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The Church Conflict in Germany

“EPAPHRODITUS.”

An exiled Member of the Confessional Church.

CONSIDERING how far reaching is this topic I feel I should not give you mere facts although they are important to know: nor yet my own experiences in the Church Conflict: nor yet the theological point of view. I feel there is something still more important and therefore still more interesting underneath all these. I shall try to say something about the innermost things behind the facts and in so doing I hope that you will be enabled to grasp the fact that the German situation concerns also all other Churches throughout the world.

Before the last war the German religious situation did not differ so very much from the English. May be your Church tradition has been a stronger one. But we, too, had an established Church, a so-called Christian State, a so-called Christian Society, Christian Education, etc. Unfortunately, however, all that was more nominal than really Christian, more a bourgeois tradition than a dynamic force. In Church affairs it was more and more only the women and the children (during their confirmation lessons), who were interested: and these only from the middle classes. When about 1913 the Freethinkers started a movement to leave the Church this had no great success, for most people were too indifferent even to leave. The Church became a negligible quantity. Only two millions out of 66 millions actually left the Church. But out of the remaining 64 millions only a small figure attended Church services, very few took the Communion, and still fewer prayed and lived the Gospel.

The Great War brought a change. Not that most people

really found Christ in the war—on the contrary most lost even the little faith they had. But a minority met the living Lord and began to bring others into contact with Him. Then during the last years of war revival began, at first among the Theologians. They led the Church back to face the original questions of the Reformation and to the whole unadulterated New Testament. This return from all surface questions (historical, philological, etc.), to the message of the Gospel itself brought a revolutionary change in the clergy, and through the clergy to the whole Church. We experienced a real revival starting not in the country among the farmers who had the best religious traditions; but in the big towns among the well-educated people and among the labourers; even some of the former socialists and communists became Christian Evangelists. Thus I do not agree with the claim of the Nazis that they saved Germany from Communism. I believe that the climax of the Communist movement was before 1933.

Into the middle of this promising though slow development Hitlerism burst, like a bombshell. Perhaps you will ask, how could so many Germans and even German pastors be impressed at all by the Nazi movement? I do not speak here about policy. But please keep in mind that this movement started as a reaction against the treaty of Versailles. And as regards the Church many of the younger pastors, Niemoeller included, thought at first that the new political wind would blow upon the nominal Church also, and bring new life to the indifference of the sleeping people. The party promised that the decay of culture and of morals should be stopped. Some hoped all Roman-Catholics would join in a united Protestant Church. And as a matter of fact, the Nazi movement has been a very vital power to break down all that was not genuine, all that was mere tradition, all bourgeois customs.

In the beginning it was not clear at all what Hitlerism really was—a purely political movement, or a “weltanschauung,” or a religion? The programme spoke about “positive Christianity” which “the party as such stands for.” It claimed “liberty for all religious denominations so long as they are not a danger to the State and do not militate against the moral feelings of the German race.” What does all that mean?

The answer has been so extremely difficult because the whole Nazi movement seemed so contradictory. It seemed to have, like the old Roman God Janus, two faces each looking in opposite directions. They like to speak (in a confusing manner) about "the victory of faith" or they say, "Never was young Germany so full of faith as our German youth is now." But they use the word "faith" in quite a different sense from the Church. The Nazis used to say, "We leave religion to the Churches, we have no religion of our own, we have only a 'weltanschauung.'" Unfortunately, the word "weltanschauung" cannot be translated (literally, outlook on life and the world) and is not a clear expression in itself. We in the Church knew that it was impossible to have a weltanschauung without touching the religious background. Recently all masks have been dropped. A few quotations from the leaders out of many similar ones will make this clear. Rosenberg writes, "To-day a new faith is awakening, the Mythos of the blood, the belief that it is by blood that the Divine nature of man is to be manifested, the belief that Nordic blood represents that Mystery which has replaced and overcome the ancient Sacraments." Again Hauer says, "For Germans there is no higher revelation of eternal reality than that which has sprung from German soil and the German soul." B. V. Schirach says, "I simply believe in Germany."

"Positive Christianity"? What does it mean? Some idealistic pastors thought at first that it meant real Christianity as the Church has always taught it. But Goebbels said: "No, you in the Church have only taught it, we practise it, see our winter relief." And Rosenberg (whom Hitler appointed the leader of all educational work on the foundation of the Nazi-Weltanschauung), writing in his well-known book, *The Mythos of the Twentieth Century*, in which he mingles paganism, intellectual enlightenment, and a nebulous mystic view, comes to the conclusion that Positive Christianity is just the opposite to all that the Christian Churches have ever preached and taught, namely a new (or old) paganism.

What of Hitler himself? There are many Germans and I suppose also people abroad who prefer to think, Hitler himself does not want all that. In 1933 in three Berlin churches there stood on the Holy Communion Tables instead

of the Cross, pictures of Hitler, but he let us know that he did not agree. In his book, and in his public speeches he is very reserved in regard to religious questions. He sometimes mentions the Almighty or Providence. But why, since January 1934, has he given Rosenberg full power to educate youth? Does he really not know what his followers teach? In the last year one of the old fighters, K. Luedecke, edited a book—*I Knew Hitler*. The writer is not a Christian. He reveals in this book, as far as I know, for the first time, that Hitler was already in 1932 a definite enemy of Christianity. Hitler said to a small circle of friends that it was not political tactics to fight against Christianity in public at that time, for the masses cannot stand having too many enemies at once. At the beginning it was enough that they should fight against Marxists and Jews, later against reaction, and finally against Christianity. He left no doubt that with his coming to power Christianity would be overcome by the German Church—a Church without a spiritual Head and without a Bible. He even accused Christ (or at least the Christ of the Church), of having spoiled the German race by weakening it and the whole world. The highest standard of the party is not Christ but the German race.

According to this doctrine Kerl, the so-called State Minister of Church affairs, says: "A new authority has arisen as to what Christ and Christianity really are—Adolf Hitler." It is from such an estimate of Hitler that the greeting, "Heil Hitler" (which all Germans are obliged to say wherever they meet one another), gets its real meaning; it is the imitation of the *Ave Caesar* of the pagan Romans. This Totalitarianism is a religion and therefore it claims a new worship. Ley, the leader of the German Labour Front, consequently says: "The Party claims the totality of the soul of the German people. It cannot and will not suffer another party or point of view to dominate Germany. We believe that the German people can become eternal only through National-Socialism, and therefore we need every German, whether Protestant or Catholic."

Thus this new paganism is different from and worse than the primitive paganism in Africa or the Far East. For the Nazi leaders have been christianized and they should know what real Christianity means. They are anti-christian.

Either the Christians are right in saying as we all do, "Hitler's revolution took place in A.D. 1933 (after Christ)—or Jesus Christ was born 1933 B.H. (before Hitler). That is the point. It was not the Church which began to say: Christ *or* Hitler. The Church didn't think of such an alternative. It was the Nazis who did it and forced the Church to answer.

Thus the Church in Germany had to face a very difficult situation. (I speak here of the Protestant Church. But in some way, I think, it applies also to the Roman Catholic Church, although her inner position has not been touched and changed as much as the Protestant Church. The Catholics had not German Christians in their midst but rather a wing who tried to be both—Nazis and Catholics.)

But what could we do? What has been done? As a matter of fact all possible ways have been tried.

Firstly, there were Yes-men agreeing to National Socialism, either out of conviction or out of mass suggestion or out of opportunism. Political fanatics put the State above the Church, and National-Socialist *weltanschauung* above Christianity, some of them without a clear consciousness. They built up a new theology as an apology for National Socialism at any cost, partly denying all that they had taught before. The German Christians (Hitler himself gave them this name), underlined the first part of their name "German" so much that the other part "Christian" scarcely was to be heard. They did not or could not realize that they are not as they pretend to be a Church party, but nothing else than the lengthened arm of the political party within the Protestant Church, a means of introducing paganism into the Church and to identify ("gleichzuschalten") the Church with National-Socialism as all other institutions and corporations had been identified.

The idealists among the German Christians hoped that their Christianity would influence the party. Their eyes were holden that they should not know. . . . They trusted Hitler and his words without the least doubt, although his real meaning was clear to all who could see.

Secondly the majority of the clergy belong to a group who prefer to remain neutral. Some certainly because they thought it safer not to make a decision, but to wait and see. Some are as idealistic as those of whom I spoke among the

German Christian front. It is not natural for them to fight as others do. They are more "pacifists," not simply out of cowardice but also out of piety. Most of them probably stand behind the Confessional front in their hearts. But they don't show their hearts, and therefore outwardly they are no weight in the conflict. They preach the Gospel, but in a harmless way, ignoring the present situation. They speak the language in the pulpit which has been spoken for many centuries, timeless, without any challenge to the hearers. Actually they give assistance to those who say (in Germany as well as in Russia), "Faith is only a matter of the inner life, or the soul: it must have no expression and no contact with daily life, for that belongs to the State."

Thirdly, there is the so-called Confessional Church. They feel that the situation in Germany is a challenge, that neutrality is impossible. They feel the inevitable task is to fight and to confess.

We have to admit that this front is not absolutely united. There are different sections, each understressing a special side of the one front. Naturally the different sections touch each other. Some of the younger clergy, to be quite honest, are or were fighting because they enjoy it. Some are idealists who have previously been National Socialists and were disappointed by the development of the movement. They may not be quite free from resentment. Some are fighting very bravely indeed, but sometimes more in the way of the Old Testament than of the New Testament, influenced by the rigorous Calvinistic theology. They feel the necessity of rebuking the authorities in public for their wickedness. They resemble the prophet Nathan blaming King David for his immorality.

Why do they call themselves the "Confessional Church"? This expression is perhaps misunderstood. Goebbels' propaganda has for six years tried to make both the German and other people think that it is more or less a mere wild struggle of theologians for their particular dogma. The theologians are, that is true, responsible to see that the basis of Christ's Church is not changed by any power of the world. All confessions of the Creed, even those in the Old Church, were formulated against some special heresy in order to make clear (so far as the mystery can be cleared), what Christianity is and what it is not. Thus the German Confessional Church

had to form a new Creed against the new heresy of State Totalitarianism, that is against the claim that there could be any other fact in the course of history either alike or more important than the coming of Jesus Christ to earth.

The original name was not "Confessional" but "Confessing" Church. That means that they are confessors, confessing their faith by deeds as well as by words. They did so, and so they do still.

May I tell you briefly about one instance. There was a place about a hundred miles from Berlin. The excellent pastor had been imprisoned for a long time because he refused to leave his congregation. The Confessional Church of the whole Province decided to have an intercession service in this little town. From almost all the Confessing congregations delegations came, pastors and laymen, hundreds and hundreds: by train, bus and car. The Police did not allow us to enter the Church. So the clergy, about three hundred, changed into their robes in their cars, and suddenly they were all standing in the market place in their cassocks. The market was crowded with people. In the presence of the whole town and of the authorities, who did not dare to destroy us, an improvised service began in the open air. We sang our old hymns of the Reformation time, we prayed and listened to the words of Holy Scripture.

You can hardly imagine how glorious such a meeting was. We realized in some way what the early Christians must have experienced, as the "Acts of the Apostles" describes it.

The Confessional Church tried to manifest her confession by words and deeds and—by suffering. It was not easy to watch the influence of the Church restricted more and more in our country, although Hitler had said in March 1933: "The National-Socialist Government thinks that the two Christian Churches are the most important auxiliary agencies for the preservation of our National individuality. Their rights shall not be touched." They were not only touched but cut away, one after another. A German Christian Church Government was forced upon the Church by the State. Their finances were taken over and the Church could not collect funds for her own purposes. It is true that until now the State has left us most Church buildings, though not all: but one stone after another has been taken from the Church. It was not easy to yield the historical forms of our

Church (though perhaps this had to be), but to see the influence of the Christian Churches on the commonsense of the country, especially on that of youth, replaced in every way by the new paganism, that was heartbreaking indeed, and could not be given away without any protest or struggle.

You can imagine what all that cost in fighting and in suffering for a man like Martin Niemoeller. There was in 1935 a very remarkable meeting of Church leaders with Hitler. It was the only time that Hitler met Niemoeller. Unfortunately, Niemoeller could not say much to Hitler. But when Hitler, in his address said: "Look you after your Church, I shall look after the State." Niemoeller replied: "You cannot take from us the responsibility we have for our people and the State." Surely Hitler has never forgotten those words.

Just two years ago I wrote to Martin Niemoeller. He was in prison, but not yet in a concentration camp. I compared him with John the Baptist, who was also imprisoned because he ventured to speak the truth. You all know how for nearly three years this brave man has suffered. Let us not, however, forget others, who are less known. For instance, the Bavarian pastor Steinbauer and several laymen. I know of a clergyman and a layman, who were both killed in a concentration camp after a terrible time of torture.

What has happened since the outbreak of War I do not know. But one thing I do know. The old word is still true to-day: "Ye thought evil against me, but God meant it for good." I can say that never have the Church and clergy in Germany been respected so much as they are now, even by their bitterest enemies. In the prison in which I was for a short time, I met a simple man who had been in a concentration camp for nineteen months. He had left the Church, as he told me, because the Church, at first, did not speak the truth about Hitlerism, but having met nineteen pastors in his prison he promised to re-enter the Church. Likewise a Danish labourer who had had no contact with his Church for years and years, read the life of Niemoeller, and came back to his faith. These are only examples.

When I spoke recently on the German Church Conflict, an English minister asked me if there were real prayers within the Confessional Church. I must confess that I was shamed.

by this question. How could there be such a fight in the Church without prayer? I am glad to be able to say that never since the Reformation have so many Christians prayed so earnestly as they have now for six years. For instance, in the Church of Niemoeller in Dahlem, there has been an intercession service for him every day since July 1937, and the praying congregation has been large every evening. All Confessional congregations have their prayer circles. Because large meetings are not allowed they gather together in small meetings of ten to thirty people in private houses to read the Bible and to pray.

These prayer circles are, I suppose, the last and certainly the most important section and work of the Church. You do not see very much of them. They are hidden, and people from other fronts may be part of this section too. These small hidden circles are the very heart of the Church and of the German people. They wait for the Kingdom of our Lord, knowing that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed.

The sufferings of the real Christians in Germany can be neither useless nor fruitless, any more than in Russia. We share the experience of the "little flock." The big battalions do not count in the presence of God. There is a layman who has all along been the soul of godly resistance in our district. He strengthens even the pastors and their wives to stand, when temptation is assailing them. One really faithful man (or woman) can hold the whole front. This last section of the German Church is not bound to any country. It should be supported, we claim, by the prayers of the whole militant Church. Nobody can wish other countries a similar conflict between State and Church as we are experiencing. Nevertheless we would not miss it in spite of all the troubles and temptations! It has awakened our Church out of her long continued secularization. Ought not the true Church to be suffering and fighting much more than our usual Churches? Is not the Gospel power, i.e. dynamite—causing an upheaval—a convulsion of public opinion in its attitude to the eternal things of Truth and Love!