

Berlin: Pro-religion referendum suffers resounding defeat

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The churches and Germany's main conservative party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), have suffered a resounding defeat in Berlin. A campaign organised by the churches and the CDU for the compulsory teaching of religion in Berlin schools, known as the "Pro-Reli" campaign, was decisively rejected by the population of Berlin in a popular referendum held April 26.

In order for the "Pro-Reli" campaign to be successful it required not only the support of a majority of those taking part in the vote. The terms of the referendum also required that at least a quarter of all Berlin citizens, or 611,422, vote in favour of the initiative. The "Pro-Reli" campaign failed on both counts. With a voter turnout of just 29.2 percent, a majority of 51.3 percent voted against the compulsory introduction of religion in schools. Just 14.2 percent of voters, or 346,119, supported the initiative.

Prior to the referendum, the CDU and the free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP), together with the Protestant and Catholic churches, organised a huge propaganda campaign involving prominent media figures such as television moderator Günther Jauch. Estimates of the money spent by the "Pro-Reli" campaign vary between several hundred thousand to more than €1 million.

These sums do not take into account the intervention of celebrities who gave their services free of charge for posters and radio spots supporting the "Pro-Reli" campaign. For months prior to the referendum, ministers and priests also used their church pulpits to propagate their support for the "Pro-Reli" campaign. Other figures who expressed their support for the campaign included Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU), the parliamentary vice-president, Wolfgang Thierse, and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (both of the Social Democratic Party, SPD).

In their own propaganda, the churches and their supporters blatantly and demagogically employed half-

truths and lies. Any other course was not open to them. If they had been honest, they would have had to say: "So far, the attendance by Berlin school children at religious education classes has been voluntary. We are now demanding that religious education be made compulsory for all school children. Anyone who objects to compulsory religious instruction must attend ethics instruction instead! Whoever studies religion, however, cannot also attend ethics instruction."

Instead of admitting the true content of their campaign, "Pro-Reli" supporters brazenly claimed that the issue was about "freedom." Quite deliberately, the "Pro-Reli" campaign tried to promote the impression that the Senate in Berlin, consisting of a coalition of the Left Party and the SPD, was seeking to suppress the freedom of religion and indoctrinate the citizens of Berlin in atheism. It was no coincidence that the slogans used by "Pro-Reli" supporters recalled the conservative battle cry from the Cold War: "Freedom instead of socialism."

Prelate Bernhard Fellmberg, who is the representative of the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD), explained in an interview that he had "nearly the impression that sections of the Berlin SPD had not fully digested their Godesberg programme," referring to the policy adopted by the SPD in 1959 whereby it formally broke with any adherence to socialism and also ended its opposition to organised religion.

Bishop Huber even went so far as to declare the existing model of school instruction in Berlin to be unconstitutional. "Unlike under the constitution (Basic Law) and in nearly all other German states, religion is not a compulsory subject in Berlin schools."

In reality, the Basic Law expressly allows for such an exception in its article 141. In addition, the Federal Constitutional Court decided two years ago that the teaching of ethics as an alternative to religious instruction did not violate the fundamental rights of parents or pupils.

On the contrary, a victory for the “Pro-Reli” lobby in the Berlin referendum would have raised serious constitutional issues.

The “Pro-Reli” campaign also demagogically warned of the danger of “fundamentalism,” which allegedly emerged as a result of the type of voluntary religious education organised by religious communities themselves. In the first place, the religious community referred to here are Muslims, who constitute about 6 percent of the population of Berlin. There is no one Islamic “church,” however, comparable to those in Christianity. Instead, there is a multiplicity of different Islamic groups, associations and currents that would hardly be in a position to offer religious education comparable to the Christian authorities. Characteristically, only the Turkish DITIB, which is subordinate to the Turkish state, supported “Pro-Reli.”

What the churches meant by freedom was explained by Bishop Huber in an interview with German radio directly after the ballot: “Our church has sought for 15 years, since I have been a bishop, to change the status of religious education at Berlin schools, because pupils confront a choice between religious education and free time, which we do not regard to be the right way to proceed with the freedom of pupils.”

The demagogic campaign conducted around the “Pro-Reli” initiative also repelled many Christians, who constitute around a third of the electorate in Berlin. More than half of the population is not associated with any religion. Even some ministers—particularly from non-Christian dominated neighborhoods—engaged themselves in the “Christian pro-ethics” campaign, because they attached importance to instruction in a common worldview for young people on the basis of an instruction in ethics. Church leaders allegedly sought to silence such critical voices.

All of the districts in the east of Berlin (which prior to 1989 were situated in the former Stalinist East Germany) voted by majority against the initiative, and there was also a large proportion of no votes in city centre districts. Only in the wealthier western suburbs was there a clear majority for “Pro-Reli.”

In an interview with the *Berliner Morgenpost* after the vote, Bishop Huber viciously attacked the Berlin Senate: “In the east the supporters of a policy were obviously mobilised who have nothing in common with being Christian.... In this connection, one must refer to the politics conducted in Berlin. In my opinion, the governing parties have failed to take up responsibility for the whole

city. If one compares the results, for example, in Spandau and Steglitz [both in west Berlin] with those in Marzahn [east Berlin], then it becomes clear that political issues are being played out here.”

The stance taken by this man of the church towards democratic decisions that oppose his point of view was made clear in his answer to the question of whether the topic of religious education as a compulsory subject was no longer on the agenda. Huber responded that now “discussions with the Senate would follow on our part.” He said, “The elected government must explain to the churches”—which have just suffered a huge election defeat—“precisely how the content of ethics instruction is to be decided upon. I still think that a range of compromises must be found” to ensure the Senate guarantees “a value-oriented instruction.” In 2006, Huber had supported a campaign organised by the Protestant Church opposing ethics instruction, named “Values Need God.” The bishop additionally threatened: “Anyway, there could be different political constellations in the city once again.”

The city’s mayor, Wolfgang Wowereit (SPD), accused the churches of harming themselves with their campaign. But he then went on to declare: “We stand by the religions, we stand by the churches in this city.” He would be the last to celebrate, he said, if confessed Christians no longer attended religious education. Speaking on behalf of Wowereit’s Senate coalition partner in Berlin, Left Party manager Dietmar Bartsch advised his own party to seek dialogue with the churches regarding the teaching of ethics.

For centuries the organised churches in Germany have functioned as a reliable prop of the respective privileged ruling elites. The SPD and the Left Party want to maintain this state of affairs. As social divisions deepen, however, this is becoming increasingly difficult under conditions where the churches are losing influence. This tendency has once again been confirmed by the massive defeat for the “Pro-Reli” referendum.



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