

CATHOLICS AND PROTESTANTS IN
GERMANY

ACCORDING to statistics lately published and confirmed through investigations made among prisoners-of-war, ninety-three per cent. of the German people are still members of Christian denominations. Whilst it is hardly necessary to discuss the political aspects of this fact, I should like to make a few points regarding practical religious life in Germany which might contribute to an appreciation of that figure.

In justification of my venture, I may say that I am an off-spring of a family which for several generations past has played a prominent part in German Protestant church life and scholarship. I myself, through the study of Protestant theology, have become a Catholic. Educated in a purely Protestant part of Germany, I lived and worked for the last seven years previous to my emigration in one of the Catholic centres of the country. Living as I do at present in, I daresay, fairly close contact with Catholic life in these countries, I feel that perhaps the most important point in appreciating the religious situation in Germany is an understanding of the relations between Protestants and Catholics in that country. I must confine myself to some points which incoherent in themselves are all still up-to-date.

Roughly speaking and from a merely statistical view-point, Germany can be subdivided into a Protestant North and a Catholic South and West. However, whole provinces of Southern Germany, such as Württemberg and the Palatinat, are predominantly and most actively Protestant, whilst Münsterland, Ermland and Silesia have been, especially during the last twenty years, leading centres of Catholic life in Germany.

The idea of subdividing Germany from a religious point of view implies that there is an antagonism between Protestantism and Catholicism on which such a subdivision could be based. However, unlike other countries, Germany's ecclesiastical history knows hardly any religious mass-persecutions and penal laws, and deeply rooted bitterness does not exist on either side. The Thirty Years' War is not remembered in Germany as a religious war. The extirpation of one third of the country's population during that war is traditionally attributed to political rather than religious reasons.

For the decisive period of 150 years after the Reformation, the German peoples strictly adhered to the principle *cujus regio ejus religio*, as to a certain extent they still do. The bishoprics of

Münster and Hildesheim like the city of Erfurt (which belonged to the realm of the archbishop-Elector of Mayence) were up to 1803 under Catholic princes and accordingly the inhabitants of those districts are to this day mainly Catholic, islands a hundred and more miles away from the Catholic 'mainland.' In those parts of Germany the observant traveller could pass within one hour's walk from a purely Protestant to a purely Catholic village, the two standing close together and maintaining friendly relations in all respects, though not inter-marrying.

There exists only one Protestant organisation, known as the Evangelical League, which is pugnaciously 'Anti-Popish.' Originating as it did from the anti-ultramontanism of the Kulturkampf-period, it has never gained ground outside the clergy, and its attacks have always been confined to writing and speech. The Gustavus-Adolphus Verein, on the other hand, rather resembles its Catholic counterpart, the Benno-Verein, two organisations devoted to the cultural support of their respective co-religionists. It may be mentioned that both of these organisations served national purposes, the Gustavus-Adolphus-Verein assisting the Germans in Poland and Yugoslavia, the Benno-Verein those in Italy.

There is no other country in the world where Catholics and Protestants form (if for technical purposes we include Austria and Sudentenland), roughly speaking, one half of the population each, and where they are so closely intermingled as they are in Germany. Even before the great industrial migrations, not to speak of compulsory labour-service, evacuations and other changes brought about by the war, the religious map of Germany was incredibly dappled, the proportion of Catholics ranged from one per cent. up to ninety-nine per cent.

Perhaps the most interesting districts are those where the proportion between Catholics and Protestants was between seventy and thirty per cent. In fact, it was an established fact that in those districts both Catholic and Protestant religious life was best. Whereas, according to a statement made by Cardinal Innitzer in a letter to Chancellor Schuschnigg, in the first and fashionable district of Vienna more dogs were found than children, places in the dispersion like Dortmund and Beuthen were, in spite of the absence of a glorious medieval tradition, radiant centres of Catholic life. Likewise, the very parts of Germany where the Reformation was first and most firmly established, such as Saxony and Mecklenburg, were also the first to collapse in their religious structure under the new Church regime, while the Protestant churches in the dispersion, e.g. in Bavaria and Württemberg, took the lead in the movement of resistance known as the Confessional Church.

At this point it must also be remembered, that in no other country in Europe is there a greater difference among the various regions in the length of their Christian tradition. Whilst in the Rhineland the establishment of Christianity can be traced down to the second century, in parts of Holstein, Meckleburg and Pommern paganism had scarcely died out when the Catholic religion was overthrown by the Reformers. It would be rash to say that all those districts remained Catholic where Christianity had been established in Roman times. The Palatinat and Württemberg again testify to the contrary. However, with regard to the depth of Christian beliefs in general, it is certainly true that districts with an old Christian tradition resisted the onslaught of neo-paganism more easily than the colonial districts. Yet, on the other hand, those old Christian districts, like Austria, were inclined to rest on their oars and to take their religious inheritance for granted as part of their national civilisation, whilst some of the colonial districts bore witness to the fact, so often experienced in the history of the Church, that constant danger keeps the people vigilant and conscious of the talent entrusted to them.

From the end of the 16th to the middle of the 19th century, the religious map of Germany remained practically unchanged. There was comparatively little intermingling of Catholics and Protestants and accordingly, due to the fewness of mixed marriages, the number of converts was negligible. There was, generally speaking, no social distinction between Catholics and Protestants. Of the heavy industries of the Ruhr-district and of Upper Silesia just one half was owned by Catholics, one half by Protestants.

The external harmony prevailing, in spite of strict religious segregation, is most noticeable in the strange institution of combined churches, frequently found in Germany. In SS. Peter and Paul's at Bautzen (East Saxony), which is the Cathedral of the Catholic bishop of Meissen, for instance, only the transept and choir belong to the Catholics, whilst the nave, separated therefrom by rails, is a Protestant church. On Sundays Low Mass is offered in the Catholic portion at 7 and 8, and High Mass at 11 a.m., whilst from 9 to 10.30 a.m. the Protestants hold their service in the nave.

There is one Church in Münsterland where for the past three hundred years Catholics and Protestants have gathered every Sunday morning at the same hour in their common parish church. The Catholic priest starts the Mass. After the Gospel, the Protestant clergyman mounts the pulpit and while he preaches his sermon the Catholics silently tell their beads. After a prayer and a hymn the Protestants file out, whilst the Catholics proceed to their Mass of

the Faithful. Undesirable though it was, this curious *mixtum compositum*, as canonists called it, was maintained, even after conditions had changed in such a way as to allow either of the denominations to have their own church. They had throughout that period distinct schools. In 1938 the Government introduced the inter-denominational or 'neutral' National School-system, but on the morning of the opening of the new school Catholics and Protestants joined in a common demonstration against this attempt 'to overcome their centuries-old religious strife.'

The distinction between Catholics and Protestants in districts with mixed populations is even more marked in virtue of the fact that the Protestants in those areas are mostly Calvinists or semi-Calvinists (deriving from Schleiermacher's Union). Apart from the Hochkirche of 'bishop' Dr. Heiler (the well-known author of a splendid study on Prayer and of an interesting book on Catholicism), German Protestantism is, measured by English standards, rather Low. St. Thomas's Church, Leipzig, known through its association with Johann Sebastian Bach, was one of the few places where High traditions survived in memory of the Leipzig Interim of, I think, 1542, when in order to please the Emperor, who was the protector of their commercial Fair, the Leipzigers agreed to the continuance of some Catholic rubrics, such as the singing of the Litany from the high altar and the wearing of a maniple. In more recent years the liturgical movement has gained ground among Protestants, leading them to an almost slavish imitation of the Catholic Ritual without realising the futility of such endeavours divorced from the dogmatic background.

Another 'High' tendency in modern German Protestantism was the restoration of something like a hierarchy. After the last war, bishops were set up in the Protestant churches of Bavaria, Württemberg, Saxony and Mecklenburg. The names of bishops Maharens, Wurm and Meisen, as well as of the venerable, first and legal Reichsbishop, Dr. Bodelschwingh, the leader of one of the finest charitable institutions of Protestant Germany (established on the fringe of Catholic Münsterland), will still be remembered from the time when the Encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* was issued. The names of bishop Rendtorff of Mecklenburg, who was the first to abolish the use of the Old Testament in his diocese, and of his colleague in Saxony, who distinguished himself by 'sacking' dozens of refractory clergymen of the Confessional Church, are fallen into well-deserved oblivion. When the bishops were first re-established, questions like the use of a pectoral cross by the bishop greatly upset church life in some districts.

My survey of interdenominational relations would be incomplete without a short reference to the unique privilege which, much to the annoyance of their bishops, Germany enjoyed in having her Catholic clerics educated at State universities. The early history of Modernism and of Central European reaction to the Vatican Council cannot be understood without an appreciation of that fact. At Bonn, Münster, Tübingen, and Breslau there existed side by side Protestant and Catholic Schools of Divinity. I myself was received as a student of Protestant theology in the University of Bonn by Dr. Rademacher, one of the finest writers on Catholic apologetics in Germany. At Bonn, incidentally, the mingling of Protestant and Catholic theologians was intended by Prussia to bring about a weakening of ultramontaniam. Although this plan was successful during the last century, in recent years the distinction between Catholics and Protestants in that university became even more marked than elsewhere through the establishment of the school of Karl Barth, who till 1934 was a professor at Bonn, and through the conversion to the Catholic Faith of Prof. Peterson, one of his early followers.

On account of the close external mingling, together with the strict internal separation between Catholics and Protestant, their mutual ignorance of one another was more marked. Ignorance rather than genuine hostility was the most prominent feature in the Kulturkampf-period and in the more recent controversies on the Concordats. The Catholic party, known as the *Zentrum*, was from 1918 to 1933 the only political party to be represented in all the numerous cabinets formed during that period. The central position of that party enabled it to redeem to some extent the wrong done to the Catholic part of the population in Prussia with regard to higher appointments in the civil service. Thus it became quite a common feature for a Catholic to be appointed President of one of the predominantly Protestant provinces. Even under Bismarck an institution such as the Imperial High Court established at Leipzig, then a 95 per cent. Protestant city, brought many prominent Catholics into Protestant parts. There was often a certain clash between the 'old' local Catholic element, mostly consisting of Polish labourers or Czech artisans, and the newly arrived intelligentsia.

My father was a clergyman, acting as professor of religious instruction in one of the State colleges of Leipzig. In 1929, the Government appointed to his school a new Rector, who happened to be a Catholic. My father already knew him, since he was at that time my teacher in another college. The staff of my father's school, including my father, protested against the appointment, but without

avail. Eventually my father was deputed to approach the newly-appointed rector with a view to extracting from him a firm undertaking that he would not use his new position for proselytizing. My father returned from that conversation to tell his colleagues that they could not have a finer Rector and that he had met the best Christian of his life. A few weeks later my father died. At his funeral his Catholic Rector wept like a child, saying that he had lost a friend. I can not think of a better illustration of the fact that ignorance is at the root of interdenominational relations, perhaps not only in Germany. And I very much doubt whether things have changed through the common plight. It suffices to say that the dogmatic back-ground of the Confessional Church is pronouncedly Calvinistic, and that on the other hand, Catholics have begun to realise that they are harvesting the fruit of three centuries of toleration and silent adherence to a cultural system heading towards religious disaster ever since the fateful 31st of October, 1517.

This brings me to my last point. Comparing Irish or English Catholics with German ones, we should not forget that, especially in the predominantly Catholic districts, German Catholicism had been watered down to a merely cultural tradition. 'Packed' churches, with which, even in recent years, foreign trippers used to be so much impressed, are by no means an indication of actual religious life. The true state of the people in those predominantly Catholic districts reveals itself once they have emigrated to a district where they are scattered. Seventy per cent. of Berlin Catholics (mainly from Rhineland and Bavaria) married non-Catholics, and only twenty per cent. of those mixed marriages were ecclesiastically solemnized. Of their children only thirty per cent. were baptized in a Catholic church. The number of divorces in which one of the partners was a Catholic was great.

Yet unlike German Protestantism which has become exclusively a matter of the lower middle class, Catholicism still embraces virtually all sections of the people, and, especially in recent years, it was hard to say which social class stood up best to the trials of the times.

It was the purpose of this paper to point to some of the highly involved problems looming behind the words '93 per cent. of the German people still Christian,' problems which are bound to play a prominent part in the future of Europe.

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