



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
opening the sixth Forum Bellevue
“Is everything a matter of faith?
On the relationship between religion and democracy”
Berlin, 26 February 2019**

The churches are getting emptier, at least in Europe. Interest in religion, however, has not waned; indeed, it is growing. As today's event shows. So many of you wanted to attend that we even had to set up extra rows of chairs.

The facts and figures paint contradictory pictures: on the one hand, the importance of institutionally shaped religion in its traditional church-based form is decreasing. One in three people no longer identifies with a particular faith or denomination. In the major German cities, as was revealed a few days ago, the number of people leaving the church rose by 17 percent in 2018.

On the other hand, a good two thirds of people in our country do still identify as religious, and for many, faith has again come to play a very important role. I am thinking of young people from immigrant families who are in search of home and identity. However, I am thinking not only of them but also of the many others who yearn for orientation in these restless times of ours and who search for it in many different forms of religion and spirituality.

Some people claim that there is an underlying trend, a “return of religion” but, on the whole, there is little proof of that. However, one thing seems to me to be clear: the unstoppable secularisation thesis certainly falls short of the mark. German society today is not areligious, but pluri-religious. It is characterised by a new diversity of religions and forms of religious expression. Immigration is one cause for this, albeit not the only one. The majority of Germans are still either Catholic or Protestant, but the number of Orthodox Christians is growing. Jewish communities are again firmly rooted in Germany – even if it is a disgrace that synagogues in Germany have to be guarded by police officers. Above all, though, the number of Muslims is

growing, and the Muslims in Germany reflect the entire broad spectrum of Islam.

Then there are – in smaller numbers – Hindus, Buddhists and many, many others. Particularly in big cities, like here in Berlin, this religious diversity is visible in everyday life. We see people wearing a cross, a headscarf or a kippah in the same neighbourhood and on the same street.

We all know that where people with different religious upbringings, or believers and non-believers, live together, the possibility of conflict cannot be excluded. Not everyone in our country thinks that religious diversity is an asset; some feel threatened and believe that the world they live in, their culture and values, are in peril.

Religious diversity also often brings to the fore the sometimes charged relationship between the democratic constitutional state and religious communities. Whether it be a court ruling on crucifixes in schools, the debate over headscarves, the circumcision of boys, church labour law, the construction of mosques, or voluntary euthanasia – time and again in recent years, we have had increasingly heated debates in Germany about the limits of religious freedom, the legal entitlement of individual faith communities, and the presence of religious symbols in the public sphere.

Religion is back “as an issue of public debate with some force”, and I believe it important that we do not sweep conflicts under the rug, but rather address them through public discussions, as frankly as possible, but with respect for other lifestyles, including those other lifestyles which in everyday language we tend to dub “traditional” or “orthodox”. We must together search for solutions and negotiate rules for how we will live together, but we must also set clear limits wherever the dignity and integrity of the individual are called into question. This can often be hard work, and it demands that we all be tolerant and willing to compromise – sometimes more than we believe is possible for us. But people of different faiths can only coexist if we listen to each other and engage in respectful debate. That is precisely what we intend to do here today.

Our Basic Law is the firm foundation on which we can engage with each other, as citizens with equal rights, and settle our differences – no matter what our faith. What is non-negotiable, though, are the basic principles enshrined in our constitution: the fundamental and human rights of every individual, as well as democracy and the rule of law.

The Federal Constitutional Court confirmed once again in its judgement on crucifixes in classrooms that the state is required to remain neutral on ideological questions. At the same time, however, it

is the state's job to protect freedom of religion and freedom of professed religious beliefs or world views.

This freedom applies to all – to Christians, Muslims, Jews – but also atheists. In our country, no one should have to hide, deny or compromise their faith. But nor should anyone have to answer the crucial question – “Where do you stand on religion?” – if they do not wish to do so. Everyone should have the right to live in accordance with their beliefs, without fear or pressure to justify themselves. No one must be discriminated against or marginalised because of their faith. That is what the Basic Law says. And we certainly must not allow people to be insulted or attacked because they are wearing a headscarf, a kippah or a cross. There can be no place for such behaviour in Germany. And that is why we must take a resolute stand against it!

Things are no less adversarial when we talk about the co-existence of religions at international level. No region in the world is as scarred by religious conflicts as the Middle East. For German foreign policy, the following applies above all else: we have a historic responsibility to protect and defend Israel's right to exist, Mr Botmann, Charlotte Knobloch, and that remains our foremost political maxim!

At the weekend, members of the public wrote to me asking: how is this maxim compatible with a telegram marking the national holiday of Iran, a country with an authoritarian regime which – in the name of religion – rides roughshod over human rights and attacks Israel's right to exist time and again?

I understand this question. Indeed, I understand it very well. In the case of Iran, it has accompanied me quite literally throughout the decades of my political career. One thing which has particularly concerned me is that the danger to the region, and especially Israel, would be infinitely greater if Iran had nuclear weapons! That is why, together with many partners, I conducted hard and laborious negotiations over the course of many years until we managed in 2015 to conclude the nuclear agreement with Iran. And I believe to this very day that the German Government's efforts to uphold this agreement even in the face of American pressure are right! I do not believe it is better to simply abandon what was agreed, including the lever of sanctions, and to drive Iran even further into isolation and radicalisation.

In a world in which tensions are growing and conflicts are increasing, we have to address this one question: when dealing with states with which we have conflicts, do we limit ourselves to breaking off relations and isolating them? Or do we try – despite conflicting views – to maintain contact and thus to keep avenues for dialogue open?

I believe we need both: a readiness to voice criticism and confront open controversies. However, if we want to be heard then we have to keep up our efforts to ensure that communication channels are never completely closed! This insight is not new. It is reflected in decades-old customs – for example, the custom that states which maintain diplomatic relations send each other a polite congratulatory letter on their national holidays. Gestures of this kind are often nothing more than the desire of both sides to keep channels of communication open. And, of course, this gesture – as in the case of Iran today – stands alongside rather than replaces the many channels and formats in which criticism is voiced, or even sanctions are decided. I will continue to express criticism. Not least the regular visitors to this series of events will remember that I invited Salman Rushdie to my second Forum Bellevue. The Salman Rushdie against whom the Iranian regime initiated a murder campaign in reaction to his alleged blasphemy thirty years ago.

As in many other cases, both our compass and our criticism must be clear. In foreign policy, however, experience has shown me that we need a stand which voices criticism not merely for the sake of being right but to genuinely bring about changes in this world for the good! I hope that we will continue to take such a stand.

In our discussions here in Germany on the relationship between religion and the modern constitutional state, our frequent tendency to essentialise is all too often problematic. We talk about “Islam”, “Judaism”, “Christianity”. And this leads us easily to forget, firstly, that faith has been and continues to be practised in so many different ways, and secondly that all religious teachings and practices are greatly subject to historical change. Even the recent rather undifferentiated debate as to whether “Islam” belongs to Germany or not is a further reflection of this tendency.

We Christians would do well to remember how long it took for the churches to establish a positive relationship with the modern constitutional state. To remember how deeply many Protestants in the Weimar Republic mourned the monarchy, with a few notable exceptions, including Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, to name but two. To remember for how long homosexuality was demonised. Yes, and to remember that it is not all that long since the first women were ordained in the Protestant churches.

So the question is not whether Islam belongs to Germany – given the millions of Muslims living in our country, that question has long been answered. No, the real question is this: what kind of Islam belongs to Germany? What form does Islamic teaching and practice in keeping with life in a modern, pluralistic society take? The promotion of child marriages or disregard for women’s rights certainly have no place in our country!

It is clear that the question as to the right way to practise religion can only be answered by the faithful themselves. And they do, every day – the millions of Muslims who are our fellow citizens, our neighbours, who work, pay their taxes, bring up children, engage in society and help shape this country. The Islam which belongs to Germany has long been in existence, being put into practice millions of times over. But I also know from the conversations I have had just how much uncertainty, how great a need for clarification, there nonetheless is. I know that many young Muslims are searching for the ethical and spiritual orientation which the traditional authorities do not give them enough of. We want to talk about this area of tension today, too. An area of tension which, by the way, is not unfamiliar to the Christian churches either.

In an enlightened and liberal society, every religious community is expected to ask itself on a regular basis whether it is living up to its own claims regarding peaceableness, morality and love of truth, and how it defines its relationship to society, the state and the legal order. This includes permitting respectful but critical questioning by people of other faiths, or by non-believers, and remaining open to dialogue.

Only such doubting and being doubted preserves religions from sclerotic paralysis and fanatical dogmatism. Only such reflection can prevent the gap between religious teaching and the day-to-day lives of the faithful from widening so much that in the end it cannot be bridged.

Among university studies, theology was always a privileged place allowing self-questioning and encouraging dialogue. I emphatically welcome the fact that there are today chairs of Islamic theology at German universities and that you, Mr Khorchide, are teaching academics whose valuable contributions are enriching not only our debate here today about the relationship between society, state order and religion.

I am pleased to be able to welcome three guests who look at the relationship between religion and democracy through very different lenses.

Evelyn Finger is a journalist with the German newspaper Die Zeit, where she has for several years now headed the "Faith and Doubt" desk. She is an advocate of strict separation between religion and politics, and she has written an article proposing an eleventh commandment, namely "Thou shalt abstain from religious politicking!"

Ms Finger, you have just returned from Rome, where the Pope and Bishops met over the weekend to discuss the cases of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. We will also presently be talking about why the churches have lost credibility, and whether this has anything

to do with the teachings that are handed down strictly "from above", so to speak.

I am pleased that you are here today – welcome, Evelyn Finger!

Hans Joas, my second guest, is a Professor of the Sociology of Religion at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and at the University of Chicago. He studies how religious individuals and communities act in certain situations. He chooses not to use "the religions" as a blanket term. For many years he has been doing research into how values are actually created in a society.

We will be turning to him to help us discuss under what conditions religious communities can contribute to peaceful coexistence in a pluralistic society, as well as what religious motivation there might be for institutionalising or protecting individual freedoms.

Mr Joas, a very warm welcome to you too!

I mentioned my third guest a few moments ago: Mouhanad Khorchide. He is Professor of Islamic Pedagogy at the University of Münster, where he is head of the Islamic Theology Cluster of Excellence. One of the focuses of his research is how the Koran can be read with the historical-critical method, and how it can be linked to the modern, liberal tradition of thought.

His theses on "liberal" interpretation and reform of Islam are controversial. Some of his critics have accused him of currying favour with mainstream society. Some even accuse him of being unIslamic. In view of the hostilities to which he is exposed, I would like to state quite emphatically that whilst objective criticism is welcome, we cannot, and must never, tolerate threats, far less death threats!

Mr Khorchide, I am pleased that today we will have the opportunity to continue the debate on your theses. Thank you for being here today! I would now ask our panellists to come forward.

Thank you very much.