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God Died in Germany

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God Died in Germany

Modern theology preaches the gospel of the death of God. We are told that God has died in our time, in our history, in our existence. Titles like *The Shaking of the Foundations, Religion Without Revelation*, "The Absence of God," "The Dissolution of the Absolute," *The Death of God*, and *The Grave of God* show that the secular age and secular man have come into their own. On December 17, 1967, just one week before Christmas, the German counterpart of *Time Magazine*, *Der Spiegel*, told its readers that God was dead for every third German. According to this magazine only one half of the population still believed in a life after death and in the resurrection of Christ.

Such are the results of an extensive inquiry into the beliefs of the population of West-Germany. The survey was conducted by the Bielefeld Emnid-Institute together with market analyst Dr. R. Müller for the magazine, *Der Spiegel*. The interesting thing about it is the fact that an identical survey had been conducted by this Institute in 1960 for the Catholic and Protestant Church. The results, however, had been suppressed and the survey had ended up gathering dust on the bookshelves of the bishops of both denominations.

God Died Quietly in Germany

During the year 1967 the Emnid-Institute interviewed 2,037 Germans between 17 and 70 years of age, who were representative of 39 million Germans according to religious denomination, sex, educational attainments and family background. To do this a questionnaire of over 70 complex questions had been constructed covering the basic teachings of the Catholic and Protestant Church and general attitudes towards God, religion and Church.

To understand the results one must keep in mind that practically every German is either a Catholic or a Lutheran. He is baptized

into one of the two Churches, receives first Holy Communion or Confirmation, is married and buried by his Church. He hardly ever renounces his Church membership. According to the Bureau of Statistics 95.2% of the citizens belong to the Catholic or Protestant Church.

The people interviewed were asked about the basic dogmas of Christianity. They were asked about belief in God, worship, prayer, the primacy and infallibility of the Pope, the Virgin Birth, the divine Sonship of Christ, His miracles, His resurrection, life after death, original sin. They were asked about today's moral problems: birth control, divorce, the necessity of premarital chastity, the legitimacy of abortion after rape, mercy killing if the incurably sick themselves ask for it, and the emergency baptism of babies in danger of death.

Besides the above questions which were directed to all, a special test was constructed for Catholics and Protestants separately. For Catholics the test included basic tenets of the faith drawn from the catechism and the writings of the Popes. For Protestants similar basic tenets were put together. The answers were then processed by computers. Only 9.4% of the Catholics and 1.8% of the Protestants believe in the essential doctrines of their Church and religion.

What were some of the other results as far as Catholics were concerned? Only about half of the Catholics still believe in the dogma of the primacy and infallibility of the Pope. Less than half affirm that their religion is the only true religion. About 60% believe in a life after death. Half believe in hell and purgatory. About 60% want the Church to allow divorce. The same number of Catholics think that premarital chastity is not necessary and that abortion after rape is all right. All are for birth-control by means of annovulants. The results are better when only practicing Catholics are considered.

For both Catholics and Protestants a Christian is simply a good man, someone who thinks of his neighbor and helps him. The Church plays no role in this definition of the Christian. In fact practically 70% are of the opinion that a man can be a good Christian even without a Church.

The survey published in *Der Spiegel* really comes as a shock, precisely because the German hierarchy had created the impression of dynamic and enlightened leadership of an up-to-date Church at the Second Vatican Council. From this survey, however, it would seem that God had indeed died for a very great number of the Christians in Germany. According to the magazine, the Church in Germany is going through a most serious crisis of faith, perhaps the most serious crisis in its entire history.

Why did God die?

The survey seems to point first of all to a serious lack of religious education among the ordinary Christians. They simply don't know much about their faith and about their Church. Their answers to questions about the dogma of the Immaculate Conception furnish the most striking proof of this. Only 6% of the Catholics could give some kind of explanation that corresponded to the definition of Pius IX. A large group thought that it had something to do either with the birth of Christ or with the necessity of premarital chastity for women. Some thought the dogma said that only a virgin has permission to wear a white wedding gown on the day of her marriage. The same ignorance, to a lesser degree, is seen operative in the answers to questions about the primacy and infallibility of the Pope.

So much ignorance in religious matters should not exist, because all public grade schools and high schools give religious instruction as part of their ordinary curriculum. Again, this instruction cannot be totally inadequate, because for two decades, some of the best and most up-to-date curricula for catechetical instruction have originated in Germany.

It seems as if the German Christian simply stopped growing in his faith as soon as he had graduated from primary or secondary school. I was able to see this verified all too often during a six-months stay in West-Germany from 1966-1967.

Even today many a parish priest is simply a *convento*-priest. He is totally uninvolved and, therefore, excluded from the lives of his parishioners. Sermons and homilies on Sunday are, to a great extent, only ten minutes of irrelevance approved and sanctioned by the institution of the Church according to Dr. Ebeling, dogmatic theology professor from Tübingen. Thus, most of the people never have the chance to continue to find out and to learn about their religion in relation to their concrete lives. At times priests tend to consider their parish as a kind of spiritual supermarket. When summer comes they just lock up the Church for two or three weeks for "company vacations" and fly to some resort to recuperate from their spiritual labors.

A relative of mine who runs a bookshop in a university town specializing in philosophy and theology books told me that in the past most of the parish priests of the area used to come in once a year to replenish their libraries with the newest publications. Now, however, they are more interested in new cars rather than in updating their theology.

According to the survey of *Der Spiegel*, many Catholics feel that the shepherds are merely following behind the flock of the

faithful regarding contraception, premarital chastity, abortion, and euthanasia. They feel that the Church talks in terms totally irrelevant to modern man. The Christian simply has to solve his own moral problems, because of the silence or because of the antiquated solution of the Church. During the *Third Reich*, the Church did not speak out against the totalitarianism of Hitler and the atrocities committed by his regime. People have become indifferent because in the concrete, the Church had been unable to contribute to modern life and modern man. *Der Spiegel* states that no bishop in Germany can speak in the name of even a majority of the Christian faithful.

Another great source of difficulty are the theological faculties of the secular universities in Germany. Outside its frontiers, German Christianity is known from the writings of theologians like Bultmann, Wilckens, Kümmel, Karl Rahner, Küng, Karl Barth, and many others. In Germany, however, this dynamic book Christianity has added to the confusion of the ordinary faithful. Today, mass media put the theories of speculative theology before the masses who do not have the background to understand them. What the ordinary Christian sees is the 'battle royal' of theologians. There is no dogma today that is not affirmed and denied simultaneously by the professors of theology. The result is a turning away from the faith. If the men of God cannot clearly recognize God anymore or His salvific plan, then how can the man of the street know Him? People do not know what to believe and so they have become indifferent, especially since many of the tenets of faith have no real influence on their practical life.

The theories of the theologians about the resurrection of Christ perfectly illustrate the above. In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, a popular magazine, Rudolf Bultmann declared that Jesus could not have risen from the grave on the third day after His death. He probably appeared to his disciples in some spiritual visions. Orthodox Protestantism has rejected this teaching of Bultmann as heretical. Catholic doctrine upheld that Jesus really rose and appeared to his disciples in the flesh. His resurrection was not just spiritual. The apostles did not just dream or see visions. Recently, however, *Orientierung*, a catholic paper from Zürich, published the opinion that belief in Christ's resurrection is very well possible without believing in the empty tomb. No wonder the ordinary person, who does not have a sufficient background in theology or the Bible, is becoming confused.

The result of all this is that according to the Survey of *Der Spiegel* 24% believe that Jesus lives on only in his works like Goethe, Shakespeare and other great men; 35% believe in a theory similar to that of Bultmann and 39% believe in the traditional teaching

of the Church. Only among those who practice their Catholicism do we find a majority of 74% opting for the traditional teaching. But even 74% is low when we consider that the resurrection of Christ is the *sine qua non* of Christianity. A denial of the reality of the resurrection turns belief into foolishness according to St. Paul. The authors of the *Dutch Catechism* echo the same conviction when they write at the beginning of their book: "The heart of this preaching is the message of Easter. If the news of Jesus' resurrection were removed, not one page of the book would have any value" (p. viii).

Karl Rahner calls Germany a pagan country with a Christian past. The Church today is fast becoming the little flock. Many people feel that one can be a Christian even without the Church. For many the institution has become superfluous.

The Church, the Sacrament of God's Presence

The survey of *Der Spiegel* probably came as a real shock to many a priest and layman. It made very depressing reading. If, however, it convinces Christian leaders that Christianity is indeed in a crisis, that something must be done and that it must be done now, perhaps this survey will prepare for the rebirth of Christ and Christianity in Germany. All will depend on whether the Church can close the gap between the clergy and the ordinary believer, between the faith of the theologians and the faith of the laity. It may also be that the age of Christianity is over, that Germany will remain a pagan country with a Christian past in which Christians will continue to live as the little flock of Christ.

The secular age, the death of God, does teach us a real lesson. There is a truth here which was often overlooked in the past, in the age of mass-conversions and mass-Catholicism. Today we are forced to ask whether the Church is the ordinary way to God for every man. If the Church were the ordinary way of salvation for man, would we not have to conclude that God did not provide very well for the vast majority of humanity who never had the chance to meet the Church and to join her? Has God not rather called a small number, a little flock, whom He has joined with His Son so that in unity with Him and bound to one another in real love, they may become the salt of the earth and the light of men? Is the Church not always a small group in the seething mass of mankind, which through its love and selfless service mediates God's love to the rest of men and in this way is the real Sacrament of God's Presence in the world?

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