walk this way alone. They were each accompanied by a representative of the state.

Like the church service, the Federal President's speech took the perspective of those who suffer from the pandemic, who are mourning the loss of loved ones, who have lost their job, or are worried about their future. It spoke of neither the achievements nor the failures of politics, but addressed what the event in the Konzerthaus itself wanted to serve for: people need places, times, gestures and rituals that allow, in the words of the Federal President, to express "pain and suffering and anger,"<sup>6</sup> to talk to one another about what worries and depresses them, but also about what provides confidence and courage.

### **A public space for religious communication**

The Federal President's initiative created a public space for religious communication. The memorial event, in contrast to the church service, was not religious in the sense of an explicit embedding in the language and actions of a specific religious community. But in the sense that it addressed the essential question of meaning and the confrontation with the unavailable that result from the pandemic. In his speech, Frank-Walter Steinmeier himself gave a religious-theoretical rationale for the event: "Rituals of mourning," he said, "give us comfort and solace as well as a sense of meaning." They do so precisely because they relate individual fate to the general which affects and concerns all. They allow us to articulate a fact "that we are all too keen to suppress, namely that we are vulnerable and mortal beings. Not everything can be planned, quantified, safeguarded or controlled. We do not have a firm grip on everything, least of all death." What becomes "a beacon of light in dark times," Steinmeier continued,

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Reden/2021/04/210418-Corona-Gedenken-Englisch.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile](https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Reden/2021/04/210418-Corona-Gedenken-Englisch.pdf?__blob=publicationFile) .

is the apparent “humanity,” to know that, “we depend on others when the chips are down.” In light of “our zeitgeist, which is so strongly geared to self-improvement,” it is difficult for us to recognize the boundaries of the achievable. What the pandemic could however teach us anew, he said expressly relating to the religious concept of transcendence, is “humility in the face of the inaccessible.”

From a more distanced, critical perspective, hard questions arise from this religious message from the lips of the highest representative of the state, above all those concerning the relationship between religion and politics, between state and church or other religious communities. Did the national act of remembrance for the victims of the pandemic become a ceremony of civil religion calling for social cohesion?<sup>7</sup> It is noteworthy how important the warning was to the Federal President that we must ensure that the pandemic, which has already compelled social distancing, “does not drive us apart as a society.”

The initiative of the presidential office regarding this official state memorial event caused a certain level of confusion in the Churches. They were not included in its planning or scheduling. But they quickly found themselves prepared to organize the ecumenical service not far from the Konzerthaus, to invite the state representatives and to include representatives of other religious communities.

Nevertheless, the eventual mutual cooperation with the different religious communities did not lead the presidential office to completely relinquish religion to them. Not because politics wanted to co-opt religion for its own purposes. The state memorial event closely observed the religious neutrality required by the constitution. It avoided explicit religious speech, but then thematized the religious dimension of the risky existential and societal experiences caused by the pandemic.

Religion, according to the central message of the official state memorial event in connection with the ecumenical service, concerns everyone, not only those belonging to a religious community. Religion allows people to recognize the inherent, abyssal need and dependence of humanity: on nature, of which they are part, on each other, because they remain dependent on one another, from the unavailable, which they never fully grasp.<sup>8</sup>

### **Implications for the relationship between religion and politics and the cooperation with religious communities in development policy**

The state memorial event sheds an interesting light on the relationship between religion and politics. Through its conception and realization it becomes visible that religion is seen as a fundamental dimension of human existence. In consequence, also religious points of reference are incorporated into the acts of the state, which was responsible for the memorial event. Here, a perspective on the relationship between religion and the state becomes apparent that stands in contrast to a strict dualism that understands religion as a clearly demarcated opposite to the secular state. This provides food for thought with regard to concrete political fields such as development policy.

Representatives of discourse-oriented research approaches, such as Philip Fountain, have long criticized that the international debate on religion and development is too strongly based on a secular differentiation between the religious and the secular. Development policy and its formulated development goals are seen to be located in the secular, which is believed to be clearly separable from the religious. Following this criticism, religion is unjustly construed as the opposite of the secular, which, in this discourse, is determined as normative and neutral. With this, an exoticization of religion

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<sup>7</sup> See Wolfgang Vögele, *Zivilreligion in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Gütersloh 1994; Rolf Schieder, *Wieviel Religion verträgt Deutschland?* Frankfurt am Main 2001.

<sup>8</sup> See Wilhelm Gräb, *Vom Menschsein und der Religion. Eine praktische Kulturtheologie*, Tübingen 2018.

is taking place.<sup>9</sup> While this expansive thesis cannot be considered in detail here, it is obvious that the official state memorial event for the victims of the pandemic presented a different approach both conceptually and in its practical realization. This can be an impulse for development policy which has increased its focus on cooperation with religious communities in the past years. In many countries around the world, religious affiliation and belonging play a much more important role than in Germany. It is in precisely there that the question should not only be if and how development policy can cooperate with individual religious communities, but above all how religion, as a dimension of human existence, can be included and considered at different levels of development policy.

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<sup>9</sup> See Philip Fountain, The Myth of Religious NGOs: Development Studies and the Return of Religion. In: Gilles Carbonnier (Ed.), *International Development Policy: Religion and Development*, Basingstoke 2013.

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