

Kyodan:

International Conference on the East Japan Disaster

Intervention by

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The Challenge of Energy Security in the Modern World – Theological and Ethical Perspectives

Respected Moderator,
Distinguished audience, ladies and gentlemen,
My dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

First and foremost allow me to express my gratitude, also on behalf of our Bishop, Dr Droege, and the Head of Berlin Mission, Director Herpich, for inviting a speaker from our church to this important international conference. They send their most cordial greetings, and so does the Dr Theilemann, whom many of you know as a good friend of the Kyodan and the people of Japan.

The East Japan Disaster, and in particular the nuclear catastrophe of Fukushima, has become a symbol of our post-modern world. Not only did it shake the trust in the controllability of technology: this was not Chernobyl, an ill-kept power plant in a run-down, socialist economy, this was a high tech nuclear reactor in the country most people associate with absolute accuracy, precision and diligence when it comes to technology. Nowhere else would such a disaster have shown more clearly the limits of human foresight and powers. But it also showed how small our world is and how connected our societies have become. And with this, I am not only referring to international trade, but also to communication and political feedbacks and impacts.

This brings me straight to the point: the country report from Germany. For nowhere else outside Japan did “Fukushima” have more obvious political consequences than in my home country.

Originally, the Christian-liberal coalition under Chancellor Merkel had changed the course taken by its predecessor, the red-green coalition under Chancellor Schröder, which had opted for a controlled nuclear power phase out. Despite a high rate of scepticism, reservation and doubt concerning nuclear power in German society, the Merkel government had decided to considerably prolong the lifespan of existing nuclear power plants. Then “Fukushima” happened, and Angela Merkel surprised even her own party with a sudden U-turn. She – a physicist herself – openly admitted that she had underestimated the risks of civil uses of nuclear energy. Phase-out until 2022 was re-enacted and had thus become the official policy of all major political parties in Germany.

This significant political manoeuvre was the direct outcome of an incident 9000 km East of Germany.

But I suppose you have not invited me to report facts that anyone can “google” within a few minutes. My intervention should, much rather, allow you to take a look behind the facts. That I will try, proposing to address the following questions:

- 1.) *What is the political context of the German nuclear phase-out?*
- 2.) *What are the major consequences of the phase-out decision?*
- 3.) *What role have the churches played in the debate?*
- 4.) *How do the churches understand their role in society?*
- 5.) *What is the biblical and theological basis for the churches position?*

Having laid out the theological positions, I hope that we will become engaged in a lively and fruitful discussion. But first let me start with the overall political context:

1.) The political context of the German nuclear phase-out

The way public opinion is formed and thus how a political system reacts to contingent events and historic developments is quite different in our diverse cultures and societies. Therefore I would like to give you some background information on the situation in Germany:

In order to understand the setting in which the decision was taken, two aspects deserve our attention: The first being the general attitude of German society towards nuclear energy, the second being the debate on climate change and the need for a complete transition of our energy supplies.

In general, one may say that Germans have an ambivalent attitude towards technology. They like to use it, their economy relies on it, but they always view it with a certain amount of tentativeness. This is not only true for nuclear power, but also for a many other technologies. But while many people might worry about the health impact of electromagnetic waves or nano-particles, two technologies have an almost symbolic meaning: genetic modification of organisms and nuclear energy.

As I said before, there has always been a high rate of scepticism, reservation and doubt concerning nuclear power in German society. In the 70ies and 80ies, no other issue has become so much of a focal point of civil society mobilisation. The roots of the Green Party, Chancellor Schröder’s coalition partner, lay in the anti-nuclear movement. After the first ever MCA (“maximum credible accident”), Chernobyl 1986, this movement made swift progress from the margins of society to its centre. It was so important for the rise of the Green Party to power, that nuclear phase-out was viewed as the touchstone for its success in government. Had the first ever red-green government not legislated for phase-out, the Greens would probably have lost all chances of re-election. Thus, the U-turn of Angela Merkel after “Fukushima” was not only the result of a sudden deeper insight, but also a tactical move, bringing her party in line with public feeling.

This situation is quite different to other countries, where the command of nuclear technology – military as well as civil – is still viewed as a symbol for playing in the first league. This is true for those who have it, like France, and those who crave it, like Iran.

The other noteworthy aspect of the matter is the transition of the energy supplies. Ever since the world agreed on the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) at Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and gave itself binding obligations to reduce carbon emissions in Kyoto in 1997, industrialised countries have intended to de-carbonise their economies. The aim of putting a halt to global warming had won the pole position in the public debate on environmental issues. Some countries even took it as an incentive to expand their nuclear programmes in order to cut down on

fossil energy use. Even in reticent Germany it was argued that nuclear power had at least its function as a “bridge-technology”, spanning the gap between now and a time in which renewable energies were able to cover the growing energy hunger of an industrialising world.

2.) Major consequences of the phase-out decision

With the political decision to phase out nuclear energy while at the same time upholding national and international carbon emission targets, the transition of the energy supply system in Germany was up to a major challenge. The transformation of the existing technological landscape was to happen much faster than expected:

In June 2011, the German government passed a bundle of laws to accelerate the “Energiewende”, the transition. In the area of renewable energies, these will continue to be subsidies by price guarantees. At the same time, market mechanisms are introduced that should stimulate need-oriented production, so as to keep a reliable level of energy supplies at all times. However, as efficient energy storage still causes many technical problems and is highly expensive, the natural fluctuation of renewable energy sources such as sun and wind cannot be compensated without flexible fossil energy production (such as gas-fired power plants).

While the EU has set so called 20-20-20-target (2020 it wants to have achieved a 20% reduction in EU greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 levels; a raise of the share of EU energy consumption produced from renewable resources to 20%; and a 20% improvement in the EU's energy efficiency), the German government has set more ambitious targets: in 2020 it wants to have cut emissions by 40%, to have raised the portion of renewable energies to 35% and to have doubled energy efficiency.

However, at the moment it is doubtful that Germany will achieve these ambitious aims. The increase of subsidised renewable energy production has had a paradox effect: The stock exchange price for energy fell, so that the difference to the legally guaranteed price for the producers increased. The difference was handed down to end consumers, namely private households (who do not profit from exceptions granted to many industries). In order to curb this price rise, a capping of the bringing into service of new renewable energy plants was implemented. Also, the expansion of the grid, the national electricity network, has not progressed as fast as it would be needed: Renewable energies are – unlike fossil or nuclear energy – decentral, i.e. local, structures, which needs a much narrower grid than less and bigger plants. And finally, the probably most important aspect, increasing energy efficiency, would require high investments especially in buildings (which have a 40% share in energy consumption) but also in machines and devices. In times still marked by a global economic crisis, enterprises and citizens are reluctant to make investments that will pay only over many years.

So, in a way, the nuclear phase-out has made a groundbreaking technological revolution both more necessary and more complicated.

3.) The role of the churches in the debate

We are here also to discuss the contribution we, as Christians, can make to societal changes. In my presentation, I will focus on my own church, that is EKD – the Protestant Church in Germany, and EKBO – the Protestant Church of Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia, which is a territorial member church of EKD:

Already in 1987, under the impression of Chernobly the year before, the General Synod of EKD declared: “As the risks of nuclear energy cannot currently be safely

controlled, it has become widely recognised that this method of energy production is not compatible with the biblical commission to cultivate and foster the earth." In 2008, the General Synod reiterated this declaration in the context of the debate on climate change, stating: "Nuclear energy is no responsible contribution to climate protection and is an impediment to the necessary transition of the energy supply system. Most of all are its risks, in particular the open question of radioactive waste storage and the high potential of damage, unsolved matters."

Likewise, my the Synod of my regional church demanded a nuclear phase out in 2007, and my Bishop reiterated this demand before the 2010 and 2011 Synods.

The RC Church in Germany was, for a long time, less clearly positioned, as the Vatican had a more positive attitude towards civil uses of nuclear energy. However, after "Fukushima" the German Bishops joined the Protestant colleagues in the rejection of nuclear energy.

At the same time, churches are also major consumers of energy – and thus bear responsibility both for its origin as for its consequences. In 1996, EKD – that is all its parishes, administrations, diaconical works etc. – had an energy consumption equalling that of the city of Hanover with its 500.000 inhabitants. Or – to make another comparison – equalling that of Sudan and Kenya put together.

Therefore, it would have been too cheap to demand a nuclear phase out without at the same time contributing to the transformation necessary for a successful energy transition. In 2008 the General Synod recommended that all its churches reduced their greenhouse gas emissions by 25% until 2015, with 2005 as base year. Most territorial churches introduced climate programmes and set up carbon emission compensation schemes. EKBO's synod is even to vote on a comprehensive environmental programme this spring. If passed, this comprehensive programme will not only cover emissions, but will aim at sustainability in general.

Synodal statements and decisions have always been accompanied by a wide range of publications addressing a wide range of recipients: from congregations to society as a whole. EKD has a Professor appointed as advisor for environmental issues who works for the Protestant "think tank" FEST in Heidelberg. Most territorial churches have also officers working on climate and environmental issues. They give counselling to church bodies and publish results of their work, including practical examples on best practice. Thus, the church contributes to the public debate in many ways and by many means.

4.) The churches' understanding of their role in society

How a church engages in public discourse is shaped not only by social denominators relevant to civil society in general, but also depends on its ecclesiology and self-understanding. The two interrelate, of course, but it is in the very nature of the church to consciously reflect on its duties towards "the world" and how this service can best be rendered:

The success of the Reformation in Germany was due not only to the persuasive powers of Luther, Melanchthon, Calvin, Zwingli and many others, but also to the fact that many territorial princes saw it as a means of emancipation from the Empire. Thus the fate of Protestantism became bound up with the rise of the national state. For centuries, the union of throne and altar became a hallmark of Protestant states. While the enlightenment led to a gradual liberation of the state from its religious foundations, the church took longer to free itself from its secular ties. In Germany, it took the devastating experience of the anti-religious Nazi-regime not only to sever remaining institutional entanglements, but especially to discover the duty to act as a

corrective to state action and societal consensus, if necessary amounting to resistance.

After WWII, this negative experience was modified by the positive experience of a democratic state, governed by the rule of law and neutral in matters of religion or confession. The modification led to a new self-understanding of the churches as actors in critical solidarity to the state. One basic insight of the Church Struggle of the 1930ies and 40ies, however, remained unaltered: That the church has a public mission towards the whole people, and that the compass of that mission is the gospel and the gospel alone. Thus, the bible and the theology deriving from it became the measure by which the churches evaluate developments in the secular sphere and the reference for its speaking to that sphere.

And speak it must, for the indispensable commission of the church "consists in delivering the message of the free grace of God to all people in Christ's stead" (Barmen VI). This message cannot be limited to theological doctrines, but must prove a liberating gospel for people in their actual lives. It must call them to God who wants to snatch them away from the grip of those powers that diminish or destroy life and lead them on the path of truth and justice and love and reconciliation.

As the gospel must, therefore, be proclaimed in word and deed, it inevitably has also political implications. One cannot speak about God's love for His creation, for example, without exhorting people to fulfil their role as God's stewards towards this world. One cannot preach about God's intention to bring about the salvation of the world (not from the world!), without working towards redeeming the destroyed relationships within it.

Thus, the churches in Germany have always felt that their diaconical duties, their calling to serve, also implies a political mandate. Not a mandate to usurp secular power, but to speak to those in positions of secular responsibility from the perspective of the world as God's creation, from the perspective of the world as He wants it to become.

In most cases, this takes the form of discussing arguments and assessing options. In few cases, however, this may lead to very concrete political demands. The demand to abandon nuclear power and to rapidly decarbonise our economy is such a case.

The biblical and theological basis for this position

Considering the awareness that usually any aim can be achieved by different means, and that it would be a rather fundamentalist approach to say that the gospel permits only one of them, this clear stance against nuclear and fossil energy needs a solid base. I will, therefore, use the remaining minutes to outline the theology behind this position:

The starting point is, of course, the theology of creation. The biblical teaching about the origins of the world and of humankind has two poles. These poles set the limits within which human freedom may unfold. The first pole is the concept that Man is created. He is not God. He is taken from earth and to earth he shall return. His existence is not conceivable outside the final and the imperfect. It is bound up with the existence of all other creatures, entirely depended on God. This pole situates us deep within what we call our "environment" or "nature". The second pole, however, is that Man is created in the image of God. Within this world, he has to play a special role. He is not only part of creation, but also a counterpart of everything else that exists within this world. He partakes in the creativity of the creator and may mould the world with his gifts, both physical and intellectual.

This special commission, to “subdue the world” and “have dominion over it”, is, however, not unlimited. It comes with strings attached to its source and objective: God Himself. Stewardship cannot be executed in opposition to Him we are commissioned to represent. Man would lose his quality of “image of God” and become an idol, a grotesque usurper if he were to damage that which he was given as tenure.

Between these two poles, there is a lot of freedom to give the world a new shape. A lot of freedom for science and technology. A lot of freedom for economy and growth. But whatever we do, it must enhance, not corrupt creation. It must serve life, not death.

This general rule must, however, be applicable. It must be translated into concrete directives for action in a complex world, where the outcome of an act is not always clear at the outset. The instrument of this translation is ethics. Ethics is the set of principles that must be followed in any human endeavour or activity.

Ethical rules relevant to our topic today mainly relate to risk. And risk is a tricky subject, for it can only be assessed by means of statistics and statistics do not represent real life. Keep in mind: Even if the risk is only 1 : 1.000.000 the risk is still 100%. It is like a lottery: The 1.000.000th statistical time might be the next time in reality. Only, in the case of disaster probability refers not to winning, but to losing.

Ethical questions concerning nuclear energy are:

- Is nuclear energy fault-tolerant – including the “human factor”?
- Do we have, at this moment, the technology to contain and remove all possible damages caused by an anomaly or accident?
- Do we have, at this moment, the technology to store all residues and by-products of nuclear energy so safely that they cannot develop into a threat to future generations?

Ethical questions concerning fossil energy are:

- Can we control all the immediate negative impacts of our emissions, or do they occur at places far from their origin and implicate people who have no part in the cause?
- Do we consume more than the ecosystem can in the same period replace, or do we consume at the expense of future generations?
- Can we be sure that carbon-emissions do not reach a “point of no return”, where they set into motion a string of events reinforcing each other (snowball effect)?

If we cannot answer any one of these questions in the affirmative, we already have a serious problem. If we need to admit that we fail on all, we are in deep trouble. I am convinced that the latter is true here. Therefore, I believe that using either of these technologies is not in accordance with the biblical concept of good stewardship.

It is, therefore, part of the office of the church to proclaim the gospel to call for a major change, a major transformation of our energy production bringing it in line with the criteria of sustainability. In order to be a credible witness to this message, the church must make all efforts possible to reduce its own energy consumption and to consume only so many resources as can be replaced within the same period of time.

Being part of our societies, we will not meet our own criteria from scratch. But we have no excuse not to start on the way.

Thank you for your attention.