

## THE STRUGGLE OF THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH IN GERMANY.

By GERTRUDE FARION.

IT is by no means easy for the British observer to grasp the significance of the Church controversy in Germany. The totalitarian claims of the State are as foreign to his way of thinking as the specific difficulties of the Churches which are faced by them. Only a certain acquaintance with the history of the Church in Germany, the traditional solution of the problem of Church and State, and of the position of the Churches immediately after the war, can enable him to see the present conflict in its proper setting.

The first thing to strike the student of the Church situation in Germany is the lack of unity within the Church, which is a direct result of the development the Reformation took in that country. It is still a controversial point among scholars whether Luther judged the situation correctly and furthered the cause of the Reformation most effectively, by endeavouring to secure the support of powerful princes such as Frederick the Wise, the Elector of Saxony, and Philip, Landgrave of Hesse. Some would argue that, had he not turned his back on the rising peasants in 1525, it would have been possible to found a real Church of the people (*Volkskirche*) instead of a Church of the princes, and that it is the most urgent task of the present day, if the Evangelical Church is to survive at all, to form a true Church of the people. Such considerations *ex post facto* seem, however, to be of little value. The fact remains that Luther did consider the territorial princes as decisive factors in his Church policy and consequently developed his conception of the prince as *summus episcopus* in his territory, which led to the insertion of the famous clause *cuius regio eius religio* into the Religious Peace of Augsburg in 1555.

This provision was to have the most far-reaching consequences. First, the decision whether the Reformation was to be accepted at all in a certain State was placed entirely into the hands of the princes, leaving their subjects no influence whatsoever. This is in itself a gross violation of the principles of the Reformation. Thus, when the times of the Counter-Reformation came, Catholic princes were enabled to stamp out the Reformation throughout their territory, no legal protection being provided for their Protestant subjects. This happened in Bavaria during the reign of Maximilian (1573-1651), who had been educated by the Jesuits at the university of Ingolstadt. Hence, though we may be accustomed to think of Germany as a mainly Protestant (or,

as the Germans would have it, an Evangelical) country, we should not forget that the percentage of Roman Catholics (in Germany they are called simply Catholics) is comparatively high. Some of the larger States such as Bavaria and Baden are preponderantly Catholic, while Prussia, at least in its central parts, Saxony and Hanover are Evangelical.

Secondly, owing to the fact that the territorial princes were left the choice as to which Church of the Reformation they would adhere, a second division was added to the first, which sadly affected the power and unity of the Evangelical Church in Germany: the difference between the Lutheran and the Reformed Churches, before which all other denominational differences within the Evangelical Church appear insignificant. This difference is one in faith as well as order. The Lutherans, who consider the Augsburg Confession of 1530 as their profession of faith, belong to an episcopal church, which up to very recent times was supported by the State. On the other hand, the Reformed, adopting as they did the Heidelberg Catechism of definitely Calvinist and Zwinglian views or a similar profession of faith, placed all authority in the Church itself.

It is true, an attempt was made in 1817 to unite the Lutheran and Reformed Churches by force, in the so-called United Church of Old Prussia. As, however, its name implies, this union only affected the older parts of Prussia, leaving the more recently acquired, such as Hanover, and the other German States entirely out of account. To the present day, there are twenty-eight Evangelical Churches in Germany with a membership varying from 19,898,531 (Prussia) to 331,304 (Oldenburg), presenting a most suitable target to a State, whose whole aim appears to be co-ordination and centralization.

The problem of the relation between Church and State was solved in a different manner in the different Churches. According to the Lutheran theory, the supreme power in the Church was vested in the territorial princes, to whom the *superintendents* and *general superintendents* were responsible. The connection between Church and State was at all times very close and can be traced throughout all the vicissitudes of Prussian history with its strong emphasis on the unity of throne and altar. The State was looked upon as the natural protector of the Church, and Christian service often as identical with service as a citizen. In support of this view, theologians would quote Romans xiii. 1, and the way was open for Church sanction of all actions of the State.

In this connection, a doctrine developed in the Continental Churches, the so-called "theology of orders," gains an added importance. With an almost instinctive distrust of the materialism implied in the traditional Catholic doctrine, developed by Thomas Aquinas, of the graduated hierarchy of Nature and Supernature, and its consequences as regards the respective positions of Church and State, the Reformers substituted for it "the fundamental contrast between faith in God and faith in the Self as two completely different attitudes."<sup>1</sup> The spiritual and the temporal spheres were, in theory at least, com-

<sup>1</sup> *Christian Faith and the Modern State*, by Nils Ehrenstrom, p. 110.

pletely separated. In practice, however, a certain *modus vivendi* had to be devised, and the doctrine of the orders was developed to meet the demands of the situation. This doctrine is based on the distinction between the orders of creation, such as the family, of preservation, and of redemption; or, in other words, between God the Creator, who created the world, God the Preserver, who is at work in nature and history, and God the Redeemer, whose sphere of action is the Church. According to this theory, the Church belongs to the order of redemption, which is ruled by the law of grace. But opinions are divided as to which order the State belongs to. Some would assign it to the order of creation together with the family, and as such it would share in the dignity of the Gospel itself as a direct manifestation of the Divine Will. Others would regard the State merely as a provision of God against evil, necessitated by the fall, and as such as essentially sinful. According to this view it would belong to the order of preservation.

To the British reader this may appear a very irrelevant distinction. It has, however, proved to be of the utmost importance in recent times, because it has served to emphasize the difference between those who are willing to render to Caesar the things which are God's, and those who would wish to preserve the fundamental tension between the Church and the State, the temporal and the spiritual power. The whole development of Protestantism in Germany has tended to blur the line of demarcation between that which is due to God and that which is due to Caesar, a line that is even at its best not more than faint. Professor Piper's remark, "The actual problem of German Protestantism is, To what extent can Christianity attain a national form without losing its universality and absoluteness?"<sup>1</sup> throws an interesting sidelight on the Church situation in Germany.

The nationalistic tendencies within the Evangelical Church in Germany were strengthened by the marked emphasis laid upon what Continental thinkers call the "historical moment." It is impossible, they would argue, to serve God in the abstract. He places us into concrete situations in order to test us. They are of His own making, and He means us to work in and through them. Each concrete situation, as it arises, is God-given, and to do our duty in it as best we can, is identical with performing God's will. His call comes to us through the orders in which He has ordained that we should live, the family, the nation (*Volk*) and the State. By serving these to the utmost of our powers, we serve Him best. It can easily be seen that an argument on these lines pushed to the extreme must result in a destruction of the entire Christian ethic and a dissolution of the original tension between the Church and the world. It is, therefore, important to realize that there exists a strong movement in Continental Protestantism which would consider the State as belonging to the order of preservation, not as an absolute but a relative order, whose very existence is a proof of the depths into which man has fallen and whose claims can at any moment be overruled by those of the Church.

The whole development of Protestant thought in Germany has led on the one hand to a complete separation of the Church and the

<sup>1</sup> *Recent Developments in German Protestantism*, S.C.M. Press, 1934, p. xv.

State as two distinctly different spheres, and on the other hand to an identification of Church and State, which has all but emptied the Church of its true meaning. The lack of interest taken by Continental Churches in social problems, which struck the Anglo-Saxon members of the Oxford Conference, has its origin in the doctrine of the respective duties of Church and State, the dispensation of social justice belonging to the sphere of the State, while the easy acceptance of National Socialism by the majority of the German clergy is only a result of the previous identification of Church and State. With the spiritual heritage that is its own, Protestant theology on the Continent had only one choice, that of becoming "eschatological," or merely apologetic of the *status quo*.

It would, however, be wrong to assume that these theological distinctions were of any general importance in the years that followed the war. There were few periods in the history of the Evangelical Church in Germany in which organized religion was at a lower ebb. This situation is illuminated by the fact that, according to the Weimar Constitution of 1919, religious instruction in schools was no longer compulsory, and the decision whether children should attend Scripture classes was either entrusted to the parents or, in the case of older pupils, to the children themselves. Thus a generation grew up, a large proportion of which was unacquainted with or even hostile to the Christian faith, while only a small but keen minority endeavoured to lead a Christian life.

But the official as well as private disregard of Christianity did not exclude an ever-growing interest in things of the spirit. In fact, the urge towards religion was very strong indeed in the post-war years. The materialism and scepticism of the age could not satisfy the longing for something higher. It is a reason for profound contrition that the Evangelical Church in Germany was not able to satisfy these desires. It had no message to give to the thousands who came back from the War, weary and disillusioned. Nor was it prepared to welcome those who had suffered at home and continued to suffer through the occupation of the Ruhr, the inflation, and prolonged periods of unemployment. The multitudes that might have filled the churches in Germany were attracted by one or the other of the many pseudo-creeds, mostly of political colour, which our prolific age offers in such abundance. That the uneducated masses should accept a party programme as their gospel is easy to understand. That numbers of educated and highly trained people should have accepted it demands an explanation.

This explanation lies in the fact that alongside the Protestant and Catholic traditions in Germany a third *Weltanschauung* or creed had arisen which proved to be a most serious rival. As a result of the Reformation which left Germany with a large Roman Catholic minority as well as a considerable number of regional Churches, a division of Germany not only in the field of faith and order but affecting all departments of life, in fact the entire historical and political outlook of the nation, ensued. It is seldom realized in England that there existed, and still exist in Germany two different traditions side by side, the Evangelical and the Roman Catholic. Both were within limits justified,

both were taught in schools. Not only did the treatment of mediæval history or the account of the Reformation differ according to the religious belief which determined the survey, even after the foundation of the Second Reich by Bismarck in 1871, members of the two Churches viewed each other with distrust. The Evangelical north would never trust the Roman Catholics, who, as they believed, were dissatisfied with the Reich Bismarck had founded, nor could the Roman Catholics forgive Bismarck his betrayal of the ancient ideal of the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation, by founding a Reich which did not include Austria and had a Protestant at its head. It is true, efforts were made by the Roman Catholic community to play their part in the Second Reich. The Centre Party proved one of the strongest supports of the government throughout all the vicissitudes of the pre-War and post-War periods. A signal success was won in 1917, when the law against the Jesuits, which dated from 1872, was repealed, the Roman Catholic Count Hertling was appointed Chancellor to the Protestant Emperor William II, and the leader of the Centre Party, Peter Spahn, took over the Ministry of Justice. During the Republic Roman Catholic influence steadily increased, and in 1925 a Roman Catholic politician contested Hindenburg in his candidature for the office of Reichs-president. It is, however, interesting to note that during the election the ancient religious difference was revived, which proved that the unity achieved in the political field was only skin deep.

The real integrating power in Germany after 1870 was what has been called the "Third Confession,"<sup>1</sup> which consists of a strange blending of philosophical, poetical, and genuinely Christian elements, and traces its origin as far back as the eighteenth century. It draws on the idealism of Kant, Fichte and Hegel as well as on the humanism of Goethe. Ardent patriots like Langbehn, the author of the *Rembrandt-German*, unknown outside the limits of the national community, have contributed to it as well as thinkers of world-wide reputation, such as Nietzsche. This new conception of the world is essentially heroic. It regards man primarily as a fighter, who can only fulfil his destiny by fighting evil and doing good. He is at the same time servant and master of the universe, which he serves best by revealing its secrets. He is the never-resting wanderer over the face of the earth, ever dissatisfied with his achievements and ever setting out on new quests. He may bow his knee before a Higher Power, but this would resemble rather the obeisance of a mighty noble before his liege lord than the prostration of the creature before its Creator. Above all, he is sure that his aspiration will win for him the crown of glory at the end, a prize which he claims as his due and by no means considers as a gift of grace. The hero of Goethe's poem *Faust* is the prototype of this ideal, which is in all essentials a revival of the Pelagian heresy to which some specifically German traits have been added. Moreover, it was a national ideal, and with its heroic conception of life admirably suited to the mentality of the Second Reich with its recent acquisition of power.

<sup>1</sup> Waldemar Gurian: *Der Kampf um die Kirche im Dritten Reich*, p. 16. Vita Nova Verlag, Lucerne.

The loss of the War led to an added emphasis on the nationalistic elements of this *Weltanschauung*, which influenced the traditional Lutheran Christianity to a far greater extent than has generally been realized. Professor Piper sums up the situation most shrewdly in the passage quoted above. Here again, as in the political field, Germany has lagged far behind her more fortunate Western neighbours. She has failed to develop a Church, which, while showing all essential features of true Christianity, yet expresses to the full her own national characteristics, as e.g. the Church of England does in so remarkable a measure.

Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, a struggle was going on between Lutheranism and the neopaganism described above. It was the Evangelical Church which compromised again and again. In particular the left wing of the clergy, the so-called liberals, endeavoured to unite their nationalism with the Christian faith. In order to attract that part of the educated population which was drifting into a cultivated paganism, they added to the Gospel message ideas which were of a totally different origin. The writer knows of an instance when, in 1918, two texts were given to each candidate at confirmation, one chosen from the Bible and another from literature. Such instances could easily be multiplied. Sermons were introduced by the recital of poems whose poetical and sentimental value was certainly beyond reproach, but the very choice of which proved that the spirit of the world was entering the Church. It is, therefore, not surprising that these pastors should not have hesitated to accept National Socialism with all its implications.

It is not within the scope of this article to describe the phenomenon of National Socialism in full detail. It may suffice to say that like all totalitarian creeds it has the tendency to organize man in all his activities, in his work, his recreation, his family life, and even in the most sacred of all spheres, in his religion. As far as the Church is concerned, the totalitarian ideal is expressed in the slogan : One Reich, one Volk, one Church ! At the outset it was generally believed that one Church could only mean one Christian Church. Not only did the party programme lay down that National Socialism stood on the foundation of "positive Christianity," Hitler himself had subsequently stressed the point in April 1933 in Potsdam. There is every reason to believe that the creation of a national Church which would embrace both the Evangelical and the Roman Church was certainly at one time at the back of the minds of those in power. This plan would, however, have met with such opposition that it was speedily set aside. But what meaning could "One Church" have then ? To-day it may be supposed that after the serious opposition of the Churches in face of all endeavours of the State to co-ordinate them, the "One Church" of the Nazi ideology may well be a pagan Church not worthy of the name, built of the material described above.

One Reich, one Volk, one Church ! was a very attractive and well-timed suggestion. What could be more reasonable, it was argued, than that the political unity which had been achieved should find its perfect expression in a united Church ? The very existence of twenty-eight

regional Churches as well as that of the Catholic Church was a denial of all the principles of National Socialism, which derives from the racial unity in which it believes the demand for unity in all departments of life. From the outset, it was obvious that the appeal for a united Church would not meet with any serious objections from that section of the clergy who had been accustomed to thinking in terms of the Church national rather than in terms of the Church universal. Any objections that might exist were all the more easily met by pointing out the astonishing successes achieved by the party in the political field.

In fact, there already existed a strong group within the Evangelical Church, the German Christians, who preached a strongly nationalized version of Christianity, styling themselves "the stormtroopers of Christ in the struggle to destroy physical, social and spiritual misery."<sup>1</sup> One of their pamphlets contains the following sentences which will shed some light on the type of their Christianity. "We reject the spirit of Christian cosmopolitanism. We want to overcome the dangerous phenomena such as pacifism, internationalism, Freemasonry a.s.o. originating in it, by our belief in the national mission laid upon us by God."<sup>2</sup> The spirit which dictated these words was not altogether alien to a number of Evangelical clergy, and it is no mere coincidence that the Church elections of July 1933 were prefaced by Hitler with the following words: "It is natural that, in the interest of the rebirth of the German nation, I should wish the new elections by their results to support our new national (Volks- und Staatspolitik) policy. . . . The attainment of this end cannot be guaranteed by the forces of a religious petrification, which turn away from this world and attach no importance to the events and phenomena of the age. It can only be realized by the forces of a living movement. I see these primarily collected in that section of the Evangelical Church people who, as German Christians have consciously accepted the National Socialist State."

One Reich, one Volk, one Church! In terms of the National Socialist ideology, a united Church would mean a racially pure Church. The extension, however, of the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service which had originally only affected civil servants, teachers, lawyers, to the Church ministers proved to be a stumbling-block to many, and it was here that the first signs of opposition appeared. As early as September 1933, the theological faculty of the University of Marburg warned the Church against admitting race and nationality (Volkstum) as criteria of eligibility to her pale, lest "the reverence for the Creator be supplanted by the reverence for the creature."<sup>3</sup>

In four great waves the authorities attempted to unite the Evangelical Churches, or in other words to integrate the Church into the State. These efforts are marked by the names of Reichsbishop Mueller, Dr. Jaeger and Dr. Zoellner. They were only in part successful. A

<sup>1</sup> Fritz Lieb: *Christ und Antichrist im Dritten Reich*, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> Fritz Lieb: *Christ und Antichrist im Dritten Reich*, p. 57.

small but determined minority resisted. In this study we are not concerned with all the details of this struggle. It may suffice to recall a few outstanding events : the establishment of the Confessional Church in deed though not yet in name at the Barmen Synod in January 1934, the following synods in Westphalia and Berlin in March 1934, the meeting of the representatives of the different denominational groups and free synods at Ulm in May 1934, where the Confessional Church was formally established, and the synod at Oeynhausen. Each of these meetings was an answer to some form of coercion by the State, which a considerable minority of ministers of the Church deemed an intolerable interference into matters strictly clerical. Their protest, though at first loud, has gradually become fainter and fainter. To-day, it is scarcely audible. It is still there, however, in spite of cruel persecutions.

It has been asked why a minority should so persistently refuse the offers made by the State, a State, it must be emphasized, whose general policy is generally approved of. The answer to this question is, to my idea, that they realize the tension that exists between God and Caesar and endeavour to render unto God the things which are God's. At bottom, the struggle within the German Church is one between the two trends in German Protestantism described above, between those who hold that the State as a Divine creation has claims to the unreserved allegiance of its subjects, and those others who recognize the State as belonging to this world and therefore not exempt from moral judgment. It may not even be saying too much, if one adds that the present struggle is a direct outcome of the weakness in the Lutheran position, which did not succeed in establishing a workable relationship between the Church and the State. Though the question remains, whether a stable relationship between the spiritual and the temporal power is possible or even desirable.

One fact, however, emerges clearly out of this extremely complex situation and that is the rebirth of the Evangelical Church in Germany. As Dr. Kuenneth has it : "To understand the significance of the Confessional Church and its great synods means realizing that, in these times of violent upheaval in the Church, a discovery of undying importance was made, the discovery of the unique reality of the Church."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Wort und Tat*, February 1936.

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We have received from Messrs. Thynne & Co. three pamphlets :

*The Sword of the Spirit* is by Dr. D. H. C. Bartlett and is characterized by the author's pungency of phrase.

*Is There a Key?* by Rev. A. Frank Evans, deals clearly with problems of interpretation in connection with Revelation.

*Who Founded the Church?* by Janette Steer, has as its subtitle : "An argument and its logical conclusion." We are not impressed by the logic.