

Ecumenism in Germany

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IN 2017, the traditional dating of the outbreak of the Reformation (1517) will be half a millennium old. Thus for a quarter of its entire history, large sections of Christendom will by then have been Protestant.

It might be of some interest, therefore, to consider, in the land most closely associated with the birth of Protestantism, namely Germany, how acute the tensions may or may not still be between the former bitter rivals, Protestants and Catholics, and to try to assess the extent to which the ecumenical movement may have eased such tensions and advanced or, on the contrary, perhaps hindered the process of bringing the two main cultural expressions of German Christianity back into alignment with one another.

Over recent decades, as if emerging from a long period of confessional and theological stalemate, the Churches in Germany have presented themselves in a friendlier light and enhanced their general visibility by means of the highly organized congresses that are held alternately by Protestants and Catholics every other year. The congresses are known as the German Protestant Church Congress (*Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag*) and the German Catholic Congress (*Deutscher Katholikentag*). At such gatherings, mainly topical themes and questions agitating Christians and society at large are aired, though usually each congress is organized around a main issue. The German Protestant Church Congress of 1965, held in Cologne, was, for example, focused on the subject of Protestant-Catholic dialogue. But there is also usually a significant ecumenical dimension to all such gatherings. Importantly, all these events are organized by lay Church members.

Furthermore, in 1948 the Association of Christian Churches in Ger-

many (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen in Deutschland* [ACK]) was founded, as a kind of mini-version of the World Council of Churches, but for Germany. It came into being partly as a response to the disaster of the Nazi period, when the various Christian traditions in Germany had been unable to prevent the rise and eventual temporary triumph of a radically anti-Christian ideology, and no doubt partly also in response to the felt wider need to move closer together in the face of the increasingly naturalistic assessment of human life in the twentieth century. The ACK's aim is to promote ecumenism and Christian unity among all Christian bodies. The Catholic Church joined in 1974.

ECUMENICAL CHURCH CONGRESSES

In 2003, there was a new departure on the German Church scene with the holding of the very first ecumenical Church Congress (*Ökumenischer Kirchentag*) in Berlin. The second was held in Munich in 2010. And there is talk of a third to be held in 2017, to coincide with the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. Possibly, however, it might be postponed until 2019, precisely not to overshadow the celebration of that anniversary. At local levels, more modest Ecumenical Congresses are also held in Germany, as in 2011 in Dülmen, in the context of the seven hundredth anniversary of the town's origin. In 2012, the fifteenth International Ecumenical Lake Constance Congress for Christians from the main German-speaking countries will be held in Überlingen. There is, moreover, much genuine co-operation at local, parish level between the main Christian traditions, and also at the higher, organizational level of the many welfare institutions run by both main Churches in Germany.

While such evidence shows that there is distinct interest and determination in German-speaking lands to overcome the divisions emanating from the Reformation, and to stress what various Christian traditions have in common, there are some shadows on the ecumenical landscape as well. It could be said that ecumenical relations had been on a fairly steadily improving course in Germany until the end of the second millennium, especially after a large measure of agreement had been reached by Lutherans and Catholics on the historically contentious

issue of the doctrine of Justification in a significant 'break-through' document (*Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church*), signed and published in 1999.

The agreed document was, admittedly, not received with universal approval by all shades of Lutheran opinion. It was, however, generally perceived at the time as a positive step forward in a more hopeful direction for Lutheran-Catholic relationships.

THE IMPACT OF *DOMINUS IESUS*

But almost immediately thereafter, ecumenism entered a much more delicate phase in Germany with the publication in 2000, during the Pontificate of Blessed John Paul II, of *Dominus Iesus*, the Declaration issued by the then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, that the fullness of the Church of Christ subsisted solely in the Catholic Church: 'the Church of Christ, despite the divisions which exist among Christians, continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church.'¹ Consequently, Protestant Churches could only be regarded as 'ecclesial communities' and 'not Churches in the proper sense', not even 'true particular Churches.'²

This document was frostily received by many Protestant Christians in Germany, and not a few German Catholics as well, and it may have helped create the atmosphere in which Bishop Wolfgang Huber, when receiving the newly elected Pope Benedict XVI in Cologne in August 2005, spoke of ecumenism as having now entered the era of an 'ecumenism of profiles'. By this diplomatically couched formula, the Bishop no doubt meant to suggest that different parts of the Christian family had different 'profiles' which revealed their family resemblances and common heritage, but that no one 'profile' should seek to lord it over any other. Or, to vary the image, that Christendom was more like a huge delta with various tributaries, all carrying water, but not destined to flow back into the Tiber.

Bishop Huber, the former Head (technically, 'Chairperson of the Council') of the Protestant [Lutheran] Church in Germany (or, more

1. *Dominus Iesus*, section 16.

2. *Dominus Iesus*, section 17.

accurately, the 'Evangelical Church' in Germany – *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* [EKD]) from 2003 to 2009, himself a distinguished theologian and scion of a prominent German academic and legal family,³ and other leading Protestant figures in Germany would appear to share the perception, indeed apprehension, that the Catholic Church is currently

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cosying up too enthusiastically to the Orthodox Churches, especially Constantinople and Moscow, and implicitly neglecting Berlin. They would wish to defend the right of their Church to be regarded as a serious player in modern Christian affairs, and fear the danger of its being relegated to a side-show in the world of ecumenical power politics.

The recent move by the Catholic Church to facilitate the entry of some disaffected Anglican groups

into full communion with Rome seems to have reinforced a suspicion among German Protestants that Rome has, as it were, 'given up' on them and is pursuing unity with only those elements of Christendom that are already quite close to the Catholic understanding of the Church. Bishop Markus Dröge, the Protestant Bishop of Berlin, is, for example, known to be critical of Pope Benedict's ecumenical stance with regard to Protestant Churches.

At the same time, relations with the Orthodox Church are perceived as improving quite appreciably. The seventh ecumenical meeting between representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church and the German Bishops' Conference, led on the German side by Bishop Gerhard Ludwig Müller of Regensburg, Chairman of the Ecumenical Commission of the German Bishops' Conference, took place in December 2011 in Moscow.

According to some commentators, the Catholic Church is now more viscerally (and also spiritually, of course) interested and more

3. See http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolfgang_Huber

actively engaged, under the tutelage of Pope Benedict XVI, in healing fully the much older breach between Eastern and Western Christianity ('The Great Schism' of 1054, now well launched on its second millennium) than in settling the more local quarrel between Latin Christians themselves (Catholic and Protestant) that has been festering for a mere five centuries.

And this would add plausibility to the, at first sight, slightly odd notion, intimated at the start of this article, that ecumenism in Germany could, paradoxically, be driving Protestants and Catholics further apart.

Many Protestant Christians in Germany, as well not a few Catholics, were thus further alarmed, when the Vatican in 2007 unilaterally again declared Protestant Churches to be

not quite Churches in the full sense. This declaration may to some extent have been intended as a clarification, from the Vatican's perspective, of Bishop Huber's notion of an 'ecumenism of profiles' within Christendom. The 2007 declaration, repeating in essence the teaching of *Dominus Iesus*, could perhaps in part be seen as a fairly robust and unambiguous rejection of any notion than one Christian 'profile' was as valid as any other.

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And as if to underline the cooling relationships between German Catholics and Lutherans, Bishop Müller of Regensburg called in April 2011 on Lutherans to distance themselves finally from Martin Luther's view of the Pope as the Antichrist. Lutherans were rather taken aback by this demand, judging Luther's view to be simply time-conditioned, and not taken seriously any more by Protestants. They didn't see why the matter was being raised in 2011 at all.

The impression of some slackening of interest in Catholic-Protestant communication was strengthened during the most recent papal visit to Germany, in September 2011, when no dramatic 'concession' in the area of liturgy (sharing in the celebration of the Eucharist between

Lutherans and Catholics, for example) was forthcoming, even though it may have been hoped for by some, in particular on the Lutheran side. Pope Benedict did, certainly, specifically honour the theological contribution of the arch-Reformer, Martin Luther, to Christian thought, especially the contribution made by Luther's existential struggle with the God-question. And the Pope even chose to meet Protestant leaders, on their home ground, so to speak, in the former Augustinian Convent in Erfurt where Luther had once studied theology and been ordained a Catholic priest.

BEAR ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS

And, indeed, Benedict's general message of the importance of the task each Christian tradition has in strengthening its own life of faith, rather than seeking agreement and unity through quasi-political means, by negotiation and compromise, may have been a gesture of acknowledgement towards Bishop Huber's earlier 2005 call for an 'ecumenism of profiles'.

It may equally, of course, have been a subtle reminder from one former German professor of theology to another, that no matter how many profiles Christendom may be able to produce, the question of truth cannot be decided by any negotiated 'trade-off' between various Christian bodies. Thus, Benedict stated at the Erfurt meeting:

We should help one another to develop a deeper and more lively faith. It is not strategy that saves us and saves Christianity, but faith – thought out and lived afresh; through such faith, Christ enters this world of ours, and with him, the living God. As the martyrs of the Nazi era brought us together and prompted the first great ecumenical opening, so today, faith that is lived from deep within amid a secularized world is the most powerful ecumenical force that brings us together, guiding us towards unity in the one Lord.⁴

If an implication of Pope Benedict's words, however, was that only the possession of the Roman (Petrine) charism or, to use Bishop Huber's term, 'profile', guarantees the validity and uniqueness of the one

4. <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/2782854/posts>

true Church of Christ, this can scarcely have sounded like heavenly music to German Protestant ears.

On the other hand, in a *Laudatio* delivered in October 2011 on the occasion of the conferring of the Ecumenical Prize of the Catholic Academy of Bavaria on the then Lutheran Bishop of Bavaria, Johannes Friedrich (who was in office from 1999 to 2011), for his contribution to ecumenism, Bishop Müller was at pains to point out that many popular interpretations of *Dominus Iesus* were quite erroneous. For they ignored the importantly different technical senses in which 'Church' in the Catholic sense is understood, and thus failed to see that the document had never meant to deny the genuine Christian and ecclesial substance of Protestant communities.⁵

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Whether his words have assuaged Protestant apprehensions in this regard, it is too soon to say.

However, it is hard to deny the sense, admittedly only an impressionistic sense, that ecumenism, in so far as it relates to Catholics and Protestants, is stalling. A slight straw in that wind is the emergence, since the 1960s roughly, of a relatively new strand within German Protestantism known as '*Evangelikal*' (the designation was apparently taken over after contact with evangelical Christians in the USA).⁶ One specific token of what this shift signifies, is, for example, that in certain Lutheran Churches, which are moving or have moved in an *Evangelikal* direction (the St.-Martini-Kirche in Bremen would be a case in point), women are not tolerated in the sanctuary area of the church building.

This new 'fundamentalism', for want of a more precise term, seems to be a sign that some Protestant Christians long again for what they consider will mark off or identify their Christian witness clearly and unambiguously, especially in terms of Church order and traditional moral values. And it could maybe best be understood as a muscular reaction to the challenge affecting nearly all Christian Churches in the

5. The *Laudatio* can be found at <http://www.kath.net/detail.php?id=33507>

6. See <http://www.evangelikale-bewegung.de/>

modern world: how to conjugate the legacy of Christian theory and practice with the demands of critical thought that have grown more insistent in the West since the Enlightenment.

Interesting, too, though in the light of the North American experience hardly surprising, is the way the *Evangelikal* influence is also making its presence felt in the world of German politics. Thus, Volker Kauder, chairman of the CDU parliamentary party in the German parliament, is said to be close to this wing of Protestantism, even if, it is said, he might not wish to apply the actual term '*Evangelikal*' to himself.

MEMBERSHIP

On the other hand, there is much common ground between Catholics and Protestants on the question of the current cultural climate in Germany and how best to react to it. It is a climate that reflects a widespread perception that Christianity is now a fading presence in the West. The numbers of those leaving the Churches in Germany over the last number of decades have increased in the last few years. The weekly magazine, *Der Spiegel*, reported in April 2011 that in 2010 the number of Catholics leaving the Church (around 180,000, an increase of nearly 40% on the previous year) in any one year may even have surpassed the number of Protestants doing so, for the first time in the history of the German Federal Republic.⁷ Another new 'first' for the Catholic Church in Germany for the year 2010 is that the number of those leaving the Church was for the first time ever even higher than the number of baptisms.⁸

One can think of statistics what one will, and in the case of Church membership in Germany, the question of Church-taxes is a relevant factor to bear in mind, as only official Church members have to pay this tax. Still, even allowing for the influence of economic pressures on some to leave the Church, the general trend in all Church communities in Germany is currently downwards, in terms of membership.

7. <http://www.spiegel.de/panorama/gesellschaft/0,1518,755497,00.html>

8. <http://www.welt.de/print/wams/politik/article13517466/Nachrichten.html>

EVANGELIZATION

A sign of the times is that not only Catholics, in a Vatican initiative, are talking about 'New Evangelization', in a de-Christianized Europe, but German Lutherans too now speak frequently of 'New Evangelization'. The idea was promoted by Bishop Huber during his time as head of the Lutheran Church in Germany, when he declared the 'new evangelization' of Germany to be one of the most urgent tasks facing the Lutheran Church. Germany, like most of Western Europe, is now widely regarded as needing to be re-evangelized. Evidence of this new departure in both Catholic and Protestant communities or parishes in recent years is the growth of 'faith courses' that are offered, in the context of Church life, to a general public, and aim at making Christianity both comprehensible and attractive again to those who have drifted away from the traditional Churches or have never had any previous contact with them.

Given the increasing precariousness of the Christian presence in Germany and western Europe generally, the seeming lack of any great urgency about ecumenism at the moment is perhaps an admission that Christianity's problems are recognized to transcend inter-Church debates. Christianity, in the West at any rate, may indeed have entered a phase reminiscent of the last centuries of Graeco-Roman paganism in the world of late antiquity when it was the Church that finally swept all before it, while absorbing significant aspects of its conquered rival's heritage.

The difference between then and now, of course, is that there does not appear to be any new movement on the horizon ready and willing to take over from Christendom. Unless it be Islam. In an interview given in 2008 to a Berlin-based magazine, *Cicero*, for example, Bishop Huber warned about the 'Islamization of Europe', and criticized the frequent references of the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to the European Union as a 'Christian Club'.⁹

What seems to be beyond dispute is that the old strife and the old cultural differences between Catholic and Protestant in Germany are of little public or political interest any longer. Even the traditional

9. http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolfgang_Huber

belief that Protestant regions of Germany were more economically vibrant than the allegedly more other-worldly Catholic ones, is hard to square with the current economic geography of Germany, where the most prosperous parts, in the south, are preponderantly Catholic (on paper, at least) and the less economically attractive areas are often quite solidly Protestant or at least formerly Protestant (again, on paper), in the north and east. The previous animosity that centuries

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ago characterized relations between Catholic and Protestant parts of Germany no longer exists, except perhaps in a residual sense of superiority and self-reliance still occasionally identified in the popular mind with a 'Protestant' attitude to life as opposed to a perceived 'Catholic'

inclination towards superstition and docility. In such cases, the term 'Catholic' is sometimes heard almost as a humorous equivalent of 'slightly gullible', but not in any seriously offensive sense.

What is much more alive, unfortunately, is a growing resentment towards Muslims living in Germany, especially those of Turkish origin. The discovery in very recent times that a neo-Nazi cell had been operating undetected in Germany for a number of years, and had murdered ten people between 2000 and 2007, the majority of whom were of Turkish background, has shocked civil society throughout Germany.

With such life-and-death problems to confront, it is perhaps not so surprising if ecumenism might seem a fairly low priority for Church and political leaders, and if they feel they have more immediate issues to which to devote their energies.