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How Democracy had Influenced German Conservatives:

The Example of the Methodist Episcopal Church during the Weimar Republic¹

In a world of wars, ethnic bloodshed and an increasing nationalism people ask whether international relations can affect political ideas and as a result reduce prejudices?² As an approach to that question I want to look at a historical example of the time after World War I.³

There are two ways in which ideas are influenced by international relations: In the first place one realises that other persons or cultures are different. This understanding opens minds and leads to a new world view. Secondly one is confronted by new ideas, which one adopts, in part or as a whole. The latter realization is the basis for this article. In order to prove such an influence, one might assume that identical thoughts among persons from different countries, which have regular cross-border contacts, do not happen by chance, compared to specific opposing thoughts among people in any one country, which have much in common with their compatriots. Such results are in particular interesting when, like in this case, some prejudices have been largely eliminated, except for two cases, which also existed in the other country.

The Church

The Methodist Episcopal Church came to Germany after 1848 and was a non-state-supported church, a status which is still unusual in Germany. (Since 1968 it has been part of the United Methodist Church). It originated through the efforts of Americans of German origin. Between 1918 and the end of 1932, the Methodist Episcopal Church in Germany experienced an extraordinary growth from 34,000 members and friends to 51,000.

The Methodist Episcopal Church was stigmatized (by the "Landeskirche", i.e. established protestant church) as a "sect". It formed a religious subculture. Many members spent much of their leisure time at church, where they had meetings ranging from Bible classes to string orchestras. The membership had chosen a puritan ethic and life style. Because of this austere ethical and orthodox piety, Methodists could steer free of the 'secular' trends of the time. They were less prone to be influenced by the zeitgeist, or at least it took a while until it showed results.

¹ This article is mainly a translation of my German one: *Reduzieren internationale Kontakte Vorurteile? Als Beispiel die Bischöfliche Methodistenkirche während der Weimarer Zeit*, Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte 12 (1999): 143-148. If a statement is not footnoted it is from my book: *Eine Kirche in Bewegung. Die Bischöfliche Methodistenkirche im Deutschen Reich während der Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart, 1987) esp. 12, 26f., 40, 58-61, 72-74, 90-107. Because this article is quite short, it can only show the phenomena in a broader perspective. I've translated all quotations. See my recent article *Die Bischöfliche Methodistenkirche in der Weimarer Republik - Gedanken zu Grundzügen ihrer Geschichte*, Freikirchenforschung 21 (2012): 69-75.

² Hans Küng emphasizes the connections between religious and political tolerance.

³ Regarding the idea of "historia magistra vitae" and its application for contemporary history see my article: *Vom Nutzen der Historie für das kirchliche Leben. Geschichtsbewußtsein und kirchliche Identität*, Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte 7 (1994): 129-136.

The theology in the Methodist Episcopal Church in Germany was in general similar to the pietism in the Evangelical Revival Movement and was different from German-American Methodism, and especially different from American Methodism. Nevertheless, the identity of the laity was more shaped into a Methodist view than that of the clergy, and for example, had a more positive view of humanity than Lutheranism. This was probably the result of regular transfers: A pastor remained in one parish around six years and, it is quite likely, the common ground in their preaching was based mainly in Methodist ideals.

Methodism was always interested in the ecumenical movement. The small German Methodist Episcopal Church was deeply involved, locally as well as foreign. German Methodists worked for example at the World Conference on Faith and Order, at the Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work, and at the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches.

International Relations

A typical characteristic of the international Methodist Episcopal Church is its structure of connexionalism. This is made up by a chain of conferences which are responsible for their regional areas from the world down to the local level: general conference, central conference, annual conference etc.

According to this structure the "mother church" in the USA was quite influential at the German branch. Germany was a mission field: Until the end of the Weimar Republic most parts of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Germany were financially supported from the church in the USA. (However, compared to other countries on the European continent, they got only a small portion of the financial aid.)

The bishop in Germany was an American, John L. Nuelsen, PhD (1867-1946). His father was of German origin, he himself had spent his schooldays in Switzerland and Germany; he studied in Germany and the USA where he became a professor of systematic theology. In spite of living longer in Germany than in the USA, he saw himself as an American.

One can see the close ties between the German Methodists and their German-American brethren in the figure of more than a 1,000 emigrants which left their congregations in Germany and found their spiritual homes in German-American Methodist churches during the time from 1918 to 1933. The Sunday paper of the German-American Methodists, the "Christliche Apologete", was mainly written in German. It was sent free of charge to all Methodist ministers in Germany from post World War I until 1931 and also to a number of other members, in particular to influential ones.

There has been a wide range of intra-European connections: The "Predigerseminar", i.e. the theological seminary was in Frankfurt am Main and it was training students from Germany and from east-European countries to become ministers. It was not uncommon to transfer pastors between these countries. This includes the German Congregation in London, which from 1923 on was led by pastors who later held prominent positions in the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Political Convictions⁴

Of the greatest interest to many is the general attitude regarding National Socialism. Until 1933 the Methodist Episcopal Church in Germany and only very few other churches and protestant religious groups had not succumbed to the propaganda of National Socialism. But: "Whoever was not anti National Socialism, was for it, in the sense, that he did not hinder the expansion of power, but remained in the background."⁵ In this sense the small Methodist Episcopal Church was only deplorably meekly "anti" to National Socialism.

At one aspect I go beyond the 30th January 1933: At the beginning of the Third Reich there was an attempt of *gleichschaltung* in one of the five German annual conferences.⁶ It was an attempt to change the legal structure of the church into the *führerprinzip*. It remained the only initiative of this kind. The *spiritus rector* was as one knows the only superintendent who was a NSDAP-member - and probably the only minister who belonged to the Nazi-party before 1933. He did it to save his position as superintendent. The circumstances show the modest political understanding of a relatively large number of pastors as a foundation for this attempt. It was stopped by lay delegates.

The Methodists did regard the "Christlich sozialer Volksdienst" (CSVD) benevolently. The CSVD was a conservative splinter party during the Weimar Republic, but it strove for positive relations toward democracy.⁷

A number of leading Methodists (including the director and some professors of the theological seminary) were active in the CSVD. But in 1930, the clergy forbade itself to hold office or take a leading position of that party. They wanted to prevent political arguments in their congregations.

The CSVD as a dedicated protestant party had deliberately warned against the NSDAP.⁸ After 1930 many members of the "Landeskirchliche Gemeinschaften", i.e. protestants fellowship groups within the established church who had supported the CSVD gave their sympathies and votes for the Nazis, but many members of the free churches including the Methodists still voted for the CSVD.⁹

Following 1918 the Methodist Episcopal Church belonged to one of the few groups in Germany which had intellectually and psychologically digested the war and the defeat with

⁴ These valuations have to be seen in comparison with the Protestants in the former state church. See for example W.R. Ward, *Guilt and Innocence: The German Churches in the Twentieth Century*, *Journal of Modern History* 68 (1996): 398-426, esp. 405.

⁵ Kurt Sontheimer, *Antidemokratisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik. Die politischen Ideen des deutschen Nationalismus zwischen 1918 und 1933* (München 2nd edition, 1978) 314.

⁶ See Hans Witzel, *Die Mitteldeutsche Jährliche Konferenz in Wilkau. Report einer kirchenpolitischen Krisenstunde* (Stuttgart, 1983).

⁷ See Hans-Georg Aschoff, *Protestantismus und Staat im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, in: Günther Rüter, ed., *Geschichte der Christlich-Demokratischen und Christlich-Sozialen Bewegungen in Deutschland* (Bonn 2nd edition, 1987) 57-84, esp. 73.

⁸ See Klaus Scholder, *Die Kirchen und das Dritte Reich. Bd. 1. Vorgeschichte und Zeit der Illusionen 1918-1934* (Frankfurt am Main, 1977) 176. [The Churches and the Third Reich. Vol. 1. Preliminary History and the Time of Illusions, 1918-1934 (London, 1987).] and Erich Günter Rüppel, *Die Gemeinschaftsbewegung im Dritten Reich. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Kirchenkampfes* (Göttingen, 1969) 36-37.

⁹ See Günther Opitz, *Der Christlich-soziale Volksdienst. Versuch einer protestantischen Partei in der Weimarer Republik* (Düsseldorf, 1969) 253-254, 257.

sobriety. The Methodists had quite a positive relationship to the state of Weimar. The former emperor Wilhelm II was forgotten very soon. One reason for that had probably been all the bad experiences, even oppression, before 1918 by the state or which the government hadn't stopped. Here as in the following point there is a huge difference to the established protestant church, which in general missed the kaiser - the Prussian king was as summus episcopus the nominal head of its church until 1918 -, and was anti-democratic and openly opposed to a republic.

When democratic politicians died, the reactions give an insight into the attitudes of the Methodist Episcopal Church toward a democratic political system and its representatives. It happened that an annual conference was held when Walther Rathenau, secretary of state, was assassinated in 1922. They sent a letter of condolence, which resulted in attacks from the protestant press. When president Friedrich Ebert died in 1925, Bishop Nuelsen made a visit of condolence. The German Methodist Sunday paper wrote positively about that visit, and its German-American counterpart received positive and negative letters to the editor. The death of secretary of state Gustav Stresemann in 1929 was a shock for many Methodist pastors.

Of importance for this topic is the understanding of democracy in the Methodist Episcopal Church. The organizational structure of the church, the connexionalism, with its conferences was a constant training in democratic decision-making-processes. How much the Methodists appreciated democracy is showed in a letter to the editor of the youth magazine "Leitstern" (it was part of the Sunday paper "Der Evangelist" at that time): "The Methodist Episcopal Church is standing on a democratic basis, says the 'Evangelist'. Probably most of the members, but unfortunately not its pastors."

Another plain difference to main protestantism one can find in the term "pacifism". It was a expletive for many Germans during the Weimar Republic, but not among Methodists.¹⁰ In the Methodist Episcopal Church a moderate pacifism predominated. War was seen as a "sin" and therefore disapproved. The Methodist Episcopal Church was in favor for a worldwide disarmament.

Among Methodist pastors one could find only a few anti-semites: Most pastors held an indifferent position towards anti-semitism. (One compares it with the famous fervent anti-semitic Berlin court chaplain Adolf Stoecker, who died in 1909.) The majority of the German Methodists didn't oppose anti-semitic remarks. They were strictly against anti-semitic actions. This level of anti-semitism in the Methodist Episcopal Church was not a racist anti-semitism nor a religious anti-semitism. It was an acceptance and partly an adoption of widespread prejudices. But these anti-semitic prejudices in the German Methodist Episcopal Church show international influences. They reflect similar tendencies by contacts in the USA and other countries.

Religious prejudice

Contrary to the ecumenical orientation in the Methodist Episcopal Church, there existed a sentiment of anti-catholicism. This prejudice was influenced from the (German-American) Methodist Episcopal Church in the USA in addition to the same attitude in German protestantism. For Germany this anti-Catholicism had the irrational characteristic that only

¹⁰ See "Leitstern" in "Der Evangelist", (1925): 204, 379, and (1926): 262.

at the beginning of the Thirties the Methodists started to evangelize in Catholic areas. Until then they had spread throughout Protestant areas and were present in big cities. Therefore, this prejudice had not been stimulated by bad experiences.

Conclusion

The historical evidence seems to prove a positive democratic influence from the American "mother church" on the German branch of the Methodist Episcopal Church during the Weimar Republic. There are a number of phenomena where German Methodists were different from other German protestants and at the same time had identical attitudes as their American brethren, a fact which makes this influence very likely.