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Atlas of the religious practice in protestant Germany 1850-1940

I. Organization and intention

In 1999 I shall present to the public a four-volume „Atlas of religious practice“, which will content more than one million data about the religious life in the protestant parts of Germany between the 1820s and World War II. It is a project which has been financially supported for many years by the „Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft“ and the „Gerda-Henkel-Stiftung“. In its methodological shape it is a sister to the „Atlas de la pratique religieuse des catholiques en France“ (published in 1980 by Mr. Isambert and Mr. Terrenoire with the support of the French C.N.R.S.), but it differs in certain aspects: First it gives a synchronic and diachronic view of the religious life over more than one century, whereas the French project is limited to the 1950s; second it reports about seven indicators of religious life: attendance at church services and holy communion, baptisms, weddings and burials, entrance/withdrawal to/from church membership and participation in church elections, whereas the French project is limited to the attendance at the holy communion. On the other hand the German project is not as much specialised in relating the religious data to other social data such as age, profession and density of population.

But there are some fundamental similarities which are much more important: first, both projects are based on a statistical approach to religious life, which was first established by the French sociologists Gabriel LeBras and his disciple Fernand Boucard in the 1930s and 40s under the label of „religious geography“. The basic assumption of this approach is, that spacial relations between religious phenomena such as church attendance and religious infrastructure in different regions are crucial for understanding the structure and historical dynamic of religious life in a society. That means, that the quantitative and qualitative niveau of church attendance in a given religious community depends on such factors as the age, gender and mobility of its members, the degree of industrial employment in the population, the quantitative proportion of the religious community in relation to the confessional structure of the whole population, the prevailing type of (kind or hostile) relation to other Christian and non-Christian communities in the same area and so on. Second, both projects report about religious life on a rather low level of regional church-organization: which in catholic France is the diocese, in protestant Germany the Kirchenkreis, a union of about 10 to 15 local parishes. This has not been done so far and will strengthen the social significance of statistical relations between data taken from different spheres of social life such as religion, politics and economy.

The tradition of statistical sources about the religious life is much better in protestant Germany compared as well with other countries as the catholic church in Germany: In England we find a national census only in 1851, in France only some scattered data of

some parishes (collected by Fernand Boulard¹), which do not allow to compare the religious life in different regions in detail. In catholic Germany systematical efforts in church statistics were undertaken not before the second decade of the 20th century, whereas in protestant Germany yearly statistical reports about many aspects of religious life in all parts of Germany were published at least from the 1880s onwards (after the first national census of 1862²), going back in some countries (such as Bavaria) up to the 1820s. It was the dramatic fall of church attendance which made church administrations in many parts of Germany aware of the fact, that the rapid decline of loyalty to the church could not be stopped by individual pastoral care, but was a general aspect of social change in modern society. Church statistics served the purpose for more than one century, to re-establish vital participation of church membership in church activities. But already by the turn of the century most statistical observers realised that the decline of church adherence ('Kirchlichkeit') could not be stopped. Nevertheless, it took some time, until the church administration began to loose its interest in statistics about church adherence after the Second World War. The golden age of church statistics was over now.

During the whole period of the last two centuries it was a subject of many discussions among church-members, how far the religious behaviour or „practice“ of people could be regarded as expression of their religiosity. It is true, that many people attend church services without piety and religiosity, and others are very pious without going to church services. The purpose of religious statistics is not to demonstrate how pious people are, but rather to analyse, what is „normal“ religious behaviour in a community or region, what can be expected at a certain time in different regions. Statistical comparison serves to explore long-term trends of religious change and the structure of religious life in different regions at one and the same time, to look for the reasons of ascendance and decline such as industrialization, mobility, political orientation and such vague factors as „secularization“ and „enlightenment“. Religious data are not bound to be regarded as expression for the same religious attitude in all circumstances, in the contrary: They help to show that „normal“ attendance at church services or certain rites de passage had different social meanings at different times and places: In early modern Europe it was an offence against public order to neglect them, in the 19th and early 20th century it still was a religious custom or convention in most regions, but from late 19th century it became a voluntary act of religious need or confession; that is: the more church attendance declined the more its religious significance increased.

Before entering the discussion of new results I would like to give an impression of the general form of the Atlas: The Atlas is organised in book on each country (Landeskirche), each country is structured in chapters on the above mentioned seven indicators of religious life, each chapter contains in paragraphs on each diocese (Kirchenkreis) several sub-indicators, which in every year allow to relate the religious data to corresponding social data: In the end you find percentage data about the yearly amount of communions (resp. church attendances) per 100 inhabitants of the communi-

¹ Fernand Boulard, *Matériaux pour l'histoire religieuse du peuple français. 19.-20. siècles* (1987)

² Dr. Zeller, ...

ty, of baptisms per 100 births, of weddings (with religious ceremonies) per 100 civil marriages, of burial ceremonies per 100 civil deaths; finally the yearly amount of entrances into and withdrawels from the protestant church and the percentage of participants in church elections. For reading the long lists of data most chapters are supported by diagrams which make it possible to perceive ad once the tendency of development in a certain diocese and abnormal events in a certain year.

Statistik AB Freiburg

Finally the Atlas is provided with more than 100 maps, which for the first time reconstruct the boundaries of the protestant „Kirchenkreise“ in Germany before the Second World War: Represented is the situation of 1910. Beside documenting the ecclesiastical structure at the beginning of the 20th century these maps serve to demonstrate the niveau of attendance at the holy communion on the symultaneous level of different regions (see below).

II. Some results of statistical observation

1. It is a common place, that the participation in church ceremonies has declined in modern Europe during the last century. But very few people are aware of the fact, that this process has started in Germany as early as the middle of the 18th century. In many Germany cities the niveau of church attendance (at holy communio) dropped from figures around 160-200% to those around 20-50% within the second half of the 18th century.

Karte Dresden/Breslau 1650-1900

Karte 1750-1930 Hannover

Already aound 1800 it was near 10-20% in some outskirts parishes of cities like Berlin and Stuttgart, a figure which could hardly be undercut in later decades. The situation on the countryside differt in time but not in principle: About half a century after the great cities they began to drop, too, but only in the 1960s they arrived at about the same low level as the cities. This secular process was shortly interrupted by decades of stabilisation or even small increase such as the 1880s and the 1950s, but in general it was a uniform process in all parts of protestant Germany.

This is true as much for other indicators of religious life such as the participation in church services and some rites de passage: It is true, the ecclesiastical blessing of baptisms and weddings were separated from civil registration of births and marriages only by 1875. However, starting with the First World War the figures of church ceremonies dropped continuesly, and from the late 1960s even church membership declined. But there is one remarkable exception in the general picture of decline: The rate of burials increased in most countries almost continuously during the second half of the century, coming at the First World War to almost 100%, a level which has not changed ever since.

Karte D 1880 Beerdigungsquote

Karte D 1910 Beerdigungsquote

This is one of the significant insights which can be learned from ecclesiastical statistics: Today the social significance of religion lies much more than in earlier periods in the acceptance and interpretation of death.

2. Even more surprising is the regional structure of church attendance: Up till now religious historians were well aware that the niveau of religious life was much higher in the south than in the north of Germany. This could already be observed on the basis of the figures, which the Eisenacher Kirchenkonferenz published every year on the aggregated level of the German countries and Prussian provinces:

Karte D 1862 AB

Karte D 1912 AB

Historical investigations (which are not very much advanced so far) indicate that this represents a very old structure of religious life in Germany, which may even go back to the first period of christianisation in the middle ages. But today the Atlas draws a picture much more detailed than before of the situation around 1860 and 1910: We see a broad saddle of high-level church attendance running down from Hamburg and Bremen through the Hessian middle of Germany to Bavaria.

Karte D 1862 AB

Karte: D 1910 AB

Much the same picture shows the rough sketches on burial in 1880 and 1910: The rate of burials was much lower in Prussia than in most parts of southern Germany, as well in 1880 as in 1910, wenn the rates had much advanced to 100% in almost all parts of Germany (see below).

By comparing these figures with the map of the density of population we understand how much the religious behaviour suffered by urbanization and industrialization in the late 19th century. This is an important factor especially in Thuringia, which was the center of protestantism during the reformation, but was almost irreligious by 1910. But looking closer we find certain interesting features which are not as obvious: f.i. the rather low rate of church attendance in reformist parts of Germany such as the region north-west of Bremen and in the rural areas of Brandenburg, Pommern and Schleswig-Holstein.

Karte D 1910 Bevölkerungsdichte

Karte D 1910 Konfessionsverteilung

Another factor of influence is the confessional structure of Germany. We see that the protestant regions cover most of the north and east of Germany from the North sea to

Upper Saxony, whereas in the south only parts of Westfalia, Hessia, the Palatinate and the north of Baden, Württemberg and Bavaria were protestant. Comparing the confessional with the map of church adherence we can make some remarkable discoveries:

First, it is not true that protestant church adherence is generally high in catholic areas, that is in the so-called protestant „diaspora“, as it was maintained by many religious historians in earlier times. Rather it is true, that even after 1900 we find high-level church adherence in diaspora areas, where protestantism was much suppressed during the period of religious civil wars in the 17th century - such as the Upper Palatinate east of Nuremberg and Swabia in the south-east of Stuttgart -, but low-level church attendance in such diaspora areas, where in later periods of tolerance protestant communities were established - such as Munic and Upper Bavaria or Cologne and the southern parts of Rhineland.

3. So far I have only touched the question of mass loyalty to the protestant church, which indeed is the main concern of the Atlas. But it can also be used as a handbook for the confessional structure of certain regions. To take up only one result of this part of investigations: It is not surprising that regions with mixed confessional structure such as the Palatine, Hessia und the Rhineland produced much more marriages of confessionally mixed couples. Experts in church statistics also realised very early that in more protestant regions the majority of mixed couples was inclined to baptise their children in the protestant church, whereas in catholic regions it was vice versa. But it is a new discovery of the Atlas, that in mixed regions we find much more members of small chapels and secular communities with a strong bias to new types of Weltanschauung. It seems that we have to look to the catholic and protestant churches as big earth-plates which at its edges produce strong concussions of the established faith in religious and church authorities.

4. Such concussions of established structures of religious believes can be found as well in the 1920s and 1930s. The statistics of changes from one church to another or to no other church at all shows a growing exodus of members from the early years of the century onwards. But only after - and as a consequence of - the First World War the exodus became a mass movement. In the eyes of many protestants church authorities had too much supported the war policy of right wing parties. The custom of fire burials, which was opposed by the protestant church authorities as being heretic, in „atheistic“ cities like Berlin and Hamburg was accepted by many socialist workers as a mighty demonstration of ecclesiastical distrust.

But in 1933 we again find many protestants returning to church membership and regular participation in church ceremonies. This shows how much the beginning of the Nazi-government was accompanied by deep fears and a need for religious orientation. But again in the following years church adherence dropped and demonstrated the growing distance of churchmembers to the established church authorities.

5. It is obvious that abnormal religious developments and events in certain regions or diocese very often had statistical consequences: The beginning of the First World War was accompanied by a huge wave of church ceremonies und religious enthusiasm. After

the end of the war an enormous amount of children were born and even more baptised. In Bochum, an industrial town of the Ruhrgebiet, in 1896 and 1926 a sudden mass exodus from church membership indicate to local events which have to be explored in more detail.

Diagramm KW Bochum

6. A last word about church elections: When in the 1820s liberal protestants began to fight for the establishment of synods the intention was to democratize the ecclesiastical hierarchy. But when in the 1860s and 70s such synods were established in most German countries they turned out to be the bullwork of the religious orthodoxy. How was this possible? The reason is that the orthodox wing succeeded in limiting the right to be a delegate to those who participated regularly in church ceremonies - which in towns was a small class of oldfashioned members of the lower middle-class, in the countryside of old-established families. The interest of the majority of protestant voters - even of those 20% of male middle-class protestants who had the right to vote - was very limited from the beginning up to our time. The statistical figures demonstrate this by percentages between 1 and 5%.

III. The use of the Atlas for historical research beyond the limits of religious and ecclesiastical history

The importance of the statistical material which is collected and published by the Atlas lies in the fact that it is the first indicator of mental structures in modern society, which is homogeneous and available for all parts of protestant Germany in the period of the industrial revolution. It allows to be related to other statistical indicators such as age, gender, profession, economic structure and voting behaviour in all parts of the country. This may lead to new knowledge about many aspects of modern societies in Germany. I should like to touch only a few examples:

First, the enlightenment shows to have had a very different shape in the northern and southern parts, in West and East Germany: In the north and east it must be seen on the background of a widely dechristianised or even less christianised population, whereas in the south and west it was deeply interwoven with a kind of popular Christian culture, which was strong both in catholic and protestant regions.

Second, the highly diversified spectrum of political movements in nineteenth century Germany, the strong bias towards quasi-religious confessions in all political movements and parties and the sharp political antagonism between radical groups in the early 20th century, all this turns out to be a consequence of the religious geography of Germany. The cohabitation of different religious groups in small areas produced both, early examples of religious toleration in the late 18th and early 19th century, but also sharp dissension and a permanent longing for religious unity beyond the established churches.

Here was a permanent chance for new religious groups which appealed to this national hope.

Third, political parties always had a strong basis in religious beliefs. Therefore the relationship between religious and party structures always was an important factor of political life. But even more the decomposition of religious milieus as the protestant milieu before and after the First World War: The fall of protestant loyalty set free a demand for new religious (or „secular“) orientation, from which both the socialists and the National socialists made profit. The data of the Atlas give clear account of the process of political reorientation in the age of industrialisation.