

Germany: major churches, conservative opposition line up with US Christian right on Schiavo case

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The right-wing campaign of Christian fundamentalists and the Bush administration around the case of Terri Schiavo, who was in a persistent vegetative state for 15 years, has won support in Germany from conservative circles, in particular the Catholic and Evangelical churches and the conservative opposition parties—the Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU).

The Central Committee of German Catholics welcomed the decision by Bush to sign an emergency law aimed at reinserting Schiavo's feeding tube—in defiance of Schiavo's own wishes as confirmed by court rulings in Florida, where Schiavo's hospice was located.

Then, following Schiavo's death, the chairman of the German Catholic Bishops Conference, Cardinal Karl Lehmann, stated in a press release: "With great sadness and dismay we heard the news of the death of Terri Schiavo. The suffering of Terri Schiavo and the public struggle by her parents for her life deeply moved many people all over the world. We expressly note the fact that letting a person like Terri Schiavo starve to death is ethically impermissible."

The chairman of the Evangelical Church Council in Germany, Bishop Wolfgang Huber, expressed himself in a somewhat more circumspect manner. He spoke of a "very great ethical dilemma," but declared that in his opinion "awake coma patients" such as Schiavo were persons "who were alive" and had to be treated as "living persons." He said Schiavo had been left to starve to death against her avowed will.

Hubert Hüppe, a deputy in the German parliament (Bundestag) representing the CDU/CSU faction on issues relating to handicapped persons, published a

statement that ignored all of the basic facts in the case and echoed the agitation of religious fanatics in the US. He spoke of an "agonising death" resulting from dehydration, and characterised Schiavo as merely having a "severe disability."

He went so far as to claim that this represented "an implicit judgement" that Schiavo was "not fit to live" and marked "the first step towards the euthanasia of disabled persons." He was obviously alluding to the euthanasia policy of the Nazi regime, which killed some 170,000 mentally handicapped persons.

Hüppe, who is active in the Catholic Church, is deputy chairman of the federal parliamentary commission into the "ethics and legal status of modern medicine," as well as deputy chairman of the anti-abortion organisations "Christian Democrats for Life" and "Action: the Right to Life for All." The latter organisation had welcomed the re-election of Bush as an "important advance in the protection of unborn children." On another occasion, the organisation expressly supported the Cologne bishop Joachim Meisner, who compared the practice of abortion to the Holocaust.

In a number of legal proceedings, it was proven that Terri Schiavo had expressed to her husband, Michael, and in the presence of other witnesses that she did not want to be artificially kept alive through life-support measures should she ever end up in a prolonged unconscious state.

Contrary to the statements of Hüppe and others, the wishes of Terri were quite clear, and were challenged by her parents only on the basis of their own religious beliefs. Indeed, her parents had told a court that they would be opposed to ending life-support measures

regardless of their daughter's expressed will.

Numerous scientific appraisals proved that the brain of Terri Schiavo was so severely damaged that it was incapable of sensation or consciousness. She was not merely mentally "handicapped." Rather, her cerebral cortex had been destroyed as a result of oxygen deprivation, and she was consequently incapable of being conscious of herself or her environment, and could feel neither pain, nor hunger, nor thirst.

At first sight, the statements issued by the major churches might seem surprising. A current edition of a magazine published by the Evangelical and Catholic churches in Germany indicates that the removal of feeding tubes in such cases is "ethically permissible."

The stance adopted by church leaders in the Schiavo case can only be regarded as politically motivated. Not coincidentally, prominent church figures had recently defended far-reaching cuts in the German welfare system enacted by the government (the Hartz IV measures) as "necessary reforms."

Formerly, in the name of Christian solidarity, the churches defended capitalism as a whole, but criticised some of its excesses and called for greater social justice. Today, social reconciliation is no longer possible within the framework of the existing system. As a result, church leaders, whose organisations are generously subsidised by the state, respond in accordance with their historical role: they encourage irrationalism, bigotry and submission, while protecting the interests of the rich and powerful.



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