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The secular state religion

Finland takes up arms against Christian competition

(Bonn, 29.09.2023) The following is a commentary by the President of the International Society for Human Rights (ISHR) and General Secretary of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), Bishop Prof. Dr. Thomas Schirmmacher, on the treatment of freedom of religion or belief in contemporary states, using Finland as an example.

Secular worldviews as state religions

State religions that suppress competition have been a frequent occurrence in history and still exist in many places today. But the secular state religions of the present, which are fighting against their biggest competitor, Christianity, somehow manage to be considered **neutral**, and to be acting only in the name of human rights and not in the name of a truth believed and claimed only by them.

But it is precisely the essence of a state religion, which harasses and discriminates against people of other faiths, that it declares its truth to be the only reality and succeeds in making the population believe that its faith is identical with reality and/or in ensuring that the silent majority does not revolt.

Extreme forms of such ideologies under Stalin and Hitler show that this is possible both on the left and on the right, but also that state terror can arise not only from religious but also from ideological fundamentalism. One can use “God” to force everyone to think and live in a certain way, but one can also do this without God by promoting a non-religious worldview.

Religions and non-religious worldviews are treated equally in the international understanding of human rights. “Freedom of Religion or Belief” means that religious and non-

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religious worldviews are to be treated equally by the state. This applies not only to their protection, but also to their violations. Whether it is a religious or a non-religious worldview that abuses the power and force of the state against its competitors makes no difference: Both lead to a massive violation of the human rights of others.

It should be made clear that the German translation “Religions- und Glaubensfreiheit” is a reference to the English “freedom of religion or belief,” in which “belief” generally includes religious worldviews and also non-religious beliefs, which is not so clearly expressed in the German “Glauben.” When “freedom of religion or belief” is more briefly rendered as “freedom of religion,” it always means not only freedom for religious people, but also freedom for people of other worldview systems, including atheistic and non-religious people. The famous judgment of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) of May 25, 1992 says, “Freedom of thought, conscience and religion is one of the foundations of a democratic society” for religious people as well as for “atheists, agnostics, and skeptics.”

The Soviet Union was an example of a state that suppressed other religions and worldviews in the name of its own secular state “religion,” or more precisely state worldview or state ideology. This was true for the biggest competitor, Christianity, as well as for competitors with similar secular views. The Soviet Union brutally persecuted even dissenting forms of communism, just as the medieval church persecuted Christian heretics.

What’s different about Finland or Australia (or whatever country) doing the same thing today?

First, an example from Australia: The Australian state of Victoria has prohibited, since 2020, not only all kinds of so-called conversion therapies but also “carrying out a religious practice, including but not limited to a **prayer**-based practice, a deliverance practice or an exorcism” (see http://www5.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/num_act/cosppa20213o2021623/s5.html). It is quite clear that here a worldview with an absolute claim to truth has forbade religions to carry out prayers and intervenes deeply in religious practices, even prescribing what one may and may not pray.

That the law of state religions is often bent against its competitors has been shown only too clearly in Finland, as is described in more detail below, where a text from 2004 is part of the indictment, even though the law being applied did not even exist then. Actually, you cannot sue people for things that happened before a law came into force; this is one of the oldest legal principles in existence. They found a way around that because the 2004 text was later cited again on the web.

For me, it is gratifying, though irrelevant to our topic, that the court in Helsinki ruled in favor of the defendants. It also the question how the next instance will rule is irrelevant for my criticism. Even in Islamic countries where Islam is the state religion in the strictest form, such as Pakistan, the Supreme Court often overturns the death sentence for blasphemy or apostasy thanks to courageous judges. And in Europe’s democracies, the victory of secular worldviews that tolerate no competition is far from complete, with

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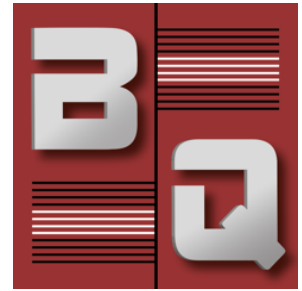
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numerous landmark rulings by supreme courts putting overzealous law enforcement agencies in their place.

However, this does not change the fact that the Attorney General of Finland, as a representative of the secular state and with the support of ruling politicians and leading media, is taking up arms against a Christian minister of the interior (at the time of her statements) and a Lutheran bishop. And all this is because of a really minimal incident on the Internet, which hardly anyone would have known about without the indictment.

Of course, the whole thing has no direct effect on the well-being of the country or its citizens. It can be understood only in terms of the hatred being expressed by a new state religion that wants to completely oust the former state religion from the market. An example is to be made, also in order to set in motion a cycle of silence.

You are not a true citizen if you do not share the worldview of the powerful and those in power. At best, one is a second-class citizen, even as a bishop or former minister. This has been the case in many states, when the state religion or state ideology turned whole classes of citizens into non-citizens. One could not really deprive them of their citizenship, but one could at least convey to them that they did not really belong here. The situation is no different and no better if an intolerant state religion or state ideology establishes itself **secularly**.

The Finnish example

Päivi Räsänen, a medical doctor who has been a member of the Finnish Parliament since 1995 and has served as minister of the interior and party leader of the Finnish Christian Democrats, and Juhana Pohjola, bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Missionary Diocese of Finland, have been charged over a pamphlet calling homosexual behavior a violation of Christian morality. A district court in Helsinki unanimously dismissed the charges on the grounds that it was not for the court to interpret biblical terms. The court ordered the prosecution to pay more than 60,000 Euros in legal costs and gave it seven days to appeal the verdict.

Retired minister Räsänen was charged with “hate speech” for sharing her faith-based views on marriage and sexual ethics in a 2019 tweet, a 2019 radio debate and a 2004 pamphlet. Bishop Pohjola was charged with publishing Räsänen’s pamphlet for his congregation more than 17 years ago. In a 2019 tweet, Räsänen questioned why the leadership of the Finnish Lutheran Church, of which she is an active member, sponsored an LGBT event called Pride 2019. The social media post included verses from the Bible that condemned homosexual acts as sinful. The tweet led to an investigation into Räsänen, which uncovered a church booklet she authored nearly 20 years ago.

In April 2021, the Finnish Prosecutor General’s Office filed three criminal charges against Räsänen, who was leader of the Christian Democrats from 2004 to 2015 and interior minister from 2011 to 2015. Two of the three charges against Räsänen were brought after the police strongly recommended that the prosecution not proceed. Räsänen’s remarks also did not violate Twitter or national broadcasting guidelines, so they remained freely available on their platforms.

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The trial lasted two days. The prosecution cross-examined the bishop and Räsänen on their theology, claiming that the use of the word “sin” can be “harmful.” The defense argued that a conviction of Räsänen would significantly affect freedom of expression in Finland. What Räsänen had said and written was an expression of Christian doctrine, the defense argued. In its 30-page ruling. The court acknowledged that even though some may object to Räsänen’s remarks, “there must be a compelling social reason for interfering with and restricting freedom of expression.” The court concluded that there was no such justification.

The case has just been heard again by the Helsinki Court of Appeal, and the verdict is due to be published the next months. In the trial, the prosecutor showed all the arrogance and aggressiveness of a state ideology towards the Christian beliefs of the defendants, if one believes the media coverage. “They can believe what they want, but they can’t talk about everything they believe,” the prosecutor said. Several times she asked Räsänen to recant. In general, the prosecutor seemed more like a preacher of new laws than a jurist committed to the law. Otherwise, she would not have focused her cross-examination on the 2004 booklet, which appeared at a time when it was not even possible to guess what the legislation would look like almost two decades later. Earlier, the prosecutor had said that it was permissible to quote historical books such as the *Koran*, *Mein Kampf* and the *Bible* (note the compilation), but not the opinions expressed in them.

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