

The Crisis of Faith in Western Europe

PETER BEYERHAUS*

IN HIS ANNUAL REPORT before the General Assembly of the Evangelical Church in Germany in January 1971 in Berlin, the chairman of the Council, Bishop D. Hermann Dietzfelbinger, shocked the delegates by the following pronouncement: 'If I am not totally deceived, we are right in the middle of a struggle of faith, a church struggle in comparison with which the church struggle during the Nazi dominion was only a vanguard engagement. The ghastly aspect of it is, that often this struggle is hardly noticed, that it mostly is played down, and that it is making progress under camouflaging terms.'

This declaration caused a considerable commotion in all ecclesiastical circles in Germany. It was hailed by all those confessing groups who, for the last five years at least, consistently had been saying the same. By others it was rejected or played down as a wrong diagnosis of an obvious but by no means threatening difficulty in theological communication, a matter of linguistics rather than of faith.

I do not know how far this recent debate has been noticed in other countries, but I think the conflict indicated by it is serious enough to arouse the concern of our fellow Christians all over the world to know what is really going on in Germany. For according to my judgment what is happening in Germany is symptomatic of general trends within the Christian churches everywhere.

The Theological Changes in the Last Two Decades

WHEN I began my theological studies soon after the war, the academic and ecclesiastical scene was marked by the victory of the Confessing Church over the party of the 'German Christians' who, by the support of Hitler, had controlled both the Theological Faculties and the Church Councils. The ruling conviction of the Confessing Church

*An address given at the Islington Conference on June 6th, 1972.

was the dialectical theology of Karl Barth, with a new emphasis given to the heritage of the two great reformers, Luther and Calvin, and to the 'heils-geschichtliche' approach to the Bible led by Oscar Cullmann and Gerhard von Rad. To study theology during these years, which were marked both by our national breakdown and the hopeful attempt of a spiritual regeneration, was a thrilling experience.

But already at the end of that period slowly we sensed a wind of change. Strangely or typically enough it came in connection with our German economic reconstruction. The hunger for spiritual nurture which marked the war generation was not so evident with the following group which was benefiting from a more easy-going style of life. Now the search for intellectual truth for truth's sake took the upper hand over against the desire for spiritual rearmament.

At that juncture, a theologian appeared in the foreground who was a contemporary of Karl Barth and who, for some years during the twenties, had formed together with him, Emil Brunner and Friedrich Gogarten the 'Dialectical School'. Now the decisive hour came to bring into effect that theological programme which had already been published in 1941, but which then in the heat of the first church struggle had hardly been noticed — 'The demythologisation of the New Testament.'

The programme of demythologisation by Rudolf Bultmann, it is true, was not meant as elimination without substitution, but rather as a translation into the appealing categories of the current existentialist philosophy. But still this translation process was achieved at breathtaking expense. It actually resulted in a complete denial, not only of all miracles done by Christ, but also of the objective character of his divine nature, his resurrection and second coming, as well as the expiatory significance of his death.

To the great distress of all Bible-believing Christians, for about 15 years the existential school became the leading school of thought. Still it was not to stay for ever.

The new change was effected by a series of events which was ignited not by some outstanding academic theologians but which was simply part of the world-wide chain reaction of the student revolution. Its chief ideologists were not theologians but philosophers and sociologists of neo-marxist conviction like Herbert Marcuse and Ernst Bloch. When the international wave of the student revolt swamped over into the theological faculties and Christian university groups, the soil had, however, been tilled and fertilised by some preceding theological developments.

First of all we have to refer back to the negative development of the large scale sale of biblical authority and confessional orthodoxy by the so called results of radical biblical criticism. For several years, engaging in such criticism was considered the very climax of the theological study which attracted the greatest audience of students.

Now suddenly it dawned on them that what they had been doing was actually to consume the substance from which they were supposed to live and to draw as future ministers. In the name of 'Kerygmatic Theology' all essential elements of the biblical kerygma, and finally even the concept of a personal God, had been annihilated. Thus academic theology suddenly seemed to have lost any relevance for life. Therefore during the students riots in 1968 and 1969 various attempts were made to forge a new concept not only of theology but of the entire function of the Christian church.

To some extent these efforts could take up and further develop theological ideas which had already appeared as side tracks within the Bultmannian area. Here we have to mention Bonhoeffer's thesis about humanity which has come of age, the end of the religious era and the tasks of the church to follow the example of Jesus as the 'Man for others'.

Even more important was the theology of secularisation as it has been conceived by F. Gogarten and taken up by Harvey Cox and J. C. Hoekendijk. Through them, M. M. Thomas, Hans Margull and Walter Hollenweger, it became the accredited ideology of the W.C.C. which reached a new climax of its influence at its Geneva Conference on Church and Society 1966 and its Uppsala Assembly in 1968.

The main ideas of this ecumenical theology of secularisation can be summarised as follows:

God is not concerned primarily with the church nor does he mainly act through it and its means of grace. Rather he is concerned with the whole world which he has created and which he, through the process of historical changes, leads to his appointed goal, the realisation of a new mankind united in Christ and governed by justice and peace.

The church is a part of the world. It is that part which knows already about the appointed goal of history and acknowledges the rule of Christ. The meaning of the church does not lie in its being or possession but solely in its function. It is to share with the world its knowledge of and concern for a future more humanised state of society. This function is often described as sharing in the *Missio Dei*.

It is strongly emphasised that the church only exists for its mission. But this mission does not consist so much in proclaiming the Gospel to unbelieving mankind or in saving souls; it rather consists in discovering the presence and saving activity of God within the events and turmoils of the world. But since God also and even mainly acts through the non-Christian forces like Che Guevara in Latin America and Mao Tse Tung in China, mission is no one-way traffic. Rather the church is to engage in humble dialogue with the heathen in order to find out what God wants to communicate to us through them. The Church-in-Mission must listen more than talk, receive more than give.

If this concept is carried through to its logical conclusion, it must, according to my judgment, necessarily lead to the dissolution of the

church into the world. Or, what is more likely, the church might be transformed into a syncretistic movement for innerworldly reforms, a movement which would not hesitate to use the power structures of this world.

There is a strong trend of immanentism dominating our European churches today. This immanentism appears in different shades and degrees, starting from a charitable humanism and ending up with an apotheosis of revolution as a participation in God's acting in history.

Sometimes such trends reveal their deepest nature the moment when they turn radical. During the years 1968-1970, we went through a period when the public scene was scandalised by theological students and young ministers who had organised themselves in so-called 'red cells' of marxist conviction. They openly aimed at nothing less than completely to smash the existing churches and theological faculties and to replace them by institutions for revolutionary action.

They did not even shrink back from statements and actions of blasphemous nature, including a black mass dedicated to Satan. Terrible as these experiences were, they served at least as eye-openers for some of us, and made us realise the apocalyptic dimension of our present ecclesiastical development.

Today, however, the task of discerning the spirits has again become much more subtle and difficult. But it is, none the less, still an extremely urgent one. Personally I am most worried by the teaching of theologians who adapt the traditional Christian concepts to the expectations and desires of the new generation.

Here the language, in contrast to both old fashioned liberalism and Bultmannian demythologisation, sounds more and more orthodox. The doctrines of the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, the redemptive character of his cross, the reality of his resurrection and second coming are reaffirmed. But their authentic content has secretly been changed and replaced by evolutionist concepts. That which euphemistically is called a 'theology related to society' or 'political theology' is, in its deepest analysis, a camouflaged atheistic humanism, in which the names of God and Christ are simply cyphers for the real nature and destiny of man. Today this camouflaging process has come so far that it is able to reintroduce religion, liturgy and mysticism without really renouncing the former anthropocentric foundations. If some people today ask for a charismatic renewal, we should strive first of all for the charisma of discerning the spirits.

Some Ecclesiastical Features in Common Market Countries Today

HOW was this new theological development reflected in the life of our European churches? Let me share three observations with you. You will, however, have to keep in mind that these observations

regard trends which can be sensed in all churches but which have not yet made equal progress in all of them.

The first observation is the growing alienation of many members from their churches. This development originated from the age of rationalism and industrial revolution. But today we find that most churches experience a new drainage in attendance and participation. This is due partly to the growing prosperity and materialism, partly to a rapid erosion of Christian values and norms in our Western culture under the influence of an emancipatory view of life.

Anti-authoritarianism and pan-sexualism seem to be the two most virulent forces within this process which does not stop to make inroads even into families with strong religious traditions. Yet there is an additional factor: many Christians feel that the churches themselves are no longer really convinced of the validity of their doctrines and of the authority of the Bible as their standard of reference. The mass media have been used not only by secular journalists but also by modernist theologians to disseminate their critical views about the basic statements of the creed.

The second observation is the strong impact of secular ecumenism on the policy of the official church bodies. The conviction that striving for greater unity is the one needy thing, and that confessional separation and concern for the upbuilding of their own religious life is *the* great ecclesiastical sin, has become almost the only important dogma.

Therefore we find in all Common Market countries the attempt of the protestant churches to get more closely together. Either they form national councils of churches, or they merge into one comprehensive protestant church, or they convert their federal structures into centralised ones.

The interesting observation is, however, that the promoters of these endeavours regard themselves neither as Protestants nor as Catholics in the traditional sense. Instead they strive for the 'Third Confession', the confession of all those hoping for a better future, including not only Christians but also Humanists and Marxists. It is only logical that in these circles also joint services for Christians and Jews are held, and in one case in Western Germany even for Christians and Muslims.

One of the most influential centres which works for such new ecumenicity is the community of Taizé. It annually attracts tens of thousands of young people from all over Europe. Now it has announced the convocation of an Ecumenical Council of the Youth. Some months ago Prior Roger Schutz amazed the public by proposing to overcome the confessional schism by allowing for a double membership in both churches.

The experiment of Taizé seems to contain more promises of success as it has been able to combine the revolutionary enthusiasm of the youth with the fascination of a colourful liturgy and an introduction

into the art of meditation. The dangerous point, here too, is the confused concept of Christian doctrines. Especially conspicuous is the absence of the crucified Christ. He has been exchanged for the mystical idea of the 'risen Christ who is preparing to celebrate a feast in our hearts'. A young North African Mohammedan commented that he knew the same experience from his own religion. It is also noteworthy that Taizé's concept of reconciliation is a basically horizontal one.

The third main observation stands in sharp contrast to the preceding one. At the same time as we encounter all kinds of unity movements and merger schemes, there is an almost equally strong tendency towards theological polarisation. It affects churches in all countries and of all denominations, and does not even spare the Roman Catholic Church.

The erosion of fundamental Christian doctrines and also forms of worship which takes place under the cloak of *aggiornamento*, adaptation and reinterpretation, causes considerable alarm and even agony in the hearts of many believers. Usually they belong to the most faithful members of their churches. These Christians are bewildered that from their very pulpits their most central convictions are torn to pieces or exchanged for completely secular concepts in the name of theological scholarship or of a progressive understanding of mission. We find amongst them a strong resistance to such modernist sermons or political action programmes. It expresses itself in the search for preachers and Christian organisations which still stick to the familiar concepts, or otherwise in a sense of complete frustration.

Those who regard themselves as progressives try to scatter these apprehensions. They develop shrewd strategies to convince their weaker and unenlightened brethren of the sublime Christian nature of their advanced views. If, however, this fails, they would despise these people as stubborn and obscurantist. Sometimes they might even accuse them that their theological conservatism is only a pretext to veil racism or other reactionary political views.

This polarisation between those Christians who still hold on to the theocentric dimension of their faith and those who have substituted for it a humanistic interpretation is most significant. It seems to supersede, at least in importance, the traditional demarcations between different ecclesiastical parties and even between the great Christian confessions. Today on either side of this new credal barrier Christians right across all confessions are feeling that they have more in common with their fellow church members on the other side.

The Role of Confessing Evangelical Christianity

ONE of the most fatal aspects in the present crisis of faith in Europe is the inability of the official church to give clear guidance to its mem-

bership as to which doctrines and practices are still in agreement with its confessional standards, and its failure to discipline those who tenaciously violate them.

There are two reasons for this paralysis of the teaching office. One is the pluralism within the theological faculties which for centuries had served as the standards of reference in doctrinal matters. The other reason is the growing polarisation between the workers of the church. Both the conservatives and the progressives want their view to become the official stance and policy of the church.

Any authoritative pronouncement in doctrinal or ethical matters is sure to be opposed by one section of the church. There are very few church leaders of the calibre of Bishop Dietzfelbinger who dare publicly to defend the standards of the church and thereby to face contradiction and ridicule.

It is here that the new Confession Movements come in. They defend biblical standards of doctrine and ethics and their validity in church, mission and also society. Often they have to act vicariously for the teaching office of the church authorities. They also have to build up an amateur system of mass communication to convey to the congregations and to the public news and messages which they would not receive through the bigger channels.

We find such Christian Confession Movements in all the Western European countries which are dominated by large state churches. They appear under different names like 'No Other Gospel', 'Evangelical Gathering around Bible and Confession', or 'The Church's Yes and No' in Denmark. They vary greatly in size. Some are real mass movements of lay people, others are more dominated by clergy.

All the new confession movements are, therefore, predominantly constituted of ministers and members of the established protestant churches and address themselves to the authorities and congregations of these churches. For the time being they do not aim at separating from the official churches but strive for a confessional and spiritual renewal within their churches. Thus they are using any possible opportunity to engage in responsible consultations with leaders of their churches and also the older established mission societies. One could say that they play within their churches the role of a faithful opposition.

In Germany, there are five different confession groups who are working together in harmony and have established a 'Conference of Confessing Fellowships'. The largest amongst them is the Confession Movement: 'No other Gospel' which was founded in 1966.

In July 1969, a famous occasion for joint witness was the 'Kirchentag' in Stuttgart. The executive council wanted to confine its themes to social and political issues. But the Confession Movement made its participation dependent on an agreement that one section had to tackle the burning doctrinal conflicts, especially in Christology.

This Section I assembled under the polemical theme 'Struggle over

Jesus'. Contrary to all expectations, this section caused by far the greatest attraction. For three days the largest hall was overcrowded by 9,000 people who breathlessly watched and actively joined in the confrontation of three modernist and three conservative scholars on the issues of the divine nature, the resurrection and the return of our Lord. Last year our main task was to intervene with the West German Government and Parliament in connection with the revision of our criminal legislation in matters of pornography and abortion.

Right now we are concerned about the moves to change the federal structures both of the communion of the German protestant state churches and of the German Protestant Missionary Council into centralised bodies with legislative and executive authority. For we are convinced that at present such unity could only be achieved at the expense of doctrinal truth and with the exchange of an evangelistic concept of mission for a social political one.

A joint undertaking of the 'Conference of Confessing Fellowships' is the Theological Convention. Its leader is the well known Walter Künneth, retired professor in Systematic Theology and Apologetics in Erlangen. This 'Theological Convention' could be called the brains trust of the entire confession movement. It convenes theologians in academic and ecclesiastical positions with the purpose of giving a theological lead in the spiritual confusion of our time.

In March 1970 it caught public attention for the first time by issuing the 'Frankfurt Declaration' on the 'Fundamental Crisis on Christian Mission'. This has been translated into all Western European and also the major Asian languages and has been spread on all six continents.

It is especially this concern for mission along true biblical lines in the spirit of the evangelical revival which has established closer relationships also between the Confession Movement and the older Evangelical bodies in Germany like the 'Evangelical Alliance' and the 'Gnadauer Union'. The Conference of Evangelical Missions comprised of 35 mission societies related to the Evangelical Alliance last February adopted the Frankfurt Declaration as its understanding of mission.

But the time seems to be ripe for an even wider brotherhood in biblical witness.

In October last year in Holland a most heartening document appeared which in structure and spirit is rather similar to the Frankfurt Declaration. It is signed by a group of well known theologians. Since it does not confine itself to the realm of mission, it is called 'On the Crisis of Theology and Church'. It is a pastoral letter in the best sense, directed to the 'Church of Jesus Christ'. It wants to strengthen and to console those who are at present in danger of becoming tired, uncertain, doubting and fainthearted. Therefore it reaffirms seven fundamental truths of the faith which at present are constantly being distorted by a humanistic ideology. Perhaps such analogous confes-

sional witness should be taken as a challenge for establishing a fellowship of evangelical confessions across all European countries.

The role of confessing evangelical Christianity is, however, by no means confined to the apologetic task in our present church struggle. 'Watching and venturing' or 'resistance and renewal' are the two great concerns of the Confessing Movement. Without this second reviving element we would be disfigured into policemen of orthodoxy. The confessing fellowships from the beginning took upon themselves, as their greatest task, the nourishing of starved masses of believers who in the ordinary church services very often looked in vain for a reviving exposition of the biblical Gospel.

There are different ways in which we communicate this spiritual nurture to the people. Up to now great rallies form an outstanding feature. They are not simply revival meetings of the old style, but they combine the elements of confessional demonstration, evangelisation and solid Christian teaching.

The biblical affirmations of the person of Christ, his work, his bodily resurrection, the significance of prayer and the reality of the eschatological expectation are important elements of these popular lectures. Recently in several German cities such rallies were held again. The one in Stuttgart attracted 12,000 persons, and was the largest one ever held in that city.

We also realise that, in spite of the essential new emphasis on the lay structure of the church, the pastor still holds a key position. Therefore vacation courses for theological students are conducted to vaccinate them against modernist infection and to build up a sound biblical substance for their personal theology. The same is done in the new study hall which we established in Tübingen in 1970. It bears the name of a famous Bible expositor and church father of Württemberg pietism 'Albrecht Bengel—Haus'. Here the students form a close Christian brotherhood and are also brought into vital contact with some of the most healthy congregations of the country.

One crucial question might finally be asked:

WHAT are the prospects of the concern to save the church from spiritual ruin and to work for a new evangelical revival?

The answer cannot be given with absolute certainty, mainly because we do not know at what hour in the history of salvation we are living now. If there is still much time ahead for completing the remaining task of preaching the Gospel as a witness to all nations, we assuredly may hope and pray for a new spiritual reformation and revival in our European churches. There are some signs that such a revival is taking place, especially amongst the younger generation.

But if we are living already shortly before the end which the Lord

has appointed for his forbearing mercy with rebellious mankind, we also might enter a time of still greater apostasy and even persecution. We are trying to prepare our congregation for both possibilities.

In either case Christ's promise and commission is the same: 'Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life' (Rev. 2: 10).