

Daniel Schenkel, Excerpts from *The German Protestant Association* (1868)

Abstract

The Professor of Theology Daniel Schenkel (1813–1885) of the University of Heidelberg was a leading proponent of liberal Protestantism and co-founder of the German Protestant Association (1865). Excerpts from his pamphlet on the association reflect his distinction between church and religion, and his emphasis on individual, non-institutional spirituality. The excerpts outline liberal Protestants' efforts to reconcile the hostile extremes of rationalist humanism and religious revivalism as they aimed for "the renewal of the Protestant Church...in harmony with the overall cultural development of our times."

Source

I. The Birth of the German Protestant Association

It is a peculiar phenomenon of our time that the church has lost the better part of the influence it used to exert on people and nations in other times. Some rejoice over this fact: they see in it a victory for freedom of the spirit. Others lament it: they perceive it as a sign of religious and moral dissipation. We, on the other hand, will seek to explain it. Religion is undoubtedly the mightiest spiritual force in man: it lifts him above the merely sensory existence; it gives him the awareness of being the citizen of a higher, eternal order of things. If human beings are religious, it is befitting of human nature; if they do not care about religious matters, it is improper. Religion, however, has always given itself a specific external form in a cult or the church, and in this circumstance lies the key to the peculiar phenomenon that human beings at times seem to lose religion, that they appear to have no more heart for religious matters, and that, as is presently the case, a large—namely the more educated—part of the nation no longer shows a lively interest in the church and its fate. Obviously, what is happening here is a confusion of concepts.

The human heart can never become indifferent toward religion itself; it is inextricably interwoven with the Eternal, and if it wished to abandon God, God would nevertheless not abandon it. It is different when it comes to the church. In many cases it is a very faulty manifestation of religion, and it can even reach the point where it is an obstacle to religion and a significant disadvantage for religious life. As evidence for this we shall invoke the Reformation. The Roman Church had tied off the life arteries of religion during the Middle Ages; it had become an entirely worldly sacerdotal state. It had suffocated consciences, paralyzed free minds, unleashed all evil passions in its own midst. If the German nation turned away from the Church and embraced the reform with enthusiasm, this was by no means an apostasy from religion, but a return to the sources of true piety. It is possible, as this example teaches us, to turn one's back on the church, on its teachings, services, and institutions, precisely for reasons of religion.

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Moreover, there is no question in our minds, as well, that the religious—or more precisely, the ecclesiastical—state of affairs of our day is unsatisfactory, that it is in need of thorough renewal and improvement. Let us speak first of the German nation only. If a nation is at odds with its church, this poses a great danger to national life. By renouncing the church, it will either simultaneously renounce religion, as well, which is so easily confused with the church, and along with religion it will lose the true moral content, its power and sacredness; or it will split religiously into a multitude of sects and special

parties, and thus lose one of the most fruitful sources of its unity and coherence. You will say: religious unity ceased to exist for us Germans with the Reformation in any case. We don't deny that. But Protestantism was at least a national creation. The German people, in spite of its confessional split, is the people of the Reformation; until now, German Catholics who are not Roman but patriotic in spirit had in Protestantism a protective wall against Roman infringements. The dissolution of Protestantism would pose not only an immense religious, but also a terrible national and political danger. We have an entirely benevolent attitude toward Catholicism, provided it does not pursue goals inimical to culture and does not seek to renew the horror of Jesuitical intolerance and priestly mania for persecution; it may continue its religious and cultural-historical mission unobstructed, as long as it does not keep us Protestants from pursuing our own. However, the religion of the modern world is Protestantism: only it has understood Christianity in a way that the nations that have come of age are able to understand and adopt in the long run. It is our belief that the future belongs to Protestantism to the same degree that it is able to realize its principles in the life of nations and states, and to cast off the theological fetters with which he, the youthful giant, constrained his still-awkward limbs already three centuries ago.

We have now already reached the point from which we are able to justify the birth of our association in greater detail. Protestantism is Christianity in the form of religious truth and moral freedom. In keeping with its basic convictions, it can be content only with the highest and complete truth, and to attain this goal it requires unconditional freedom that does not shrink in fear from any consequences. Protestantism broke with the medieval form of Christianity in three ways. First, it rejects all priestly mediation, all priestly rule. Second, it demands an autonomous recognition of faith, a personal conviction of conscience: a faith that is merely traditional and adopted has no value for it. Third, it places no importance in external forms: the peace of the soul, the communion with God is, in its eyes, independent from them. In the same way that Christianity itself was not able to pervade the world immediately with its new ideas, Protestantism was unable to realize its principles in full purity and strength without delay. The Catholic leaven that was still left within it once again suffused the community it established. The rule of Catholic priests was replaced by the Protestant rule of theology; independent convictions of faith by a dependent faith of a traditional and confessional faith; Catholic rules and ceremonies by Protestant dogmas and formulas, which, as on the issue of the Eucharist, caused an irreparable rift even among Protestants themselves; the living pope in Rome by a paper pope, namely the Bible that was simply declared to be inspired and therefore infallible.

That is why the expectations that were initially placed in Protestantism were for the most part not fulfilled. As long as German cultural life on the whole did not exceed the average educational level of the sixteenth century, the nation felt rather content with the new ecclesiastical conditions. They were at least better than those of Jesuit-dominated Roman ecclesiasticism. But from the middle of the eighteenth century, when the general revolution in the fields of knowledge dissolved the traditional circle of intellectual imagination, and the infallible authority of the Bible could no longer prevail against path-breaking new discoveries in the natural sciences and philosophical ideas, the Protestant church also fell into strife with science and education; the only reason why that strife did not have any more deleterious consequences for the time being was that theologians in the eighteenth century hoisted the banner of the Enlightenment, relinquished the autonomy of religion, the infallibility of the Bible, and the authority of the ecclesiastical confession, and accepted the unconditional sway of reason also in matters of religion.

This devaluation of religion was lamentable, however, and Friedrich Schleiermacher, a man who has had a truly reforming effect on our century, fought against it victoriously and successfully in his "Speeches on religion to its cultured despisers." Culture separated from religion has no warmth, just like religion alienated from culture has no light. At the beginning of this century, the German nation longed once again for religious edification and refreshment; terrible trials, relentless hardship led back to religious deepening and moral purification; it seemed that a time was about to begin in which a vigorous

religiosity would go hand in hand with a solid national education.

It turned out differently. The political restoration in 1815 was accompanied by a religious one. With the Jesuits in the Catholic Church, the literalists returned to the Protestant Church. [...]

Until now the great restoration within the Roman-Catholic world has carried along the restoration within the bosom of German Protestantism. Since 1815, under the banner of so-called conservative interests, one party in the Protestant Church has gradually seized almost complete power—a party that lives with modern culture in a state of the greatest tension, and whose efforts are aimed at nothing less than disconnecting German theology and the church from their cultural links with the great achievements of modern scholarship, and subjecting them absolutely to the authority of biblical literalism and the confessional creeds handed down from the age of the Reformation. The party that is pursuing this goal calls itself “believing”; but it does not believe in the living God who reveals Himself in history and for that very reason does not bind the truth to dead letters; instead, it believes in its allegedly exclusive claim, in its absolute dominion over conscience. But precisely in this it has in fact left the ground of Protestantism. For the latter draws its life force not from dogma handed down in the church and not from the conventional institutions of the church. It draws this force from the spirit of Evangelical truth and freedom. Whoever elevates tradition, dogma, and historical origins to be the decisive authority within the Protestant church returns thereby to the Roman Catholic position. You are speaking of the apostasy that is currently taking place within the Protestant church. Look into the mirror! If you put the Protestant conscience under obligation to the allegedly infallible letters of the Bible, if you imprison it within the articles of the Augsburg Confession, if you seek—through intimidation and threats—to prevent younger scholars from subjecting the documents of Christianity to a conscientious examination—by such conduct you show yourself to be apostates from the principles of the Reformation, which grew out of the spirit of the freest examination; then you yourself deny the foundations on which the church, to which you belong, has built itself for more than three centuries.

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The talks in Eisenach quickly led to complete agreement about the principles of the association. According to this agreement, the Protestant Association stands on the ground of Evangelical Christianity. This foundation is laid by Jesus Christ himself, and for that very reason is not formed by traditional dogma or confession; for Christ neither established dogmas nor placed his disciples under obligation to any kind of creedal formula. Christianity is a principle of faith and life within the world, a source of spirit and power, a historical revelation of the immediate relationship between humanity and God. The Protestant Association professes its allegiance to the principles of the Christian faith and life, and thus to the person of Jesus Christ himself, who revealed the truth and the life out of God in a way that is eternally authoritative, and implanted it into humanity through his holy spirit. Our Association leaves it to theologians to determine the teachings and rules in which these principles find doctrinal expression; they may quarrel about them or agree on them, that is not a matter for the Association. What it strives for is not agreement on some kind of dogma; as centuries of experience have taught us, such striving has always led merely to greater division and fracturing among fellow believers. It seeks “the renewal of the Protestant Church in the spirit of Evangelical freedom and in harmony with the overall cultural development of our time.”

A renewal of the church; for there can be no disagreement that our church is in need of such a renewal. It is behind the times in every respect. While its official organs still seek the center of the church in traditional teachings, the so-called confession, modern scholarship has long since demonstrated that faith and not dogma, life and not the theological formula, form the essence of Protestantism and, moreover, that the traditional notion of dogma no longer holds up before the judgment seat of rigorous examination, because it is built upon presuppositions that have become entirely untenable. Its chief pillars of support are the following: the seventeenth-century doctrine of inspiration, which scholarship

has refuted in every point; the Christology of the old-Catholic church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries, which stands in irreconcilable contradiction to the correctly understood Gospel literature and to a genuinely historical understanding of the person of Christ; the so-called Athanasian creed, which makes the doctrine of the three divine persons within one divine being an absolute obligation on pain of the eternal fire, and in order to be accepted, this creed must stake the claim to the complete suppression of rational thinking; the notion that theologians should determine the belief of the congregation and, as those who are of age the laypeople who are minors, and this notion is not only un-Protestant, it also clashes with the great New Testament principle that all Christians should have priestly rights and a free conscience. That is why the Protestant Church is urgently in need of renewal “in the spirit of Evangelical freedom” at this time. No one must be prevented from understanding and professing the Gospel in accordance with his own best knowledge and conscience. No one, especially no church authority, shall declare one single way of understanding and professing the Gospel as the exclusively justified one, and be allowed to condemn and suppress all others. That would amount to a coercion of conscience and faith that would not only be the equal of the Roman Catholic spiritual coercion, but would be even be worse, because it would be a denial of the Protestant principles under the banner of Protestantism itself.

The Protestant Association seeks the renewal of the Protestant Church “in harmony with the overall cultural development of our time.” For that very reason, because it does not acknowledge a finished dogma and no completed ecclesiasticism, but regards the form of the doctrine and the institutions of the church as the product of a particular time and of the ideas that predominate within the church, it also cannot accept that the development of doctrine and the constitutional formation of the church is finished at a particular point and then stands in contradiction with the subsequent times. To be sure, conventional theology proceeds on the assumption that the church is supernatural in origin, while culture is something natural. The conclusion that is drawn from this presupposition is quite simple: the natural must subordinate itself to the supernatural; culture is justified only to the extent that the theologians approve of it; thus, if theology, in accordance with its supernatural inspiration and the theory of the divine authority of the Bible, finds itself compelled to assume that the earth stands still while the sun revolves around it, it is the mark of a false education to claim the opposite. The Protestant Association for its part recognizes the full right of modern science to seek out its own paths, and it is of the opinion that religious truths are entirely independent of scientific findings. Once this proposition is accepted within the church, peace will be made between Christianity and culture. If culture often sees an enemy in Christianity, church theology itself is to a large degree responsible for this. A theology that elevates the Bible into an infallible textbook in astronomy, geography, natural history, and world history; that places the earth at the center of creation, the throne of God with the three persons of the Trinity on top of the vault of heaven and hell with the damned into the interior of the earth; that populates the airy space between heaven and earth with angels and demons, which, among other things, create good or bad weather; that attributes insanity to demonic possession; that denies that man as such has free will and the power to do good; and that sees the majesty of God in the fact that he violates his own order of the world with miracles and, from the mass of reasonable creatures he has created, saves only a small undeserving bunch out of sheer mercy—such a theology invariably creates an impression hostile to culture and inevitably provokes the contradiction of the century against the propositions it advances with the air of infallibility. That same theology is also by no means Christian in essence. Jesus Christ called humans to community with God and to love for one’s fellow human being, but not to accept a more narrowly formulated system of natural science and to solve metaphysical or astronomical problems. He said: “Of one thing there is need,” and that one thing is the undivided devotion of the spirit to the eternal, while theologians declare that the assent to a bunch of precepts is a necessity and have captured the poor consciences in hundreds of snares. The Protestant Association proceeds from the confidently correct assumption that as soon as theology seeks to be only religious, culture will no longer be hostile to the church. We will then be able to be both at the same time: pious in our hearts and bright in our minds; piety will warm the mind, science and scholarship will enlighten the heart.

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Source: Daniel Schenkel, *Der Deutsche Protestantenverein und seine Bedeutung in der Gegenwart nach den Akten dargestellt*. Wiesbaden: E. W. Kreibel's Verlag, 1868, pp. 1–2, 3–6, 7–8, 23–27.

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