



Institut für
Ethik & Werte

Fostering Culture War 2.0

Why the Manhattan Declaration is correct

A statement for the Institute for Ethics and Values, Giessen

Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. theol. Thomas Schirmacher

The so-called 'culture war' was a dispute between the Roman Catholic Church, under Pope Pius IX, and the Kingdom of Prussia and Imperial Germany, under Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, from 1871 to 1887. The intention was to drive back the public influence of the church with the aid of legislation. What was meant by the church was the Catholic Church. However, legislation touched all churches. Indeed, it even partially affects all religions in Germany up to the present day, inasmuch as regulations from that time still apply today.

In 1871 what stood at the beginning was the famous *Kanzelparagraph* ("Pulpit Paragraph") which made a pastor liable for political or alleged political statements. What followed in 1872 was civil marriage – a marriage in the presence of religious officials was from that time on strictly forbidden (except as a belated celebration afterwards). Later, in 1875 there was the *Brotkorbgesetz* ("Breadbasket Law"), by which indirect financial support was systematically withdrawn from churches. Finally, all church schools were placed under rigorous state school supervision. In many other questions as well the churches were forced to play according to the rules of the state.

Many of the guidelines were in place for a long time or still apply today. The *Kanzelparagraph* was not lifted until 1953. It has only been since 2009 that a civil marriage does not have to precede a church marriage. In contrast to practically all other western countries, a

religious marriage ceremony is not recognized in Germany as a legal act. And there has been no change in this situation up to the present day.

Bishops ended up in prison, and the state looked on astonishingly as a sleeping mass of nonpolitical Christians, in solidarity, suddenly became defiant. After a lot of unnecessary fuss had been caused, the State finally gave up. This State only held anyway until 1918.

Christian churches were indeed badly harmed in the culture war. At the same time, however, they in large part also experienced a revitalization – and in the end the State backed down. What happened was that the churches that were not the intended targets, especially the Evangelical churches, were affected more, while the actual goal of breaking churches' international bonds was completely unsuccessful. The climate was poisoned for decades. Loyal citizens were forced to choose between their faith and the state, without there being anyone who actually profited from this.

There have repeatedly been similar culture wars. National Socialism was not opposed to the churches as long as they conformed to the party line in a streamlined manner and helped make soldiers good soldiers. The GDR (German Democratic Republic) wanted socialistic and controllable churches. Practically all western countries have gone through similar phases from time to time. In the USA the culture war has crept along for almost 30 years, and that has finally led to the Manhattan Declaration.

Naturally there are differences between then and now. The political power of the Catholic Church was at that time much greater. Additionally, we in the West live in established democracies.

It is therefore all the more astonishing just how many powers there are today who in peaceful societies are organizing and pursuing a new edition of the culture war, "Culture War 2.0," over against today's peaceful churches. Great Britain is a forerunner in this respect. Bishops in The Church of England – where ironically we are still speaking about the state religion - are paying horrendous penalties for preaching on the topic of sexuality and are being forced to attend anti-discrimination seminars. All Catholic adoption service centers have been closed, because they were being forced to also broker to same-sex couples. Furthermore, increasingly often Christians are removed from their positions of service to the state because, for instance, they wear a cross.

Abortion, bioethics, sexuality, marriage, family, gender mainstreaming – the list of topics used to try and force the church to think and act like ‘published’ opinion gets longer all the time (this is because the ‘public’ opinion of the majority of people is not always on their side, and these people are not even necessarily interested in the opinion of the majority).

Christians are called upon to no longer consider that what others do is wrong. They should put their ethics *ad acta*. This does not mean they are to move in favor of an absence of ethics nor in favor of a free set of ethics held at their own discretion. Rather, it is supposed to be the ethics of those who are heading up the culture war. The churches should either practice others’ ethics in the midst of those same people, or otherwise be completely pushed out of public life.

For instance, this becomes clear when looking at the subject of religious education. The city of Berlin portrays the situation as if it does not have to do with getting rid of religious education. Rather, it is a question of enforcing the compulsory attendance of all children in state worldview ‘ethics’ instruction. In school life the constitutional right of parents to have their children educated in line with their religion has not played a role for a long time. And there is an unbroken trend that expects Christians, just like everyone else, to see to it that they place their children in state or state-financed nurseries from very early age. Along these same lines, everyone who takes care of his child at home is suspected of being asocial.

Surely history does not repeat itself; however, one can learn from it. The parallels are striking: in the Western world the means of persecuting Christians and the means of religious oppression are law and legislation, which are the same means then as now. New screws are repeatedly turned, whereby the state seeks to force Christians into certain behavior without having to utilize open force. It certainly has been force, but due to the fact that it has been state force, it appears legitimate.

The dispute in Germany, in Europe, and indeed in the entire Western world is about as useful as a hole in the head. It is not the churches in Germany or Europe who are guilty of social strife or from which discrimination and violence towards others originate.

The European Union stands before enormous tasks. Still, instead of fighting unemployment and racism, legislation goes grazing where churches as religious groups have alleged

special rights. Religious freedom, no thank you!? Churches' rights to self-determination according to §140 of the German Constitution, but how? Every church should see to it that they submit to the direct grasp of the state the same way every company does. A creditor with qualms of conscience? They will not buckle until the pressure is strong enough.

The EU, or more precisely certain political powers in the EU, want to force Christian churches to their knees. Not, for instance, the clearly politically based claim to power from emergent Islam. And not the Islamistic minority, which unashamedly utilizes violence and against which one moves astonishingly meekly, leaving critics' lives difficult through the multiple millions spent against Islamophobia. No, it is the Christian churches, who in the countries of the EU significantly back the state, who support democracy, and who enrich civil societies. The churches, who contributed to bringing about the thought of a peaceful Europe and helped bring about the founders of a peaceful Europe – one only has to think about the European originator Robert Schumann.

It does not matter which particular topic we are dealing with. Many a Christian and many a church would rather prefer to dodge various topics. Many topics are too much of a bother to them. Additionally, they do not understand why many topics are so important to other Christians. However, all of them will not be able to avoid the basic question in the long run. The one or the other church, the one or the other theologian may not look so narrow-minded in the public for a longer period of time – but in the end it will affect everyone.

I am not writing all of this in an agitated and dramatic state of mind. The Christian churches survived Rome's hostility and downfall, as it did National Socialism, Stalinism, Maoism, and many less brutal challenges. Most Christians in the world wish that they had the freedoms Christians have in the West. The world changes continually, and due to that there are always new, unexpected challenges. Taken on the whole, pressure from outside has not harmed the global expansion of the message of freedom with God through Jesus Christ – on the contrary, the churches growing most strongly around the world are those under pressure.

However, that changes nothing about the fact that this new test of strength is real. Societal forces in the West abuse the state in order to force churches to their knees and to ethi-

cally streamline them into conformity with their worldview. The state becomes the prey of a worldview which then oppresses its supposed opponents.

This will bestow many triumphs upon the state, especially if the churches react completely peacefully. However, it will significantly damage society to place citizens in unnecessary dilemmas and throw democracy out of kilter by gagging people. In the end it will only strengthen the Christian faith and reduce compliance with 'the powers that be.'

In this same connection one finds the family, all too often declared dead and presented as obsolete. It will be shown that the family is not just a random event that has existed for thousands of years, and also not just a random event that has existed much longer than the countries in which we live.

The state increasingly exacts resistance from Christians against a state which they actually endorse and indeed often love. Still, if they are completely and unnecessarily placed before the choice, they will increasingly, and more decidedly, say what Peter and John said: "We must obey God rather than men." As a Christian, one often has to and wants to obey people. The state is desired by God for the purposes of peaceful coexistence. However, an individual has to obey God *more* if the state places that individual before a choice. Imprisonment should have restrained Peter and John from speaking publicly about Jesus. Those in power who decided to follow this course of action have long since been forgotten, while the message of Jesus is being proclaimed more than ever. This often occurs under the pleasant protection of religious freedom, but more often in spite of governmental bans or societal threats.

All of this could end bitterly. I do not mean thereby that a fear that Christians will become violent is validated. Churches have a lot of practice in non-violent resistance – against the abandonment of children in Roman times, against slavery in the 18th century, against apartheid in South Africa, against the breakup of the family, and against the suppression of religious education in the Soviet Union. However, a climate is being produced in which, on the one hand, there is an increasing amount of badgering from the sides of the media and the law in which significant attention is taken away from the true problems of our society. Bismarck's state lasted until 1918. The chances our states and democracies have for survival are surely much greater with the churches than against them.

My call goes out to *politicians*: Do not participate in the emerging culture war 2.0! Turn your attention to the true problems we have!

My call goes out to *judges*: Stop the sprawling culture war 2.0 by doing what you can within your legal bounds, through sound judgment and peaceful solutions.

My call goes out to the *media*: Do not participate in the badgering that evokes social strife, but rather report on religious issues and about minorities of all kinds in a conciliatory manner, democratically and fairly. And let those involved have their say instead of ostracizing them.

My call goes out to the *churches, free churches and various Christian communities*: Grapple soberly with upcoming developments and lift up your voice. Do not let yourselves be divided because you place different accents on one or the other ethical question, but look rather at the entire picture. Whoever is silent today will himself tomorrow be a target. In the words of Ulrich Parzany, I also say: "Stand up if you are Christians!"

My call goes out to *everyone*: In the name of a peaceful and democratic society, I ask you to end the emerging culture war 2.0 and not to continually turn the legal screws which inhibit churches' leeway.

Western Christianity has in large part assimilated to Western culture to the point of almost abandoning itself. A point has been reached where no more is possible without at the same time giving up the Christian faith. Whoever in spite of this wants to force such a situation, may even do Christianity a service, because followers will have to ask themselves anew just what their faith in God actually means in everyday life and how much their faith is worth to them.

The Manhattan Declaration ends poignantly: "We will fully and ungrudgingly render to Caesar what is Caesar's. But under no circumstances will we render to Caesar what is God's."

That is not a threat – that is not what we as Christians are lining up for. It is simply a declaration. And that we mean it seriously has been sufficiently demonstrated in history.