

Church, Power, and Politics: An Ambivalent Relationship

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Introduction

Academic research attempts to answer questions, solve problems, and clarify ambiguities. Some fields of research seem far removed from the everyday realities of life. This may seem to be true, at first glance, of biblical studies and the study of the ancient Near East and archaeology, to which Angelika Berlejung and I have devoted much of our lives. Scholarship encompasses countless disciplines and fields, large and small, seemingly important, central, and comprehensive, and seemingly less important, peripheral. Together they form the concert of science, the *Universitas litterarum*.

Scientific research is a never-ending process. As Karl Popper and Critical Rationalism put it: there are two kinds of hypotheses—those we already know are in need of improvement or are wrong, and those where we don't yet know. This applies to the smallest details as well as the bigger picture. And whenever one begins to agree with the majority opinion, it is high time to rethink (self-)critically.

There is a time for everything (Ecclesiastes 3:1-9). For example, in biblical studies, the reflection on an exegetical detail, or in archaeology, the interpretation of a find, large or small. Equally important is to repeatedly step back from the detail and consider the "big picture." The study of the Bible and its historical context serves theology and thus fulfills a fundamental task that benefits church doctrine and pastoral care. Thus, the Church, pastors as well as all Christians, should follow the example of the shepherds in the Christmas Gospel (Luke 2:17), "spreading the word that had been told them about this child."

Those who pursue academic theology through research and teaching, as Angelika Berlejung and I have done and continue to do, simultaneously fulfill a responsibility to accompany and consider church life and actions, church practice, not least because we are tasked with training pastors and religious education teachers who are capable of spreading the message of the Gospel with heart and mind. Like those we train, we are citizens of our country. Therefore, we have a responsibility to be interested in church practice and the political actions of the powers of our time and world—theology and church, politics and power in relation to one another. This can only be addressed here within the framework of a brief personal reflection, maybe preliminary and incomplete.

The nouns "power," "church," and "politics" in the title suggest a connection. If one understands the noun "power" as a verb and the sentence as a question: "Does the church engage in politics?", "Should the church actively operate in politics?" then the sentence has a dynamic quality. Influence in state, society, and the public sphere: How, what, and by what means does this fall under the Church's responsibilities? To what extent does the Church exercise power in this context?

A brief look at the history of the origin and spread of the Christian faith

With its history, the Church possesses an extremely rich "memory." It contains much about the Church, much about power, and much about politics. It also contains much about the Church's powerlessness, much failure with the power it possessed, and much abuse of power. "Power is the most unstable of all human achievements... But since faith and power are mutually exclusive, all religions and all political systems that were originally founded on rational faith eventually become corrupt and lose their strength

when they rely on their power or ally themselves with power. [1]" Alongside the Church's successes, there have also been failures and defeats, shortcomings and crimes, as well as threats and persecutions, when it has been on the other side, more or less powerless against the powerful and those in power.

In its early development [2], as well as in later centuries during its worldwide spread to the most remote regions of the earth and in its global mission, the Church has also benefited from alliances with political powers. Of course, in its first three centuries, it was only through the witness of individuals, witnesses, and martyrs that the Church came to the attention of those in power and was able to gain state recognition and support. Thus began a history of the Church's use of power and its commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but also of the Church's abuse by political powers and rulers. This latter aspect meant, and still means, the danger of (political) instrumentalization. "Jede Macht korrumpiert. Der geistige Mensch muss deshalb immer in der Opposition leben." [3] (tr. "Every power corrupts. The spiritual {or: intellectual} person must, thus, always live in the opposition.") It is, for example, sobering to see that the Russian Orthodox Church, after 1917 cruelly oppressed for decades, is now once again courted by those in power and occupies the front row at state receptions.

Participation in power and politics is convenient and useful. The exercise of internal power is essential for diverse, large communities. With the rise of Christianity's social influence and spread across the globe came significance, social weight, and consequently, the ability to exert pressure and power, along with the obligation to take a stand and participate constructively within the social fabric. Of course, this also applies to power within the church. Without constant critical reflection grounded in the Bible, ecclesiastical power is vulnerable to human failings and abuse. The church as an institution can be no better than the people involved, never ideal, and always open to criticism.

Constructive Minorities, Doubters, Critics, Dissenters, and Visionaries

The church's handling of power and politics, including in the dissemination and defense of its doctrine, is reflected in countless examples throughout church history. "Heretics" and minorities within the church represent an almost inestimable and crucial factor. The Church has not always been aware that "heretics," dissenters of all kinds, and newly emerging groups can represent necessary signals that problems exist in a given context and that critical self-reflection is necessary to avert a recognized crisis. In this way, such signals prove to be the opposite of a danger, but rather an impulse. They spread new and current questions and keep church teaching alive. "Heretics," writes Stephan Langer [4] in connection with the 80th birthday of the theologian Eugen Drewermann, who was banned from teaching and preaching by the Catholic Church and finally suspended from the priesthood in 1992, "are usually the more compelling authors. Those who are not satisfied with the Church as it actually exists and its doctrine, which in many respects is merely conventional but by no means responds to the insights of our time in culture and science." And Langer asks: "Where would we be today if the church had listened more to the 'heretics' [5]. Afterwards, it often turns out that the unconventional thinkers were actually visionaries. That they were right, at least in part, and advanced the doctrine." And Langer, citing theologians who have been reprimanded, recalls "what Hans Küng said about the truth in the (other) world religions," how Pierre Teilhard de Chardin sought to reconcile evolution and belief in creation, how Leonardo Boff and Ernesto Cardenal reminded us "that the Gospel is also political and must become concrete," and how Eugen Drewermann "integrated psychotherapy into theology," just as, long before him, the practical theologian Otto Haendler, among others, had emphatically pointed to „Tiefenpsychologie“ (depth psychology) within the framework of theology—the latter, of course, as a Protestant, without negative consequences for his teaching as a Professor of Theology and his relationship with his Protestant Church.

A Disturbing Present

In today's era of rapid secularization, the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski [6] suggested that Christianity would be saved, but it would be saints, not bureaucrats, who would save it; good people, not pompous haters; various communities of believers who find themselves on the margins of the Church or outside of it—though not too far removed. So Kolakowski encourages us to hear, spread, and integrate into the discussion the voices at the margins and beyond the mainstream.

The Ambivalence of Power

Power, church, and politics have often formed an unquestioned connection. Powerful churches were often dependent churches, if only by the fear of losing power. It has become apparent in recent decades, perhaps for the last 200 years, that the Church, without political power, comes closer to God than centuries before. Based on my experience living in East Germany, an independent church, clearly separated from the state, without or in opposition to power and politics, can bear more credible witness than a state church or a church more or less integrated into political power. This by no means implies that the Church should withdraw from politics as action in the public sphere and in society. Rather, with its religious offerings, the Church has a task of providing meaning that the state cannot fulfill. Religious impulses broaden, within social discourse, the possibilities of contributing in a specific way with one's respective abilities. It is the independence and the connection to an ultimate responsibility before a power beyond earthly political powers and structures—what Christians may call God and others by other designations—that can make the Church's work convincing, provided Christian existence is based on biblical principles or, in other words, follows the example of Jesus. The more independent the Church, the more credibly it can raise public questions and, in an ever-changing and increasingly turbulent world, call for reflection, for contemplation before action.

Courage and Power of the Individual

It was individuals who, at the beginning of the Church, rose up as martyrs, as witnesses, just as the Old Testament prophets and authors did as solitary and mostly unheard voices crying out against the tide. Is the Christian way of life no longer perceived in the public sphere today? This was the question posed by Bishop Wolfgang Huber. Personal example is the only truly convincing factor, was his answer. What matters is not skillful preaching rhetoric or colorful forms of worship, but rather "that people encounter a way of life that they find so plausible that they ask about its origins" [7]. This is all the more true given that many people consider a rigid party system inflexible and preoccupied with itself when it comes to tackling the growing problems of our world. Which politician dares to speak uncomfortable truths, judges purely on the basis of facts and not with party loyalty or an eye on the next election? The economic historian Niall Ferguson [8] rightly asks: Is representative democracy, which since the 17th century, together with market economy and competition, the rule of law, education and science, property, consumption and individual initiative, innovation, work ethic, and medicine, brought about the rise of the Western world, coming to an end? Have we recognized the dangers arising from, for example, alienation and depersonalization or the virtualization of debt and financial relationships? Where a financial sector, becoming increasingly autonomous, forgets its function of serving the economy as well as the people, where a thicket of regulations stifles the rule of law, where governments stand helplessly before exploding national debts, aging populations, historical amnesia and cultural decline, a disintegrating social fabric, and a polarized, intolerant public discourse that is no longer willing or interested in considering dissenting opinions? It is no coincidence that the sociologist Ulrich Beck [9], who died on January 1, 2015, called for far greater civic engagement, which he termed "subpolitical." Every single individual is needed. There is probably no person who could not contribute constructively, with a specific talent, to the spread of a tolerant, democratic discourse.

Religious Power and Violence

Sometimes it is lamented that the Church, or more generally, religions, have too much power and are violent. Judaism appears to be violent and warlike in certain biblical passages. It is often overlooked that these texts never reflect the historical reality of war and violence. Rather, in the Bible, a very small, historically defeated, deeply humiliated, and scattered people seeks, at least narratively, some spiritual solace. It is also frequently overlooked that the Jewish people, like no other in the world, relentlessly and critically examine themselves in their (biblical) texts. Christianity, unlike Judaism, did indeed often resort to warfare and violence when the power to do so existed. Here, too, it is important to ask who used or misused the Christian religion for what purposes. However, anyone who carefully reads the Jewish and Christian Bibles, the Old and New Testaments, will find a wealth of wisdom and experience,

exemplary and inspiring material from a millennium preserved there, material worth considering and examining. This material could and can lead to the misuse of religion, but also to enlightenment and critical self-reflection. Political Islam has been militant almost from the beginning, seeing itself as obligated to subjugate the entire world by force, fire, and sword if it did not submit voluntarily. However, it is wrong to speak of peaceful or militant religions. Religions are only as peaceful or violent as their followers practice them.

Conclusion: Church and Christians in Word and Action

In the beginning was the Word (John 1:1) and God's Action (Genesis 1:1): God connects the Word with His Action (John 3:16). The Church, with the Bible, word, and action, has the obligation to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. When the Church and every individual Christian publicly bear witness to the Christian faith in word and action, the Church or the Christian acts as homo politicus, as a citizen in the public sphere. In doing so, it simply follows the example of the shepherds of the Christmas Gospel, "to spread the word (of the Gospel of Jesus Christ)" (Luke 2:17). Do the Church and Christians thereby exercise "power" (in German: "Macht")? The German noun "Macht" can be associated with the use of force. Etymologically, it means "strength" [10]. Christian life and Christian witness should be full of strength and loving.

As an academic teacher and researcher, Professor Angelika Berlejung has dedicated her scholarly work to the fields of theology, the Bible, and historical anthropology, including archaeology. Her wide-ranging literary output extends from detailed analyses of archaeological finds to the fundamental and comprehensive question of God, iconography, and monotheism [11]. With gratitude and respect, I offer my colleague and friend some fundamental thoughts on theology and the church, power and politics, in their interconnectedness on her 65th birthday.

References

- [1] My translation, for the German text cf. Erich Fromm, Die Kunst des Liebens. Welterperspektiven. Ullstein Materialien. Ullstein Buch Nr. 35258. Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Wien 1980/1982, p. 138.
- [2] Cf. Andreas Lindemann, "Gehet hin in alle Welt..." - Migration und Mission im frühesten Christentum, in: Christian Ammer, Jörg Kärger (Hgg.), Migration: Dynamische Prozesse in Natur und Gesellschaft, Schriften der Evangelischen Forschungsakademie Neue Folge, Leipzig 2019, pp. 39-76.
- [3] Renée Sintenis, in: Carmela Thiele: Kalenderblatt. Rundfunksendung im „Deutschlandfunk“, 22. April 2015.
- [4] My translations, for the text in German cf.: Hört früher auf die „Ketzer“!: Christ in der Gegenwart-online 25_2020, 267-268 (<https://www.herder.de/cig/cig-ausgaben/archiv/2020/25-2020/hoert-frueher-auf-die-ketzer/>) Access 23.04.2026.
- [5] The term "Querdenker" used by Stephan Langer (translated by me as "heretics") has since fallen into disrepute due to its current use in populist contexts, but in Langer's case it is quite appropriate in my opinion.
- [6] Der Himmelsschlüssel. Erbauliche Geschichten. München, Zürich 1985.
- [7] My translation, for the text in German cf. Mecklenburgische und Pommersche Kirchenzeitung Nr. 50, 14.Dezember 2014, p. 2.
- [8] Der Niedergang des Westens – Wie Institutionen verfallen und Ökonomien sterben. Berlin 2012; Der Westen und der Rest der Welt. Berlin 2013.
- [9] Weltrisikogesellschaft, Weltöffentlichkeit und globale Subpolitik. Wiener Vorlesungen im Rathaus, Vol. 52. Vortrag im Alten Rathaus am 23. Mai 1996. Wien 1997.
- [10] Kluge. Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache. 23., erweiterte Auflage, bearbeitet von Elmar Seebold. Berlin, New York 1999, p. 530 s.v. Macht.
- [11] Angelika Berlejung, YHWHs Vielfalt. Viele Namen und keine Ikonografie? Orientalische Religionen in der Antike, 63. Tübingen 2025.