AFRICAN CHRISTIANS IN THE GERMAN-SPEAKING DIASPORA OF EUROPE

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If, in Germany, one consults the Federal Office of Statistics (Statistisches Bundesamt) in order to obtain detailed data about religious communities or Christian denominations, one meets with generalisations and a lack of understanding. Religious communities are classified into Christian, Islamic, Jewish, and other religious groups and those which do not legally belong to a religious group. Smaller groupings are assigned to these two last mentioned categories!

In Germany approx. 600 religious communities practice their faith. This variety is only partially perceived by the population and the state and also the established churches. In the course of religious pluralization, Germany has developed from a society stamped by Christianity to a multi-religious society where ideas offered by the churches only seem to be one possibility besides many others.²

The dilemma of the non-transparency of the division of religious groups at state level also appears in the statistics of the Christian denominations: They are subdivided into Roman Catholic Church, Protestant Church and Protestant Free Church. In Germany, the lack of more precise criteria of differentiation, especially for the Protestant Churches and the Free Churches, leave a great deal of detail undiscovered. Thus, members of Philippine, Korean, Finnish, Indonesian, Japanese and also African Christian churches are mostly subsumed in the category “Protestant Church”. This blurring of the genuine identities has the consequence that, on the one hand the African Christian churches receive less attention and therefore enjoy less public awareness, and on the other hand they have to pay church taxes to the traditional mission churches which are collected by the state. Nevertheless, for the members of these churches it is still a matter of course to pay a contribution to their own church, since it is


financed by donations only. For many members of the Diaspora churches, this practice can lead to a high financial burden.

The individuality of these church communities is suppressed and therefore they do not get due attention. Quite often this simplified classification of the statisticians and the loss of members from the established churches, has led to the assumption, that there are non-religious times ahead of us. And yet the secular European society has not abandoned religiosity. Quite the contrary, there is a religious market of possibilities which is well frequented. This change in religious emphasis demands a rethinking and an opening on a political as well as the churches part, leading to an increased awareness and sensibility for the religious pluralism on our own doorstep.

As we have learned above, this religious pluralism also becomes apparent in a Christian, i.e. denominational pluralism. The African Initiated Churches (AIC)\(^3\) represent a considerable new development in the variety of denominations. This is caused by the great immigration to Europe of Africans in the eighties and nineties of the last century. Almost 500,000 Africans are residents in Germany.\(^4\) Approximately half of them are Christians. However, this doesn't mean that all of them practise in a similar manner their Christian faith in the foreign country. Leaders of congregations of African churches often complain that because of shift working and second jobs their members are prevented from attending church on Sundays. Moreover, for African Christians the secularised society with its leisure time and pleasure activities are a great stimulus, which also prevents them from attending the Sunday services. One must not make the mistake of idealising and falling into romanticism about the situation of African Christian Churches in the Diaspora. They are also confronted with the temptations of secularisation and have to struggle for active members.

Nevertheless, in Germany, numerous African Christians find their new home in the theological and sociological heterogeneous AICs. The communities and churches are places of refuge where they regain their strength and increase their belief and become able to cope with the

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3 In the debate on the African Christian churches I would not like to speak of African-Independent churches any more since in some cases the independence of the historical mission churches is 100 years ago, but I favour the concept of the African-Initiated Churches since it points to the self-initiative and the autocephaly of the respective church. The conceptuality of the African International Churches Gerrie ter Haar introduced in *Halfway to Paradise. African Christians in Europe* (Cardiff, 1998) does not appear to me as adequate as it does not take into consideration the different stages of identity search of African Christians in the Diaspora. The internationality in those Churches is not generally promoted and practised from the beginning.

4 Here, I have not yet taken into account the number of unrecorded cases of Africans living illegally in Germany.