CATHOLIC AND PROTESTANT IN WESTERN GERMANY

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OBSERVERS surveying the political scene in Western Germany immediately after the Second World War were apt to agree that the good understanding between Catholics and Protestants was one of the few positive results of the ghastly experience of Nazism, war and defeat. Everything seemed to point to the permanence of this new harmony. Catholic and Protestant Christians had both suffered for the same reason, both had learned to understand one another faced as they were by the totalitarian menace—first Nazi and later Communist. And both had reason to regard themselves as the 'saving remnant' that had redeemed the soul of Germany. The temporary disappearance of a German state had led finally to the emergence of the two Churches as the only remaining pillars of native authority which could give guidance and solace to a despairing and bewildered people.

The situation is unfortunately radically different today. As long as the majority of Germans remained stunned by defeat and pre-occupied with the burden of day-to-day existence, old feuds and rivalries seemed meaningless. The stabilisation of their currency, however, with its almost magical effect on the living standard, together with the re-emergence of German statehood—even though with limited sovereignty—have once more led to conditions in which echoes of the past can be heard with increasing and alarming clarity.

The clue to German history is the centuries-old interplay of religion and regionalism which dates back to the Reformation. The South and West, as everybody knows, remained Catholic, whilst the North and East embraced the new faith. The rise of Prussia, the absorption of the Catholic Rhineland and Westphalia into this militantly Protestant state, the exclusion of Austria from the new Germany, and finally the setting up of the Hohenzollern Empire, marked the stages of Protestant and Prussian ascendancy over the Catholic West and South. At one time, many Germans thought that this development was the unalterable will of the

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Hegelian 'Weltgeist'. The majority of Protestants were fully satisfied with their status of privileged subjects under the Hohenzollern crown; and their upper strata, which enjoyed the quasi-monopoly of higher appointments in the civil service, in the army and the universities, were inclined to look upon democratic self-government with suspicion and distrust. The Catholics were meanwhile organising themselves on more popular lines, independent of the state. Towards the end of the Hohenzollern Empire and during the Weimar Republic, 'political Catholicism', to use a rather hackneyed German term, formed a closely-knit minority, led by a middle-class intelligentsia, supported by a growing Catholic trade-unionism, and centred mainly in the Rhineland, Westphalia and Bavaria.

The Second World War, the de facto division of Germany and the emergence of two hostile German states, one free and the other slave, have brought about changes in the political climate which would have to be called revolutionary but for the fact that they were brought about by foreign interference rather than by internal stresses. With Eastern Germany crushed under the Soviet heel, and the Prussian ruling class all but liquidated, Prussian ascendancy ended almost overnight. Berlin ceased to be the political capital, and a new centre of gravity emerged in the West. The new 'Land' of North-Rhine-Westphalia, with its near-monopoly of German heavy industry, became the natural leader of Free Germany, and it was an act of almost poetic justice that Bonn on the Rhine should be chosen as Western Germany's capital.

This new development came about solely as the result of the Cold War and the unalterable facts of geography, and was in no way due—as men like Niemöller are apt to forget—to any anti-Protestant bias. The fact remains, nevertheless, that whereas the old Reich was more than two-thirds Protestant, the corresponding figures for the West German Federal Republic are, 50 per cent. Protestants and 45 per cent Catholics, the remainder being minor sects and denominations as well as avowed agnostics. It is furthermore true that the C.D.U. (the Christian Democratic Union), the leading party in the governing coalition today, is predominantly Catholic; and that the notion of a political party based on Christian concepts is well in accord with Catholic tradition, whilst being alien to the spirit of German Protestantism. Catholics may well

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point to the fact that in Western Germany today the majority of key jobs in the administration and in industry (though not in the Cabinet) continue to be held by Protestants, and that a certain equalisation is overdue; their opposite numbers however remain unconvinced. They have come to regard Protestant ascendancy as natural, and blame the Catholics for taking advantage of Germany's division. Every new appointment of a Catholic to a senior post is regarded in certain circles as proof that Western Germany has, to all intents and purposes, become a Catholic state.

These bickerings and petty statistics might be regarded as unworthy of comment were it not for the fact that they are assuming a new importance in view of the challenge from the East. It is undeniable that today the two Churches are unable to see eye to eye on this vital and indeed all-important issue. There are, it must be emphatically stressed, no pro-Communists in either of the two Churches, but the differences in the ways in which Catholics and Protestants intend to meet the Eastern menace are profound and spring from deep-rooted principles and traditions.

To Catholics, Soviet Communism and Marxian materialism mean the denial of God, neither more nor less. The Catholic Church would rather expose Catholics in Central and Eastern Europe to increased Soviet pressure than compromise on principles and expose the free world to Soviet infiltration. German Catholics and German Catholic politicians take the same line, a decision which may have been facilitated by the fact that only ten per cent of German Catholics live behind the Iron Curtain.

The position of German Protestantism is more difficult and in a sense more tragic. Its traditional outlook is national rather than European, so much so that historically German Protestantism may be regarded as a repudiation of internationalism, both in the political and religious spheres. Protestants look upon Eastern Germany as the heart land of their country and the cradle of their faith, and are inclined to pay a far heavier price for the restoration of German unity than are the majority of Catholics. Protestantism finally is united by a common 'Lebensgefühl' and not by a common doctrine. They have no Supreme Pontiff to guide them and consider diversity as the true essence of Protestant genius. Is it to be wondered at that this diversity is reasserting itself today?

There is the 'Confessing Church' which, in the course of its

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struggles with Nazism, has learned to look askance at secular authority and social privilege. Breaking radically with the German tradition of state-worship, these men hold that since all human institutions are contaminated by original sin, the Church must keep aloof from secular affairs—whatever that may mean. Distrusting the motives of the West and East alike, unable to break entirely with their nationalist past, however they might try, and fearful of the consequences of another war fought out on German soil, men like Niemöller are surrendering to emotions which have been aptly characterised as 'a highly explosive mixture of pacifism and nationalism'.[1] Bewildered and blinded by disappointment and resentment, they see the hand of Rome and of Big Business everywhere. Hence the wild statement that the Bonn Republic was 'conceived in the Vatican and born in Washington'.[2] It is only natural, therefore, that the Confessing Church today, which in many ways represents the flower of German Protestantism, should be propagating a policy of strict neutrality.

Theirs, however, is but the voice of a minority. The majority of the leaders of the German Evangelical Church have other reasons for hesitating to identify themselves with the Bonn Republic. Viewing the situation in Eastern Germany today, the Evangelical Church sees the gradual and perhaps inexorable collapse of the old social order in these parts. A new, one-class society is taking shape in the very provinces which, historically, were the stronghold of German Protestantism and which are, moreover, inhabited by more than forty per cent of the total of German Protestants. Rightly or wrongly, many Protestant leaders fear that, should the gulf between the social structures east and west of the Iron Curtain be allowed to widen, it might one day become unbridgeable, and German unity be destroyed for ever. Hence the extreme caution of many Protestants who regard their Church as the last organised link between the two Germanies; hence the fears of men like Bishop Dibelius and his solemn warning, 'We are rapidly becoming two nations'.

Finally, there is the appeal which the forces of neo-nationalism and neo-Nazism are making to a certain section of the Protestant electorate. It must in fairness be stressed that no responsible

1 Walter Dirks, in *Frankfurter Hefte*, Dec. 1950.

2 A statement repeatedly made by Niemöller.

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Church leader has up to now compromised with these sinister tendencies. It is, on the other hand, more than a mere coincidence that, for the time being at least, neo-Nazism is limited to those Protestant provinces of Western Germany that are the most deeply impregnated by the tradition of Prussianism.

For historical, doctrinal and political reasons, the 'cold war' has thus united the German Catholics whilst accentuating the cleavages and diversities within the Protestant body, a development which in turn has increased the latent rivalries between Catholics and Protestants.

What conclusions must be drawn from this unfortunate state of affairs except the obvious one that old traditions die hard? It would indeed be pointless to try to predict the future. There are those optimists who claim that, in view of the tremendous upheavals which have taken place in Germany, it is almost a miracle that understanding is as good as it is; they point to the fact that, in the purely religious sphere, there is little or no bad feeling, and that existing difficulties are limited to the field where religion and politics overlap. There are others who are inclined to believe that the present predicament of German Protestantism is due to the vagueness of its doctrinal foundations and to its over-emphasis on the dictates of the individual conscience. There are finally those who point to the historical truth that Germany, as opposed to England, France and Italy, was always a country of extremes and that she always had great difficulties in striking the golden mean.

None of these interpretations by itself is wholly satisfactory, and a combination of the three is perhaps the nearest to the truth. An analysis of the present can never be an entirely reliable guide to the future.

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