

Protestant Theology through Catholic Eyes (1902)

Abstract

A Catholic theologian criticizes his Protestant contemporaries for failing to connect with their congregants and permitting divergent theological opinions. Catholics often viewed Protestants as secular and servile to the state.

Source

The *Evangelischer Kirchlicher Anzeiger* in Berlin is the organ of the Prussian court and union theology. Thus, it is easy to understand why it has a difficult time acknowledging the ways in which Protestantism is flawed. It is all the more remarkable when it writes in a long lamentation (nos. 23 and 26, 1898) about the party that calls itself liberal:

“Who does not know them, these younger or older gentlemen who feel obliged to recite to Christians for edification, not the creed of the church, but the lecture notes [*Kollegien-Heft*] of their professor? Who recommend themselves to the community in which they seek office by presenting a new theory of the miraculous, but who otherwise insult the convictions of the most earnest believers? That in the Christian congregation, in its places of worship, there are needs other than those of reason, that the high enlightenment of the preacher could be taken as an affront to faith and creed – this is seen by these gentlemen as an injustice both to them and the progress of science. And it is considered the fault of church governance [*Kirchenregiment*] that it is not permissible for any given preacher to present the congregation with what seems to make the most sense to him at the most current stage of his inner development or to a particular theological school at a particular time. Admittedly, university theologians do not have as direct a relationship with the Christian community as the official clergy; however, objectively speaking, it is impossible that they could feel entirely devoid of responsibility toward the Church. To be sure, they have to teach scholarship, and faith is not something one learns at university. But through scholarship they are to train servants of the Church, and even though only a few are entrusted with supporting the development of a burgeoning faith among the student youth, it is incumbent upon all, at the very least, not to explicitly obstruct such a development. That all learned theologians might also be faithful believers by conviction will no doubt remain a pious wish; but it is surely a justified demand that all theological teachers of youth maintain a serious, ethically bound, and respectful attitude towards sacred matters. Scholarship has its temporal currents; thus, at times, the prevailing theological views are thoroughly penetrated by downright anti-ecclesiastical and anti-Christian currents, naturalism, nationalism, and skepticism toward everything transcendent, and the studying youth is weaned from an awe for the holy. And here everyone who renders a sober and honest judgment will admit: it leads to utter nonsense when the academic teacher of theology, himself at odds with the teachings of the Church or indifferent toward it, [decides] on the basis of academic freedom to undermine respect for the Church’s foundations in the minds of the studying youth, the future servants of the Church – and [when] the Church has to suffer this passively.”

This, then, is modern court and union theology; not cold and not warm – Laodicea! One would think it the most natural demand in the world for Christian theologians to be “faithful believers by conviction,” but that is something that the *Evangelischer Kirchlicher Anzeiger* abdicates from the very outset, calling it “a pious wish.” It is satisfied with much less, demanding from them merely a “serious attitude;” they are allowed to be unbelievers. If we were talking about a debating club, where the most diverse opinions can be cultivated, then one could speak in such a manner; but without a firmly articulated creed that is law

for all, one can hardly claim to be a “church.” The Church should answer Pilate’s question: “What is truth?,” but it must not say: “We shall leave all of this undecided; there are very different opinions among us; all of us are searching – in vain – to fathom the truth.” How is one to guide and comfort people if one has to tell them: “Your doubts are ours, and we agree with Dubois-Reymond: ‘ignoramus, ignorabimus’ [‘we do not know, we will not know’].” The individual pastor and professor may have an answer ready, but he is expressing only his subjective conviction, with which he may stand all alone among his fellow believers. The Protestant servant of the Word can never say with the certainty of the Catholic priest that this or that is the doctrine of “the Church,” he can only appeal to his own view and the opinion of his theological school or current. “With him you always end up in uncertainty,” as Goethe says, he speaks *pro domo* but not *pro ecclesia*. And whoever probes these matters in depth may also repeat the words of Faust: “And even, alas, Theology!”

However, the *Evangelischer Kirchlicher Anzeiger* is not content to preserve the theologian’s right to free scholarship, followed by the complaint that “the Church has to suffer this passively.” Into the battlement that it seeks to defend it puts further breaches – so the enemy may storm it all the more easily – by saying: the state, which administers the universities, in order to exercise justice toward the Church, should ensure that the various currents that are battling each other in theology should be equally represented. The “positive” paper thus asks that liberal theologians, too, be given adequate consideration; but what is the point of all this noise?! Nothing reveals the entire Protestant inconsistency and half-truth better than this clash between theory and practice. The liberal professors are to be given equal consideration, but they should not make use of their views; people bewail terribly what the church has to endure passively, while at the same time proclaiming the right of the state to exert its influence, which amounts to its effective omnipotence in matters of faith. This is a conceptual confusion that is hard to beat, though it is a most apposite characterization of Protestantism as a whole. The *Evangelischer Kirchlicher Anzeiger* writes on the one hand:

“The Church is not an institution for science and scholarship but for a godly life. Its first demand is that of a living faith in what one does not see, in the heavenly, the world beyond, in its blessings of salvation, and in the duties it imposes.”

But it also declares in the same breath:

“It is virtually the distinguishing mark of the Protestant spirit that the sacred tradition, too, not only may be subject to ever new scientific examination, but actually should be by those qualified to do so.”

This is a complete contradiction, which no dialectic can dispel. The gentlemen would like to hold onto two fundamentally different, diametrically opposed views, much like it used to be said of the former finance minister v. Miquel that when great opposites clashed, he preferred to stick with – both parties. Thus, modern Protestantism staggers back and forth between authority and anarchy; to the “Romans” it invokes its “free scholarship,” to the unbelievers its “confession of the church.” But just as it is in conflict with itself, so too must it end up in conflict with all the world; it has nothing positive to offer to the souls who turn to it in need of consolation, and, on the other hand, it is compelled, in order to document its autonomous existence as a “church,” to live in struggle with “unconditional scholarship.” And therefore the fate of all half-truths will play itself out on Protestantism: it will be crushed between the millstones of the left and the right. It no longer has a foundation among the broad masses of the people, who want something positive and demand a firm authority, and, at the same time, it lives in conflict with modern philosophy, which does not accept as given what human reason itself has not constructed.

Source: Phillip Huppert, *Die moderne Hof- und Unionstheologie*, in: *Der deutsche Protestantismus zu*

Beginn des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts. Cologne, 1902, pp. 25–29.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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