

The Role of Religion in Peace Building – A Berlin Voice

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15 June 2019

I.

My name is Markus Dröge. I am the Bishop of the Protestant Church of Berlin, Brandenburg and silesian upper Lusatia. In this region we are the biggest religious community. We have nearly one million members.

It is a great honour for me to be invited to speak to you about the subject of your meeting. You deal with a subject that is very topical in Berlin. As the Evangelical Bishop here in Berlin, I will try to give you an understanding what this topic, “The Role of Religion in Peace Building”, means to us today, to us living in Berlin, an exciting but strained city.

It might be surprising that I emphasise the important role this topic, or even the role of religion, plays for our city. For Berlin is often called the capital of atheism. That is not true at all. There is a variety of ideologies, lifestyles, cultures and a diversity of religious life. The way we can maintain a peaceful co-existence within this diversity in Berlin is a key issue for this metropolis and especially for the Christian churches. For the New Testament describes the Christian message as the message of reconciliation.

II.

However, the role of religion for peaceful coexistence in the modern and growing city of Berlin is by no means indisputable. The question remains whether religions are part of the solution or part of the problem. The fact that Christian faith – especially the role of the Evangelical church in the GDR – contributed to the revolution 30 years ago remaining peaceful still lives in the consciousness of the people and particularly Protestant Christians. This coming October, we will remind at Gethsemane Church that the people were gathered in prayer in this very church on 9 October 1989, one month before the fall of the Wall. Here in Berlin, they were praying that the demonstrations in Leipzig should remain peaceful. On that day, one month before the Wall came down, the demonstrators tried to close the peaceful ring around Leipzig. They were concerned whether the state authorities would intervene by force. When the news “The ring is closed. And there was no violence!” was transmitted from Leipzig to Berlin into the Gethsemane Church by telephone, the people staying in the church cheered. That is why today the people actively participating in the peaceful revolution 30 years ago do not consider the day the Wall came down, 9 November, as the significant historic date. In their judgement, 9 October was the crucial day. Four weeks before the fall of the Wall, the revolution saw a decision – it took a peaceful direction and avoided any turning into violence.

However, the role of religion and its peace-building role are superimposed by quite different experiences today. Religion as a whole has come under general suspicion for many contemporaries. This can be felt particularly strong in Berlin:

Meanwhile, it has been generally realised that 9/11 was a turning point. Since this Islamist act of terrorism happened, mistrust has spread. Ever since it has become evident again what destructive power the abuse of religion can develop, particularly when faith is instrumentalised for hatred and contempt of mankind.

Here in Berlin, this reality got frighteningly close to the citizens at Christmas 2016. The 2016 Berlin truck attack on Breitscheidplatz, destroying human lives, has changed the atmosphere in our city.

Since then, the atmosphere has become more seriously, despite the lightness belonging to the life in Berlin.

Already the day after the attack, we issued an invitation to a memorial service taking place in Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church on Breitscheidplatz. This is the church consisting of a ruin from the Second World War and a new building, intended to be a memorial showing where war and violence directs mankind. It was of utmost importance that we organised this service involving Jews, Christians and Muslims, it was important that it was transmitted by television and that we were the first to spread the message: We, the representatives of different religions, together oppose hatred and contempt of mankind and jointly advocate that religion shall establish reconciliation and bring about peace.

Thus, we very closely feel both aspects in Berlin: the experience that religion is a factor for peace and the experience that the abuse of religion for inhuman goals happens time and again.

III.

The peace and conflict researcher Markus Weingardt expressed the reality we experience in an apt phrase¹:

“Only if we accept this ambivalence (of religion) ..., the peace-building potential of religions will be expected to being made accessible.”

He writes that, on the one hand, there are the religious “heroes of non-violence” like Gandhi, Martin Luther King or Desmond Tutu, that, on the other hand, the “Clash of Civilizations” is fuelled and that this viewpoint – represented by Samuel Huntington – regards religion as a power mainly strengthening conflicts.

I would now like to give you three examples how we here in Berlin try to campaign for the peace-building potential of religions:

a) Interreligious Celebrations on Special Occasions

I already mentioned the interreligious service we invited to on 20 December 2016, one day after the Berlin truck attack on Breitscheidplatz had happened. This memorial service represents the attempt to encourage the peace-building potential of religions. This example drastically demonstrates that this power has to face substantial resistance. The fact that the assassin regularly visited a Berlin Mosque obscures the efforts for reconciliation. Meanwhile, we as religious people of any denomination or religion in Berlin will be watched with suspicion if we organize interreligious ceremonies. With which partners do we cooperate? Which contacts do those Partners maintain to which powers here in Germany and all over the world? That is why we advocate the dialogue of the religions with great effort.

b) The House of One

Next year, on 14 April 2020 (the anniversary of the premiere of Lessing's “Nathan the Wise” in 1783 in Berlin that become famous for its Ring Parable as a message of tolerance between the three major monotheistic religions), the foundation for the House of One will be laid. This house has been

¹ Markus A. Weingardt, Religion als Friedensressource. Potenziale und Hindernisse (Religion as a Peace Resource. Potentials and Obstacles), in Wissenschaft & Frieden 2008-3: Religion als Konfliktfaktor (Religion as a Cause of Conflict).

designed to accommodate people belonging to three religions – Jews, Christians and Muslims. It will respectively offer one room for religious ceremonies for each religion. This means that there will be no mixing of religions, but the building will include a common room at the centre allowing ways of community to be sought and signs of communion to be set: artistic and intellectual ones as well as forms of a living community still to be discovered. The building was designed by the famous architectural office *Kuehn Malvezzi*. It will cost some 30 million euros. The financing has made progress. Many sponsors from Germany and beyond have contributed to this construction project.

c) A Preschool for Three Religions

Another example I would like to mention is represented by a preschool for three religions, comprising Jewish children, Muslim children and Christian children: Here again, there will be no mixing of religions. Three different religion-educational concepts have been developed. However, there will be a common life under one roof. This project too is coming into being here in Berlin just now.

This is the way we try to live in tolerance in Berlin. I think that in our times it is very important, that every religion feels responsible to build peace.

I hope you have good encounters and creative discussions here in my hometown Berlin!

Thank you for your attention!