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"Religion often seems a problematic issue"

Christoph Boehinger, a professor of religious studies, sees no countertrend to secularisation, with the result that the churches have lost their role as leaders on matters relating to values and conscience.

Interview by Matthias Herren



Dr. Christoph Boehinger is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Bayreuth and President of the Steering Committee of the National Research Programme "Religions, the State and Society"

"SWISS REVIEW": The Catholic and Reformed Protestant Churches have steadily been losing members for decades. Have they done a poor job?

CHRISTOPH BOEHINGER: No, I wouldn't say that. It has much more to do with a general change in the religious landscape and a long-term process of secularisation. The churches cannot alter this trend. Other large organisations are also losing members.

What are the reasons for this change?

The churches no longer have sovereignty over the interpretation of the major questions in life. Alternatives can today be found in any railway station bookshop. Religion plays almost no part in everyday life for the vast majority. Belonging to a specific religious community from the cradle to the grave is no longer the norm.

The churches nevertheless assume the right to act as society's conscience on socio-ethical issues. Is this still justified?

It is becoming increasingly clear that the churches no longer have a role as leaders on such issues.

Who is responsible for values then?

A process of secularisation has also taken place with regard to values. Many of the values in modern democracy have not been defined by the churches. One example is human rights, a value that has its roots in the Enlightenment.

Despite shrinking congregations, the major churches are well integrated institutionally. They are recognised by the state and can raise church taxes. Is this status still justified?

These provisions need to be revised. The question is whether these rights can be extended to other religious communities. If this is not possible or desirable, the rights of the major religious communities can also be curtailed. The state must ensure that the issue of religion is addressed fairly. This also means that people with no religious affiliation must be respected as well.

Religion has received extensive media coverage since the terror attacks of 11 September 2001. Has the influence of religion on politics and society been underestimated?

Our research has proven through several projects that the theory about the re-emergence of religion is not accurate. Religion often seems a problematic issue in public debate, particularly in relation to Islam. The role of religion is overestimated here. The vast majority of Muslims have no interest in political Islam but simply want to

practise their faith. They are not politically active, nor are they seeking to oust the Church.

Why do these discussions result in such polarised positions?

Society is becoming increasingly heterogeneous. The gap between devout believers and the non-religious has widened. This is sparking fierce debate.

How is the situation set to develop?

I cannot see any countertrend to secularisation and pluralisation even though there are isolated conservative reactions to these trends.

This position of distance from religion that has been adopted in Switzerland and Europe is an exception globally. Religion has much greater importance in the USA. Could this outlook cross the Atlantic like trends in other walks of life?

This is occurring on a small scale in relation to certain free churches or Jewish groups. However, the general situation here is very different to that in the USA. Over there, people have an acute awareness that the Protestant denominations made US democracy possible. Despite the formal separation of Church and State, religion therefore enjoys great status in the USA. The opposite is true in Switzerland. Here, the people and the state have painfully discovered that religion is an extremely complex issue. It has caused conflicts lasting centuries. Experience has shown that it is better if this issue does not become too prominent. In light of this situation, I do not envisage a resurgence of religion.