

Dealing with uncertainty: Christian semantics and right-wing populism

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Introduction

Right-wing populism can be understood as both originating from people's experience of crisis and as a driver of crisis. From one follows the other, in defining the relationship between right-wing populism and social crisis phenomena (at least) two perspectives can be adopted: the first perspective addresses the idea that right-wing populism itself represents a form of crisis management, the second raises the question of how to react to or rather *cope with* right-wing populism as a manifestation of crisis. Against the backdrop of our research project, which examines the relationship between right-wing populism and Christian thought, and will be briefly introduced in the following, we therefore take a twofold approach. First, we investigate how populism itself can be interpreted as an expression of crisis (on the controversy of this interpretation cf. e.g. Müller 2016, 20). In this context, we argue that neither left- nor right-wing populisms develop randomly. Rather, they stem from personal experiences of crisis and are often connected to feelings of disenchantment and powerlessness (Priester 2012, 7). This implies that populism can be seen as a corrective to democracy. It renders deformities—such as a fundamental representational problem—visible and in the best-case scenario even enabling them to 'heal'. Secondly, right-wing populism constitutes a kind of crisis within church communication—not only from the perspective of liberal-minded church members, but also from the perspective of a church leadership that cares about inner church plurality (as it is the case in the mainline Protestant church in Germany), it may be asked: how to deal with church

members who are (at least partly) guided by images of group related enmity? The crisis, in our view, also consists in the fact that there is little common understanding of how to deal with such prejudicial attitudes when they are found both outside and inside the Church. Thus, in a wider sense, the crisis raises the question of how to deal with ideological plurality. Our study "Religion und Rechtspopulismus/-extremismus: Analysen von Narrationen vorurteilsbezogener Kommunikation und Hassrede online" ("Religion and right-wing populism/-extremism: an analysis of narrative configurations of biased communication and hate speech online") analyzes interpretations of Christian topoi and practices of ideological actors in the context of prejudice-related communication. Such communication, we show, manifests itself in narrative patterns and narratives or narrative fragments. Before we note some findings, let us ask in advance: What is right-wing populism? What is linguistic violence? The design of the study will also be briefly presented.

What is right-wing populism?

Populism can be understood as what Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser in reference to Michael Freeden call a *thin-centered ideology* (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 6). Labeling populism as 'thin' or 'weak' acknowledges its highly fluid and adaptable character and points to the fact that populism does rely on a holistic, more elaborated ideology, i. e., a host-ideology. Although due to its fluid character, populism is able to take on a huge variety of different appearances stretching politically from





right to left, it does not follow that populism can randomly be morphed into all kinds of different forms of appearances. Rather, populism is characterized by specific key messages (cf. Virchow 2016, 19) rendering it a phenomenon *sui generis*. Its most important feature is a firm *anti-elitism*. Populism's anti-elitism manifests itself in the assumption that society is "ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 6). In other words, anti-elitism or anti-establishment conforms to the idea that society is marked by a dichotomous opposition based on morality. Based on this model, 'the people' are visualized as a primordial entity possessing an invariant homogenous will. Populists consider themselves as the representative of people's will. German political sociologist Karin Priester adds further characteristics to these core elements: the reference to 'one's own', accompanied by a rejection of globalization, cosmopolitanism and universalism, the interpretation of the currently experienced history as decline and decadence, and finally a moralizing with regard to political action (Priester 2019, 12-13).

As indicated, populism can appear as politically right as well as left. What separates the two forms are their concepts of nation and people. Right-wing populists differ from left-wing populists in promoting sociopolitical exclusion: the national autochthonous population is supposed to be the first and sole addressee of social welfare and political concern (cf. Priester 2016, 546). This is not to say that right-wing populists do not invoke the idea of inclusion. Quite the contrary: inclusion is of great importance insofar as it means fostering a shared identity and solidarity with one's 'own people' within a society that is otherwise deemed cold and egoistic (Priester 2019, 17). Against this backdrop, there is still controversy about whether (right-wing) populism originates from sociopolitical crisis. Nevertheless, it is not possible to fully dismiss both the facts that from the perspective of right-wing populist agents society lacks solidarity and socioeconomic stability, and that it is this perception that gives rise to feelings of powerlessness and disillusionment and the need to dissolve them.

Linguistic violence

Looking at texts either located in right-wing populist/extremist communication or texts in other contexts using motifs, narratives, argumentations that can also be found in rightwing populist/extreme contexts, it quickly becomes clear that the reader often has to deal with forms of linguistic violence. In order to see which forms of linguistic, crisis-inducing violence can be found in our material, it was necessary to ask: How can we understand linguistic violence?

Following John Langshaw Austin's speech act theory and its further developments, it has become a conventionalized interpretation in the humanities and cultural studies that speech is always action. With Sybille Krämer, a German theoretical philosopher, we assume that linguistic action can also have *destructive* effects (cf. Krämer 2007, 32-33). Thus, in a performative sense, linguistic violence represents "speech that in being performed is at the same time a form of exercised violence" (Krämer 2007, 35 [translation KM]). The absence of address, silence and silencing can also be forms of linguistic violence. Performative speech 'does' something to a person, and the kind of change that performative speech brings about can admittedly also be negative: disparagement and humiliation can put people in a social situation that is precarious (Herrmann and Kuch 2007, 12), and the precarious social situation can also be produced by misrecognition (in the sense of a symbolic negation). Alterity can either be negated (by forcing the particular into the general, the conventional—on the violent dimensions of the structure of language cf. e.g. Adorno 1996; on the regulating structures of discourse cf. (Foucault 1991), or it can be exhibited, ostracized, and demonized—as is often the case in the material of our study—so that the recognition of the other, the foreign, is no longer possible. Both negate the legitimacy of the other's own place—and in this respect both are a form of violence in symbolic-social terms. With reference to Judith Butler, Krämer also shows how speech and the act of violation are interrelated: in the constitution of our subjecthood, Butler argues, we are dependent on an invocation by the Other, dependent "in order to be" (Butler 2018, 48; here, Butler adopts Althusser's theory of interpellation, cf. Althusser 1977). And this constitution is, of course, also vulnerable. Linguistic violations are "effects of a social practice and of social asymmetries" (Herrmann and Kuch 2007, 13 [translation KM]).

Hate speech lives on repetition, on citation, it updates contexts of injury and hatred, and continues the subjugation of subjects through certain forms of language or forms of address. Butler sees this as a possible ritual dimension of linguistic violence. Linguistic violence can thus very often refer to resentments that have already been socially conventionalized and have migrated into everyday linguistic usage, be it racist or sexist etc. resentments (Herrmann and Kuch 2007, 15).

If one now looks for the ‘grammar of linguistic discrimination’, various elements can be found: differentiation and separation (between ‘us’ and ‘them’), stereotyping and categorization, disparagement, and devaluation (Krämer 2007, 43–44). Verbal violence or hate speech can be indirect or direct, covert or overt, it can be supported by power and authority, it can be accompanied by physical violence or not, it can be “more or less strong” (Meibauer 2013, 2 [translation; KM]). With regard to the material of our study, the form of *indirect* violation is most interesting and important: the speech’s ‘victim’ is not directly addressed; rather, it is a third party with whom a person or a (constructed) group is discussed (Krämer 2007, 45), and it is an audience with whom forms of linguistic subjection are processed or actualized.

Pejorative aspects can be found on the most diverse levels of speech, from phonology to morphology to pragmatics and semantics. The contextual understanding of language and speech acts makes it clear that the understanding of linguistic violence is also only ever possible in a context-related way.

Design and method

Our research project¹ as its title indicates was primarily concerned with analyzing how agents interpret and accommodate religious topics and practices within biased communication online which manifests itself in patterns of narration, narratives, or rather fragments thereof (cf. Merle and Watzel

2022). As is generally the case with empirical studies online, we were confronted with an overflowing pool of data that we decided to limit by applying two selection criteria.

The first criterion was content related. We focused on journalistic texts and (blog)posts/comments that emerged in connection with the Evangelical Church in Germany’s (EKD) decision to establish an alliance (*united4rescue*) to support sea rescue missions on the Mediterranean Sea, the funding and acquisition of a rescue ship (*sea watch 4*), and the ship’s first mission. In accordance with this focus, we delimited our time frame to the period starting from the Church’s initial decision to support sea rescue operations at the *German Protestant Kirchentag* (DEKT) in Dortmund on June 19th, 2019 through the end of August, to be able to take the ship’s first mission on August 15th, 2020 into account, as well as conform to the research association’s timetable (2019–2021). Data gathering was conducted via several key words that turned out to be most productive after a first explorative phase of data analysis. Thereby, various platforms and text types came into focus: posts and threads on *Facebook* and *Twitter*, articles from online journals and blog entries, both including user comments relating thereto, as well as letters, mainly e-mails, to the *EKD Info Service* (a contact point for church matters). The second selection criterion complies with our goal to take different communication contexts into account that unfold along a presumed left to right spectrum in order to illustrate how the severity and intransigence of biased communication varies throughout. Our assumptions were both that content, language and interaction rely on its contextual embeddedness and that tracking contextual differences might provide us with some insight into how a scope of action could look like when confronted with right-wing populist and xenophobic statements that draw on Christian thought and values.²

1 The research project “Religion and right-wing populism/extremism: an analysis of narrative configurations of biased communication and hate speech online” (“Religion und Rechtspopulismus/-extremismus. Analysen von Narrationen vorurteilsbezogener Kommunikation und Hassrede online”) was part of the EKD (Evangelical Church in Germany)-funded research association “Church Membership and Political Culture”.

2 The question of data collection was of course considered from a research-ethical perspective. In the context of social media, only publicly accessible comments (accessible without a user account) were included in the data pool. Emails to the Info Service represent a separate ‘genre’. All data was fully pseudonymized (names and other information do not allow conclusions about the author). The data has been archived by the researchers and can be viewed if required. On the issue of ethical guidelines regarding internet research, see also: Association of Internet Researchers 2019.



Employing the concept of ‘narrative’ as an analytical tool enabled us to assess both short posts and longer texts like e-mails because, as semiotic semantic structures, narratives underlie all forms of communication (Müller 2019, 3). Screening our material in our qualitative study, we identified a right-wing populist/extremist master narrative taking both a minimal definition of narrative (Prince 1973) and the key features of right-wing populism outlined above into account. The master narrative reads as follows: a) Germany has been the homeland of the German people (=autochthonous population) and is characterized by a faultless religious social structure, b) the corrupt church elite has been and is still betraying their faith, country and culture for their own (financial) benefit, c) Germany with its social structure and Christian values falls apart—the ‘true’ Christians recognize this development and resist and fight against the elite as well as the culturally foreign influence. This master narrative allowed us to discover narrative fragments, their variants, and contextual modifications.

Manifestations of crisis: Findings

Against the backdrop of the right-wing populist master narrative and its contextual modifications, particularly three aspects strike us as manifestations of crisis. They provide support to the idea that (right-wing) populism must be considered as both originating from people’s experience of crisis and as a driver of crisis.

Resource crisis—crisis of representation?

The first aspect points to the critics’ portrayal of the Church representatives as corrupt elite, a portrayal that is associated with experiences of resources scarcity. Anti-elitism, as mentioned above, represents a fundamental feature of populism. It is in this light, that we interpret the comments of those agents who draw on right-wing populist clichés and consider the Church’s commitment to sea rescue as overstepping or failing in their actual role as a representative of Christian values and social welfare. The line of thought of such criticism reads as follows: the Church’s and its representatives’ commitment to sea rescue does not serve their own people but harms them. In supporting sea rescue the Church encumbers their own people with the financial and socio-political consequences sea rescue missions have.

Moreover, the Church underestimates or deliberately accepts the threats to their own culture and values. This line of thought interlinks the feeling of existential and symbolic endangerment with a feeling of betrayal by the Church and its representatives, rendering them responsible for society’s presumed instability:

It is not the churches that should be destroyed; rather, it is the false and hypocritical church leaders that need to be removed. Get rid of them. A lot of pastors in the smaller communities who do not agree to this crap feel left alone. If there are no churches left, what will we have to set against the Islamists? Soon there will be more mosques than churches. Here, cause and effect are mixed-up. Don’t put up with that. Our culture, also for the non-believers, is what it is all about. The churches belong to Europe. Let’s make sure, that they once again represent the people of our country. Like the current government failing to represent their people the church leaders need to be replaced because they do no longer represent the believers’ values instead they follow the mainstream. (FB #Schlepper (4), 116 [translation AW])

Beyond expressions of pure hatred and disapproval, and conspiracist views that are typical of comments on the far-right, the data confronts us with users pointing to irritating experiences and expressing their astonishment and concern about the Church’s setting of priorities in light of resource conflicts they claim to perceive and feel. In their opinion, the Church neglects their essential tasks, i.e., pastoral care, the proclamation of God’s word, and basic social, diaconal responsibilities:

Every other child who lives in Ruhr Valley is genuinely poor. Why is the EKD focused only on foreign affairs? Why do they never denounce the poverty and the hopelessness that is in Germany? (FB #leavenoonebehind (2), 53 [translation AW])

It seems that a lot of users find it hard to acknowledge that the money for the ship’s acquisition did not stem from Church taxes, but was raised by donations. Their statements reflect a strong sense of being in a situation of resource scarcity, and the impression of being exposed to a constant (worldwide) competitive struggle. In addition to worrying that the Church fails to satisfy its actual purpose, opponents charge that the Church is overstepping its area of responsibility. Some users’ complaints that the Church increasingly acts as an NGO can be interpreted similarly: in representing specific political positions and appealing to the likeminded, the Church symbolically excludes people who have a

differing opinion but who are in fact official Church members.

What we aimed at demonstrating so far is that most of the critical voices throughout the various contexts struggle with the impression of being disconnected from the Church and its representatives. In feeling unheard and misunderstood, they interpret the Church's initiative as clear evidence for such disconnectedness. Such an impression is not least nurtured by the fact that the Church's participation in sea rescue does not seem to be a topic that is embedded in people's daily social environment, i.e., their local Church communities. Rather, it seems to be a debate that is conveyed primarily by the media and associated with particular individuals representing the Church.

Crises of interaction

While the first aspect consequently might be understood as pointing to a crisis of representation, the second one concerns the crisis of interaction the debate on sea rescue exposes. Comments drawing on right-wing populist narratives very often involve verbal abuse, aggression or hate speech. In doing so, they present a major challenge for a joint discourse, or to put it another way, they enhance conflicts in communication by provoking counterviolence. The further right on the contextual spectrum, the more comments involve linguistic violence.

This observation is closely linked to the fact that those contexts constitute filter bubbles or self-referential communities: they repress differing views while self-affirming their own standpoint thus leaving verbal aggression and hate speech unquestioned. Consequently, they seem like hermetically sealed social spheres, although technically speaking they are open to anyone. At times, such online journals and blogs' self-affirming appearance even evokes the impression that commenting serves as a strategy for the users to cope with their feelings of crisis and personal worries. From this, it follows, that contexts tend to particularly function as echo chambers reinforcing right-wing populist and extremist narratives. In comparison, the publicly available threads on *Facebook* and *Twitter* appear to be more diverse and less static or settled. The more dynamic environment leaves room for opposition and the possibility to challenge verbal aggression.

Apart from such rather formal aspects, instances of linguistic violence often appear in our data in comments drawing on the basic semantic figure of

'the familiar—the foreign' (Busse 1997). The further right, the more lucidly users portray this difference between what counts as familiar and foreign in a discriminating way, in order to justify their presumed values: they constitute their own worldview and community by distancing themselves from the foreign that is labeled deviant and, in some instances, is even demonized. In the majority of cases, what is defined as different and deviant equates to the religiously foreign, i.e. people of Muslim belief.

We noticed that the users' strengthening of the difference between 'the familiar' and 'the foreign' corresponds to a shift in who they regard as the 'main perpetrators' being responsible for their own misery and society's decline, economic and otherwise. Comments by what we consider to be the middle field address primarily the Church representatives or rather Church 'elite': they criticize their irresponsible attitude towards the consequences of their involvement in sea rescue. What they find particularly problematic is the allegedly additional burden for the social system and the taxpayers. In contrast, further right users do not take the Church 'elite' for the (sole) cause of their own situations' aggravation or the presumed additional burden. Rather, they hold the culturally foreign responsible while perceiving the Church 'elite' as secondary cause, i.e., the actual perpetrators' *accomplices*. Syntactically, the mounting demonization of the (religiously) foreign manifests itself in the fact that Muslims and also people of color (especially men) are put in subject position, thus labeled as agents who display criminal and deviant behavior and attitudes while the commentators in question present themselves as innocent victims. In their view, it is the culturally foreign and the Church representatives supporting them that pose a threat to our democratic society and set of values. The further right, we are more often confronted with statements that must be regarded as group-based enmity. At the same time, comments that entail insults and defamatory naming towards Church representatives become more frequent. The following comment demonizes Muslims by falling back on generalizations and claiming that immigrants of Muslim belief feel nothing but hate for Germany and consequently are engaged in planning acts of war:

The overwhelming majority of these 'refugees' are Islamists who brutally fought for ISIS and ruined their own country. These 'people' will hate Germany too, and bring armed conflict to us if we let them in. [...] But these two preachers ['Pfaffen'] studied 'Belief', and this is why they



are actually clueless. At best, these “Christians” only know how to destroy themselves [‘den Weg der Selbstzerstörung’]. (JF_EKDRettungsschiff (=1), 262 [translation AW])

The increased differentiation between the foreign and familiar equates to an exclusionary notion of nation and people that reflects on the users’ interpretation of Christian topoi, values, and biblical stories. In this context, neighborly love represents one of the most frequently discussed and contested Christian topoi, often accompanied by the recourse to the story of the Good Samaritan. Critical comments that can be placed in the ‘middle’ field are those that question the moral acceptability of the Church’s commitment by arguing that the Church oversteps its area of responsibility for neighborly love. By contrast, further right-wing users refuse to consider the Church’s involvement in sea rescue as constituting neighborly love stating that it harms their own people. What becomes clear here is that the benchmark of neighborly love represents the idea that the consequences of action need to benefit primarily the autochthonous population, i. e., an increased differentiation between the foreign and the familiar that ultimately leads to the demonization of the latter. This, in turn, colors the comments’ interpretation of neighborly love resulting in a narrow, territorially bound rather than universal concept.

From this the question arises how to engage with users that appear to invoke such a narrow concept of neighborly love that presumably results from an emphasized differentiation between the foreign and the familiar. A lot of users in the *Facebook* threads we analyzed who strongly support the Church’s advocacy and commitment to sea rescue seem offended by such a narrow concept. They allow themselves to equally provoke their interlocutor and in some instance to question their commitment to Christianity. Our material shows that such provocative responses are anything but beneficial for achieving substantial progress in dialogue—they leave the factual level of discussion. Moralizing and lecturing appear to be equally problematic because they establish an asymmetric communication relation that gives rise to a feeling of intellectual inferiority. We believe that to foster dialogue it is important to closely ‘listen’, to pay attention to details and, in doing so, to enter into an open-minded exchange about important everyday experiences—because personal experiences constitute both a crucial source to learn something about the interlocutor’s intentions and

the horizon against which biblical stories and topoi are interpreted. But ‘listening’ closely does not equate to fully abandoning reasonable objections.

Rather, it is a matter of questioning inconsistencies and non-transparent assumptions on which the statement ultimately rests. Revealing one’s background assumptions is a necessary condition for an exchange that aims at mutual understanding.

Practices of crisis orchestration

In comparison to the second aspect, displaying crisis as a practical effect of prejudice-related communication, the third one points to practices of crisis orchestration. Particularly in those communication contexts further right on the spectrum, our data confronts us with comments that paint vivid threats and doom scenarios which in some instances employ extremely violent images. Within these scenarios a key role is attributed to the Church representatives. They are made responsible for a whole set of negative events and developments. As already indicated above, critics consider the (autochthonous) population as suffering from the Church’s lack of attention. Apart from such an assumption rooted in experiences of resource scarcity and the emphasis on national priority, some users’ accusations against the Church representatives are more strongly motivated by their perspective on the difference between the foreign and the familiar as outlined above. The guiding principle of their accusation constitutes the idea that owing to their support for sea rescue the Church representatives abet culturally foreign influences that ultimately lead to a decline of their own peoples’ identity. Such narratives of identity decay rest on an ethno-pluralistic worldview that aims at maintaining cultural purity (cf. Weiss 2017, 16sq). From this viewpoint, the (post-)modern globalization dynamic represents the relevant source of danger since it makes the blurring of national boundaries more likely, i. e., it carries the danger of—to put it in a term repeatedly invoked by the ‘New Right’—a ‘great exchange’. Some users in our data also use the term ‘Umvolkung’ [ethnicity inversion] in this context.

But right-wing populists do not understand the globalization dynamic as the primary reason for cultural amalgamation. Rather, they hold society’s (post-)modern attitude responsible—an attitude that in their eyes is, in particular, encouraged by the social elite and frequently characterized as ‘liberal decadence’ because it lacks awareness for a cultural heritage or tradition. As a result, the imagined cul-

tural community (the autochthonous people) loses its very own identity and historical continuity. From this identity crisis a cultural, or rather religious vacuum emerges enabling other cultural and religious forms to invade.

In our data such considerations manifest themselves in comments that accuse the Church ‘elite’ of neglecting their role as representatives of the Christian value system by supporting refugees of Muslim belief thus fostering the decay of their own cultural identity instead of preserving the same. Here, users draw threat scenarios that picture people of Muslim belief as criminals showing sexually abnormal behavior and even stage Islam per se as a massive safety hazard. While some comments interpret the Church representatives’ commitment as an expression of delusion and misjudgment obstructing their proper perception of the threat others accuse them of intentionally facilitating their own people’s cultural decay.

The process of ‘Umvolkung’ can’t go fast enough for the EKD – especially for Bedford [sic]-Strohm. These people are doing everything they can to flood Germany with bogus asylum seekers from foreign countries, until our country is no longer recognizable. They have no concern for the German population. On the contrary, they weigh down citizens with ever-more demands in the hope of reaching their own ludicrous goals. They couldn’t care less about the fact that the German taxpayer must finance this whole business of asylum-seeker tourism. Sure, [Bedford-Strohm et al.] act like good people ... they have a noble character. These dreamers who are totally out of touch with reality at least really believe in what they’re doing. (JF_EKD-Rettungsschiff (=1), 169 [translation AW])

It is these comments questioning the Church representatives’ good intentions which adopt conspiracy narratives. Some of them claim that they pursue a large-scale agenda that benefits them financially, few even compare this course of action to the medieval selling of indulgence, others consider it to be a manifestation of the capitalist rational, i. e., an asylum industry (‘Asylindustrie’). In the framework of those comments, accusing the Church representatives of unethical or corrupt intentions and betrayal we were faced with several cases which identify the Church representatives with biblical figures, namely the Pharisees and Judas thus invoking antisemitic stereotypes (cf. Schwarz-Friesel 2019, 35). Some users even employ the metaphor of Satan in their judgment about the Church representatives—an image that has a long history of being used to dehumanize

Jewish people (cf. Schwarz-Friesel 2019, 34) which frequently figures in conspiracy theories (cf. Butter 2018, 94). In doing so, they portray the Church representatives as (self-)destructive force that creates chaos. In some instances, the impression of the Church ‘elite’ as betraying its own people and faith results in a desire for revenge. It manifests itself in judgment fantasies that are packed with aggressive language and violent images. The following comment deploys the image of ‘hell’ as description of the punishment the EKD-president (Bedford-Strohm) is supposed to receive:

“Bedford-Strohm is a Judas who betrays Christians by supporting their worst enemies. He should sizzle in the fires of hell.” (PI_Seenotrettung (=2), 668 [translation AW])

Concluding thoughts

What our findings essentially point to is that evaluating aspects of crisis within right-wing populist and extremist speech that is related to Christian thought and the church requires a differentiated analysis. It seems to be crucial to distinguish closely between right-wing users who are aiming to obtain cultural hegemony through strategically orchestrating crisis scenarios and using hate speech from those who, due to personal dispositions and experience of everyday resource scarcity, gratuitously draw on right-wing populist narratives. This is not to say that the latter should not be held responsible for their statements and attitudes. For communicative reasons, it is reasonable to compile a detailed picture of one’s interlocutor in order to be able to evaluate one’s own scope of action. Similarly, it is necessary to distinguish the amount and intensity of verbal aggression and hate speech the comments display. Our material confronts us with very different stages of violent language. The central question here is: what remains when we strip a statement of its violence? In quite a number of cases, we are left with nothing more than language functionally reduced to a tool utilized to hurt others. It is in these cases that the crisis of interaction reaches its peak since all efforts to enable mutual understanding or discursive progress are blighted from the start. But we also came across comments unveiling worries and fears as well as negative experiences that can constitute the starting point of an open-minded dialogue. In light of religious questions, we believe that it is important to foster the *practice of a contex-*



tualizing theology. Our material emphasizes the fact that biblical stories and topoi are open to different readings and interpreted based on individual experiences and backgrounds. With the intention of an understanding between different positions, what is needed is both to evaluate the biblical texts' interpretative horizons as well as to elucidate the conditionality of one's own position.

In closing, we would like to highlight two areas of concern that we take to be important in considering the Church's commitment and tasks. The first area refers to the issue of diversity within the Church: how can the Church become competent to deal constructively with the most diverse spiritual and political views? The second area of concern rests on the idea that verbal aggression and hate speech usually spring from social conventions. Consequently, what needs to be considered is where the church itself employs violent speech or rather speech that can be experienced as violent. Here, violence does not only mean the misrecognition of particular groups, individuals, and their life plans but also practices of stigmatization. The Church needs to raise awareness for violent speech and its systematic culturally inherited character—not least in its own practices.

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