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GSJ View

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The Crisis in the Catholic Church Comes at a Bad Time

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- 1 Hardly a day goes by without reports in the media criticizing the internal state of the Roman Catholic Church. Every month another topic hits the headlines: sexual abuse in schools, hospitals' refusal to treat rape victims, discrimination against homosexuals and divorced members of staff at Catholic institutions. Surveys show that members of the Church are increasingly rebelling against celibacy, the Church's teachings on sexuality, the exclusion of the laity and the handling of cases of abuse. The Roman Catholic Church as an institution and the world's Roman Catholics are drifting increasingly apart. Can members of other faiths be indifferent to this? Should they even be secretly pleased by it? My answer is a very emphatic No.
- 2 Let's take a look at the world as a whole: the fact that Islam is on the advance worldwide is not in itself a worrying phenomenon. That this advance sometimes involves violence, terrorism and the persecution of members of other faiths (all too often Christians), however, is extremely worrying. At a time like this, what Christians actually need is a high degree of global cross-denominational unity. And our Churches need to be close to the faithful in the practical basic questions of life; they should be a source of strength in dealing with the challenges of today and tomorrow, and provide guidance on day-to-day "moral" issues. People are demanding common solutions to the global problems and challenges. Unfortunately, ecumenism is not fashionable at the moment; the renewed rejection of full communion between Catholics and Protestants at the end of the twentieth century leaves many members of both denominations speechless.
- 3 In the wake of the fall of numerous post-colonial dynasties and dictatorships and the failure of Arab nationalism, what we are seeing in the Arab world and beyond, far into Asia, is an increasing Islamization of politics and everyday life. What makes Islamism so successful is its broad grassroots appeal, the feeling of comprehensive solidarity between the Islamic religion, its representatives and the faithful. Not only does the Islamic religion itself give its followers moral guidance: the religion's representatives and organizations regularly provide ordinary Muslims with advice and help in everyday situations. This is true of both Sunnis and Shiites.
- 4 Even those who occupied the US Embassy in Tehran in 1979 were already so firmly anchored in the mass of the Shiite population of Iran that the collapse of the Shah's regime met with very broad approval. The Shiite Hezbollah in Lebanon derives its political power (and the willingness of many to turn a blind eye on Hezbollah's terrorist activities) from the fact that for decades its social institutions have helped the poorest of the poor where the state and secular society have failed to do so. The situation is very similar when it comes to the Sunni Hamas in Gaza, which has long maintained a direct link to Egypt's (Sunni) Muslim Brotherhood, which does enjoy broadly based support among the people (though it came to power through elections whose conduct can be criticized). Something similar can be said of the moderate wing of the Islamic movements in the Sahel region, which includes the northern part of Mali. Many developments in those parts of the world take place in the name of an Islam that is welcomed by the vast majority of the people because it succeeds in giving the impression of understanding the everyday lives and cares of ordinary people – and has the means to ease these cares and solve problems. This is far from a full explanation of Islamism as a phenomenon, but perhaps it goes some way to help us understand the tremendous support it enjoys among the people.

- 5 Christians around the world are in competition with the phenomenon of moderate, popular Islam. A comparable readiness to engage with ordinary people and their day-to-day lives is painfully lacking in many of our churches today. Both our everyday concerns and the global challenges are crying out for leadership and guidance from the main Christian denominations and their institutions and leaders. Some of what we have been hearing from the Vatican or from the pulpit, however, has absolutely nothing to do with real life. When will we see a Christian spring, especially in Rome? After years of stagnation the election of a new Pope offers huge opportunities here. The world needs the moral support of a universal church.

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Note

The author is State Secretary of the German Foreign Office (U.S. equivalent: Deputy Secretary of State) and Research Professor for Global Studies and Diplomacy at SBIGS, the Stony Brook Institute for Global Studies. The views expressed here are entirely the author's own.

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