



Z ŻYCIA NAUKOWEGO

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Mission: Impossible!

Helmut Schmidt, the Churches, and the Christian Mission to the Jews: An Analytical Study. In Honor of Werner Ustorf, Emeritus Professor of Mission at the University of Birmingham, on the Occasion of His 80th Birthday

Abstract

This article examines the attitude of the former Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Helmut Schmidt (1918–2015), toward the Christian Churches, with particular emphasis on the issue of the Christian mission to the Jews. It argues that the Churches, as institutions embodying ethical standards for society, played a significant role in Schmidt's political thought. Notably, he was among the few politicians who rejected the idea of Christian missionary work directed at Jews as early as the 1960s.

Keywords: mission, Helmut Schmidt, Church

Słowa kluczowe: misja, Helmut Schmidt, Kościół

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The relationship between social democracy, the labor movement, and the Christian Churches remained tense for a considerable period. It was only following the adoption of the Godesberg Programme by the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) in 1959 – which explicitly affirmed public legal protection for religious communities and expressed a willingness to cooperate with the Churches on the basis of a free partnership – that a gradual rapprochement occurred.

Individual Social Democrats, such as Herbert Wehner (1906–1990), Hans-Jochen Vogel (1926–2020), Hermann Schmitt-Vockenhausen (1923–1979),

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Heinz Rapp (1924–2007), Helmut Schmidt (1918–2015), and Georg Leber (1920–2013), recognized this previous neglect and, out of personal conviction, actively and passionately committed themselves to the process of reconciliation – ultimately with notable success. As a consequence, the reservations and criticisms directed at the SPD by the Churches diminished, enabling the party to secure a significantly higher proportion of votes, initially among Protestants and subsequently Catholics, eventually establishing itself as a majority party at the federal level.

Moreover, the relationship between political parties and Churches was – and continues to be – of particular importance, especially during pre-parliamentary and parliamentary deliberations on legislative proposals affecting Church interests, notably in areas such as marriage, family, youth, and education. Given the marked differences between the SPD and the Catholic Church on the legal reform of abortion (Section 218 of the German Penal Code), maintaining constructive relations between party leaders and high-ranking church representatives assumed outstanding significance.

This article illustrates these dynamics through the example of former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and his position regarding the Christian mission to the Jews.¹

II

“It does not serve peace between religions and churches if one religion or Church attempts to lure believers away from another – regardless of its motives. For this reason, I have opposed the so-called *Judenmission*, the Christian mission to the Jews, for decades. I am, in fact, deeply skeptical of any form of religious mission. It seems to me an act of human arrogance to claim that only a Christian, or only a Muslim, or only a Hindu can attain holiness – and to assume, therefore, that people of other faiths must convert and abandon their traditional religion.”²

It was Helmut Schmidt who made this statement during a lecture delivered in the 1990s at the Church College in Bavaria (Augustana Hochschule Neuendettelsau). In this address, Schmidt reflected upon his personal beliefs and arrived at the conclusion that any form of religious mission was, in essence, impossible. As he once personally confided to me, he had intended to provoke his audience with these remarks – although, in the end, this did not occur. This particular section of his lecture, concerning the question of mission, was never published by Schmidt himself.³

¹ R. Hering, *Die Kirchen als Schlüssel zur politischen Macht? Katholizismus, Protestantismus und Sozialdemokratie in der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, “Archiv für Sozialgeschichte” 2011, vol. 51, pp. 237–266.

² Archiv Helmut Schmidt, Hamburg-Langenhorn (AHS), Eigene Arbeiten, Ordner 295, p. 12.

³ Ibidem. The part on mission quoted above had been written by hand in the manuscript (Bl. 20 and 20a, emphasis from the original text); interview with Helmut Schmidt, July 1, 2010. Later, Schmidt wrote: “Was auch immer an gemeinsamer Geschichte Europas hinter uns liegt, so kann ich darin keine Rechtfertigung für den Versuch erkennen, Angehörige der jüdischen oder

In his book *Außer Dienst (Off Duty)*, published in 2008, Helmut Schmidt reiterated his longstanding position that he had always accepted people regardless of their faith. For him, religious tolerance was a fundamental principle: every person, he argued, must respect both the belief and unbelief of others. “For this reason,” he wrote, “I have always regarded Christian mission as an offense against humanity.”⁴

Helmut Schmidt passed away in 2015 at the age of 96. He continued writing, giving interviews, and delivering public lectures until shortly before his death. During the final decades of his life, Schmidt enjoyed a popularity surpassing that of his years as an active politician and as Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany between 1974 and 1982. In 2008, he was even voted the most admired politician in Germany.⁵

At the same time, Helmut Schmidt had already become the subject of historical research during his lifetime. On the occasions of his 90th and 95th birthdays, several biographies were published, alongside numerous articles in newspapers and academic journals. Some of these authors utilized archival materials, and several conducted interviews with Schmidt himself. The two substantial volumes on Schmidt by Hartmut Soell remain the most authoritative biography to date. However, even Soell – and indeed virtually no other scholar – paid serious attention to Schmidt’s relationship with the Churches or with religion more broadly.⁶

der islamischen Religion für das Christentum zu missionieren.” (AHS, Private Korrespondenz 1997 S-St, Schmidt to Pastor Johannes Siegmund, December 30, 1997).

⁴ H. Schmidt, *Außer Dienst. Eine Bilanz*, Siedler Verlag, Munich 2008, p. 288f; cf. idem, *Die Mächte der Zukunft. Gewinner und Verlierer in der Welt von morgen*, Siedler Verlag, Munich 2004, p. 144 and 164f. On Schmidt’s relationship to Israel cf. idem, *Wahrhaftigkeit und Toleranz. Ansprache in der Gedenkfeier zum 9. November 1938 in der Großen Synagoge in Köln am 9. November 1938*, [in:] idem, *Drei Reden*, Bundesdruckerei, Bonn 1978, pp. 43–55; idem, *Der Kurs heißt Frieden*, Econ Verlag, Düsseldorf–Wien 1979, p. 51–55 and p. 85–99; W. Bergmann, *Realpolitik versus Geschichtspolitik. Der Schmidt-Begin-Konflikt von 1981*, “Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung” 1998, vol. 7, pp. 266–287; S. Shafir, *Helmut Schmidt: Seine Beziehungen zu Israel und den Juden*, “Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung” 2008, vol. 17, pp. 297–321; M. Wolffsohn, *Ein Datum macht Geschichte. Wie das Gedenken an die Pogromnacht im Laufe der Jahrzehnte in West und Ost politisch genutzt wurde*, “Jüdische Allgemeine,” November 6, 2008; R. Hering, *Helmut Schmidts christlicher Glaube*, [in:] *Perspektiven auf Helmut Schmidt*, Bonn 2024, pp. 67–79.

⁵ Forsa-survey cf. “Spiegel online,” January 16, 2008, <http://www.spiegel.de/panorama/leute/0,1518,druck-528997,00.html> (access: 17.01.2010); “Der Spiegel” 2008, no. 52, p. 148 and 2009, no. 18, p. 154; “Kieler Nachrichten,” no. 294, December 15, 2008, p. 3; “Stern” 2008, no. 15, pp. 66–74 and no. 52, p. 3; “Focus online,” July 25, 2007; “Hamburger Abendblatt,” December 2, 2008, p. 8; “Focus online,” May 23, 2009; “Hamburger Abendblatt,” September 18, 2009, p. 1 and p. 13.

⁶ Cf. M. Rupps, *Helmut Schmidt. Politikverständnis und geistige Grundlagen*, Bouvier, Bonn 1997, pp. 172–188 and pp. 373–433; H. Albrecht, “Pragmatisches Handeln zu sittlichen Zwecken.” *Helmut Schmidt und die Philosophie*, Edition Temmen, Bremen 2008, pp. 135–140 and pp. 146–148; H. Soell, *Helmut Schmidt. 1969 bis heute. Macht und Verantwortung*, Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, Munich 2008, pp. 812–818; T. Birkner, *Mann des gedruckten Wortes. Helmut Schmidt und die Medien*, Edition Temmen, Bremen 2014; T. Karlauf, *Helmut Schmidt. Die späten*

In the final years of their lives, I had the opportunity to speak with Helmut Schmidt on several occasions, as well as with his late wife, Loki Schmidt, and a number of other politicians from that era, and to consult his private papers, both at the Archives of Social Democracy in Bonn and at his home in Hamburg-Langenhorn. I subsequently published a book on Helmut Schmidt's relationship with the Churches. My research led me to conclude that Schmidt's engagement with the Churches was of considerable personal importance and remains essential for any comprehensive understanding of his personality and political outlook. It is important to distinguish between two distinct aspects of this relationship: Schmidt's personal beliefs and relationship with the Churches and, separately, the significance he attached to the Churches within his political activity.⁷

III

As one might expect, it is not easy to analyze the personal beliefs of an individual. Therefore, the following observations can only offer a general outline of Helmut Schmidt's religious personality. Throughout his life, he remained a member of the Lutheran Church: he was baptized as an infant, confirmed as a young boy, and married in a Protestant church during his military service. However, as far as one can ascertain, Schmidt did not possess strong religious feelings, nor did he maintain an inner spiritual connection to the institutional Church. In his autobiographical writings, he openly stated that he did not pray and did not believe in the Holy Trinity, in Jesus as the Son of God, in his miracles, or in life after death in the Christian sense. The notion of the forgiveness of sins through the death of Jesus held no particular significance for him.

When Schmidt referred to "God," the term did not necessarily signify the Christian God. His use of the word was abstract and indefinite, referring instead to some form of higher power. This openness, I believe, was neither incidental nor superficial. It enabled him to engage with people of different religious traditions while simultaneously avoiding the need to define his own position on God too precisely. Furthermore, Schmidt was always pragmatic by disposition and lacked scholarly or theological ambitions. As he summarized his stance in 2008, he had never developed a deep personal relationship with religious belief, yet he consistently identified as a Christian.

There was, however, a discernible development in Schmidt's relationship with Christianity over time. Until the 1980s, he maintained a strong confidence that God was the Lord of History. Particularly during the Second World War, he believed that nothing could happen on earth without God's will. This perspective,

Jahre, Pantheon, Munich 2016; M. Woyke, *Helmut Schmidt. 100 Seiten*, Reclam Philipp Jun. GmbH, Verlag, Dietzingen 2018.

⁷ R. Hering, "Aber ich brauche die Gebote..." *Helmut Schmidt, die Kirchen und die Religion*, Edition Temmen, Bremen 2012; idem, *Helmut Schmidt – Der Protestantismus, die Kirchen und die Religion*, "Zeitschrift für Schleswig-Holsteinische Kirchengeschichte" 2015, vol. 2, pp. 269–287; idem, *Helmut Schmidts christlicher Glaube...*, pp. 67–79.

however, changed in later years. After retiring from active politics, Schmidt had greater opportunity to acquaint himself with other religious traditions, including Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, which served to deepen his religious tolerance. Ultimately, it seems that for Schmidt, being a Christian primarily meant adhering to the ethical principles associated with Christianity.⁸

IV

The second aspect of my topic – Churches as a political theme – is somewhat easier to address. Throughout his active political career, Helmut Schmidt engaged consistently with the Churches as significant actors within German society. He actively supported the Social Democratic Party's process of opening itself to the Churches following the adoption of the more liberal party program of 1959, the so-called *Godesberger Programm*. In particular, during the 1960s, Schmidt concerned himself intensively with questions of ethics and the role of the Churches. He read widely in philosophy, maintained a dialogue with figures such as Karl Popper, and regularly read *Lutherische Monatshefte*. However, it should be noted that he did not occupy himself with specifically theological topics.

From the 1960s onward, Schmidt was one of the few Social Democrats to deliver lectures and participate in roundtable discussions within Churches and church academies. In 1976, during his chancellorship, he published a book entitled *Als Christ in der politischen Entscheidung* (*A Christian in the Political Process*), which compiled his speeches and articles on the subject. He explicitly sought to place his views within the public sphere and, in the book's introduction, even stated his intention to present his opinions as a Christian – an unusually forthright position for a leading German politician.

Although this book appeared shortly before the federal election in 1976, Schmidt had conceived the idea two years earlier, and his initial intention was not merely a matter of political tactics. For him, the Churches fulfilled an essential societal function as institutions that shaped behavioral norms. He engaged in discussions with philosophers and leading church representatives from both Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions to reflect on his role as a politician and to consider ethical standards in public life. Several senior figures from the Protestant Church – including Hermann Kunst, Hans-Otto Wölber, and Eduard Lohse – and from the Roman Catholic Church – such as Oswald von Nell-Breuning, Franz Hengsbach, Franz König, and Hans Küng – became his dialogue partners, advisers, and, in some cases, personal friends. This extensive engagement was exceptional for a political leader of his standing.

Another important dimension of Schmidt's intensive contact with the Churches concerned intra-German relations prior to 1989. With the assistance of church institutions, numerous informal channels of communica-

⁸ R. Hering, "Aber ich brauche die Gebote...", pp. 213–221; idem, *Helmut Schmidts christlicher Glaube...*, pp. 67–79.

tion were established, providing West German politicians with information about everyday life and public opinion in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), often conveyed through the churches. Conversely, church representatives such as Albrecht Schönherr and Manfred Stolpe served as intermediaries, conveying messages to GDR politicians that could not be transmitted through official diplomatic channels. The Churches played a crucial role in providing informal assessments of the political situation and in facilitating unofficial communication between the two states. Moreover, the churches frequently helped individuals leave the GDR or secure their release from imprisonment.

After leaving office as Chancellor, Schmidt continued to visit the GDR throughout the 1980s, frequently delivering lectures in church settings. Only days before the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, he was in Saxony meeting with church representatives. No longer bound by an official political role, he was able to speak more openly and directly with both GDR citizens and representatives of the Churches and state. These visits allowed him to convey a clear message: that the Federal Republic had not forgotten those living in the GDR and remained committed to improving their situation. These signals resonated not only with the thousands who came to hear Schmidt in person but also more broadly within the GDR as a whole. In the years that followed, Schmidt returned repeatedly to the GDR, continuing to speak in churches and engage with religious and political figures.⁹

As this overview demonstrates, the Churches occupied an important place in Helmut Schmidt's life on multiple levels. Viewed chronologically, his relationship with the Churches can be divided into five phases, combining both private and political dimensions:

Childhood and Youth: Schmidt was raised in a middle-class milieu typically characterized by a certain distance from religious practice – a cultural attitude widespread in Hamburg, often described as the least religious city in Germany. He was baptized and confirmed in the Lutheran tradition. Emotionally, however, church music played a significant role in his life. As a pianist and organist, Schmidt deeply admired the works of Johann Sebastian Bach, which, for him, represented an essential expression of Christianity.

The Second World War: During the war, Schmidt found comfort in a belief in God. Both his fiancée, Hannelore Glaser – who had grown up in an atheist household – and he viewed the churches as essential bearers of intrinsic values and personal dignity in the aftermath of the Nazi regime. They, therefore, decided to marry in a church ceremony in 1942.

⁹ Idem, *Helmut Schmidt und die Kirchen in der DDR. Von Güstrow nach Rostock*, "Zeitschichte regional. Mitteilungen aus Mecklenburg-Vorpommern" 2013, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 5–19; idem, *Helmut Schmidt in Güstrow*, "Damals" 2015, vol. 47, no. 1, pp. 47–48; idem, *Brücken in den Osten. Die DDR-Reisen Helmut Schmidts 1983–1989*, [w:] *Perspektiven auf Helmut Schmidt*, eds. idem, M. Woyke, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn 2024, pp. 11–18.

Political Career: From the early stages of his political work in Hamburg and at the federal level, Schmidt recognized the importance of the Churches for Social Democratic politics. He actively cultivated connections, especially with representatives of the Catholic Church, to dismantle longstanding barriers between the party and the Churches. In 1976, he delivered a highly regarded lecture on *Grundwerte* (core values) at the Catholic Academy in Hamburg, earning broad recognition for his thoughtful reflections. Schmidt was particularly drawn to Catholic social teaching (*Katholische Soziallehre*) and maintained a close relationship with Oswald von Nell-Breuning.

International Diplomacy: From the late 1970s and particularly during the 1980s, Schmidt sought to address international issues through engagement with the Vatican. It is noteworthy that he appealed to Pope John Paul II to issue a social encyclical for Latin America, calling for the liberalization of family planning policies. This proposal, however, was firmly rejected by the Pope.

V

The Christian Mission to the Jews

In the mid-1960s, Helmut Schmidt emerged as one of the first German politicians to oppose any form of Christian mission directed at Jews. In the spring of 1964, Schmidt was serving as Senator for Interior Affairs in the city-state of Hamburg while also holding a position on the board of the Society for Christian-Jewish Cooperation (*Gesellschaft für Christlich-Jüdische Zusammenarbeit*) in Hamburg. Within this context, Schmidt learned that the local Protestant Church was actively engaged in missionary work among Jews. This development caused considerable concern for both Schmidt and members of the Jewish community. He personally contacted the Protestant-Lutheran Bishop of Hamburg, Dr. Hans-Otto Wölber, to gather further information and to express his unequivocal criticism of any such missionary activity directed at Jews.¹⁰

Efforts by Protestant reformers to convert Jews to Protestantism had existed as early as the sixteenth century. However, an organized Protestant mission to the Jews began only in the eighteenth century, notably through the work of Johann Christoph Wagenseil. In 1728, the *Institutum Judaicum* was founded in Halle with the dual purpose of studying Judaism and seeking to convert Jews to Christianity. The Revivalist Movement of the nineteenth century further invigorated missionary efforts directed at Jews, particularly in England.

Following the Second World War and the unprecedented catastrophe of the Holocaust, the Protestant mission to the Jews underwent a process of realignment. From the 1960s onward, Protestants increasingly questioned the legitimacy of proselytizing Jews. Nevertheless, it was not until 1980 that the Synod – an assembly of Christian clergy responsible for decisions on matters

¹⁰ This part draws upon R. Hering, *The Controversial Mission to the Jews. A 1964 Correspondence between Helmut Schmidt, Hamburg's Senator for Interior Affairs, and Bishop Hans-Otto Wölber*, <http://jewish-history-online.net/article/hering-mission-to-the-jews> (accessed: 4.09.2024).

of faith – of the Protestant Church of the Rhineland became the first regional Church in Germany to reject missionary work among Jews as a matter of principle. Within the Roman Catholic Church, discussions regarding missionary activity toward Jews had been taking place since the Second Vatican Council, held in the Vatican between October 1962 and December 1965. This Council marked a significant moment of reflection and renewal within Catholicism, culminating in the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*, the “Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions” (1965), which acknowledged and recognized other religious traditions. In 2009, the Central Committee of German Catholics (*Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken*) formally rejected any form of missionary work among Jews, emphasizing instead the importance of dialogue between Christians and Jews.

The correspondence between Senator Schmidt and Bishop Wölber offers valuable insight into the fundamentally opposing positions in this nationwide debate. It is striking that a political figure would display such pronounced interest in this issue and voice such clear opposition to missionary work directed at Jews at so early a stage. At the time, Schmidt’s position was a minority one within Protestant circles, though it would later come to represent the mainstream view in subsequent decades.

In his letter, Schmidt adopted a critical stance toward Hans-Otto Wölber, a church representative for whom he otherwise held considerable respect, due to Wölber’s continued support for the mission to the Jews – then reflective of the majority position within Protestantism. Schmidt devoted substantial effort to the debate and – despite his lack of formal theological training – sought to educate himself on the issue through reading widely circulated theological periodicals. He demanded not only tolerance in matters of religion and ideology but also exhibited a pronounced sensitivity toward Israel and Judaism, shaped by his personal experiences during the Third Reich.

The debate had been sparked by a board meeting of the Society for Christian-Jewish Cooperation, founded in 1952, during which the subject had been raised. Schmidt had expressed surprise upon learning that the regional Church was engaged in missionary work targeting Jews and subsequently made an inquiry to the bishop on 30 April 1964: “There are no more than 2000 or 3000 Jews living in Hamburg at this time; I would consider proselytizing among them – regardless of any possible theological justification – misguided church policy. I have already heard a very bitter remark made by a Jewish person about this kind of work.” While Schmidt did not entirely dismiss the possibility that the Church might possess theological grounds for its missionary work, in light of the historical trauma of the Holocaust, he regarded such arguments as of far lesser importance than the fostering of constructive and respectful relations between Christians and Jews¹¹.

Nevertheless, in his letter of 13 May 1964, the Bishop of Hamburg insisted upon proselytizing Jews explicitly for theological reasons, while disregarding

¹¹ This part draws upon R. Hering, *The Controversial Mission to the Jews...*

the Jewish perspective. According to Wölber, missionary work signified “establishing contact between groups which God directed toward each other by his acts throughout history. [...] This has nothing to do with overbearing on the part of Christianity, with racial prejudice, with a lack of repentance among Christians in Germany or whatever else one might assume.” Schmidt, however, remained unconvinced by this clerical reasoning. In his response of July 13, 1964, he wrote: “While I can agree with the term ‘service to Israel,’ I still consider the term ‘mission to the Jews’ inappropriate, just as I consider any kind of missionary work among German Jews inappropriate.”¹²

Schmidt’s engagement with the subject persisted. Through an article by Paul Reinhardt published in the journal *Lutherische Monatshefte*, he learned that a theological argument could also be advanced against the mission to the Jews. Schmidt recorded his strong agreement with the views expressed by Günther Harder in this article. Harder, a professor of New Testament Studies at the Kirchliche Hochschule (Church College) in Berlin and an active member of the German Protestant Church Committee on Jewish-Christian Dialogue (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft Juden-Christen beim Deutschen Evangelischen Kirchentag*), disapproved of proselytizing for Christianity in conversations with Jews. In light of this, Schmidt continued his correspondence with Wölber on August 26, 1964. He argued that to claim the aim of the mission to the Jews was “saving Israel” was, as he aptly phrased it, “infinitely overbearing.” As citizens, he maintained, it was incumbent upon Germans to “show tolerance toward other faiths” – a tolerance grounded in respect for the religious beliefs of one’s neighbors. Schmidt’s letter makes clear that he regarded Jews as German citizens of a different faith, thus placing Judaism on an equal footing with Christianity. Consequently, he affirmed that both citizenship and, by extension, the state, must remain neutral, guaranteeing equal rights to adherents of all religious traditions.

Schmidt further explained that his particular interest in the issue of proselytizing Jews stemmed “from remembering the particular role some Lutheran Christians of earlier generations unfortunately played in the treatment of Jews.” This could be interpreted as an allusion to Martin Luther and his vitriolic late writings on Judaism. However, it is more likely that Schmidt was primarily thinking of the *Deutsche Christen* (German Christians) of the Nazi era, as his personal experiences during that period had profoundly shaped his political convictions. Such a perspective – and this degree of sensitive engagement with the National Socialist past – remained comparatively uncommon within ecclesiastical circles in the 1960s.¹³

Wölber, however, remained steadfast in his position. On September 22, 1964, he sent Schmidt several recent articles concerning the mission to the

¹² Landeskirchliches Archiv der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche in Norddeutschland, Kiel, Nachlass Wölber, Signatur 11.02, 1693, Wölber to Schmidt 13.07.1964.

¹³ Landeskirchliches Archiv der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche in Norddeutschland, Kiel, Nachlass Wölber, ref no. 11.02, 1693, Wölber to Schmidt, 13 July 1964.

Jews, which had been taken from the journal *Lutherische Rundschau*. He then sought to conclude their debate with a vague formulation that effectively side-stepped their underlying disagreement: "When we inquire about redemption within the whole breadth of religious thought, the Christians still believe they have to counter the views of their Jewish brothers. However, you are right in saying these are all questions which are answered in very different ways among the ranks of us Christians as well."

It is evident that Schmidt and Wölber were arguing from fundamentally different premises. While the bishop's focus was rooted in theological argumentation, Schmidt was principally concerned with the political and moral implications of missionary activity directed at Jews in the context of Germany's historical responsibility for the Holocaust. In Schmidt's view, these considerations far outweighed any theological justifications, as his priority lay in promoting the peaceful coexistence of both religious communities.

Three decades later, in 1995, the Society for Christian-Jewish Cooperation (*Gesellschaft für Christlich-jüdische Zusammenarbeit*) issued a formal "Rejection of the Mission to the Jews," which provoked intense debate, particularly within ecclesiastical circles. This publication was prompted by the increased immigration of Jews from the former Soviet Union, who were increasingly targeted for conversion efforts by Evangelical groups.

Helmut Schmidt maintained his opposition to missionary activity, unequivocally rejecting proselytism in a lecture delivered in December 1997 at the Bavarian Churches' Augustana College (*Kirchliche Hochschule*) in Neuendettelsau: "It is not at all conducive to peace between faiths, between religious communities, and churches if one of them tries to woo away members from another — no matter how good their intentions may be."¹⁴ In his 2008 book *Off Duty* (*Außer Dienst*), a self-described "stocktaking," Schmidt affirmed that he had always respected the faithful "regardless of which faith they adhere to." He regarded religious tolerance as fundamental: "Every human being must allow every other human being their faith and their religion. He must also allow them their skepticism. Humanity needs religious tolerance, and therefore, each individual needs religious tolerance. [...] For this reason, I have always considered Christian proselytizing an offense against humanity."¹⁵

From the late 1980s onwards, Schmidt's religious interests shifted from Christianity to other world religions. A significant factor in this development was his active involvement in the InterAction Council and the *World Ethos* Project initiated by Hans Küng. Established in 1983 as an independent international organization, the InterAction Council aims to harness the expertise, energy, and global connections of a group of statesmen who have

¹⁴ Archiv Helmut Schmidt, Hamburg-Langenhorn (AHS), Eigene Arbeiten, Ordner 295, p. 12. The lecture of 6 December 1997 is based on the paper given on 6 October 1997 in Hamburg, "Warum ich (kein) Christ bin," the sentences on mission are added handwritten (p. 20 and 20a).

¹⁵ H. Schmidt, *Außer Dienst...*, p. 288f; cf. idem, *Die Mächte der Zukunft...*, p. 144 and 164f.

held the highest offices in their respective countries. Council members collaboratively develop recommendations and practical solutions addressing the political, economic, and social challenges facing humanity. The Council is distinctive in convening regularly and informally more than thirty former heads of state or government. Through the efforts of its individual members, the Council seeks to advance international cooperation and action in three priority areas: peace and security, global economic revitalization, and the establishment of universal ethical standards. In 1997, the Council introduced a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities. Schmidt maintained that the global challenges facing humanity could only be effectively addressed through comprehensive, global frameworks. In this context, he worked closely with Hans Küng, advocating for the development of a global ethic and a set of shared values encompassing all religious traditions. On a personal level, Schmidt's distance from Christianity increased notably during the final two decades of his life.

VI

In conclusion, it can be observed that Helmut Schmidt approached faith, religion, and the Churches primarily through an ethical lens. He regarded ethics as fundamental to the peaceful coexistence of individuals and nations. For Schmidt, the principal role of Christianity was to articulate and uphold ethical values. His engagement with Churches and their representatives served to reinforce his own conscience through a form of dialogue – perhaps as a means to preserve moral integrity. In this respect, he might be characterized as a religious pragmatist. Schmidt explicitly rejected all forms of mission work, particularly Christian missionary efforts directed at Jews. With this unequivocal stance, he was among the earliest opponents of the mission to the Jews decades before this view gained wider acceptance within Protestant churches.

In parallel with the globalization of politics and economics, Schmidt broadened his religious perspective beyond Christianity to encompass all world religions. He held that global peace could only be achieved through peaceful relations between religions. This conviction underpinned his longstanding commitment to the InterAction Council.

Schmidt dismissed the notion of “Christian politics,” asserting that neither the Bible nor Christian doctrine provides explicit instructions for political conduct. To him, the ultimate authority rested with the individual conscience, provided it had thoroughly considered all aspects and potential consequences of a decision. His approach reflected Max Weber's ethics of responsibility, which guided his conduct both as a private individual and as a politician. Schmidt's overriding aim was to establish political and social peace globally; for this reason, he saw no place for missionary activity. Mission: Impossible.

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