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Protestantism and the Trade Union Movement in the 20th Century— from Ideological Confrontation to Socio-Political Cooperation

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the development of relations between Protestantism and the Trade Union Movement in Germany during the 20th century. At present, despite some differences concerning the rights of staff of the Diaconia in Germany, there are many similarities between the two organisations, Protestantism and trade unions, in their perception of social problems and in their proposals for coping with these challenges. The article shows, how, step by step, both are *en route* to joint socio-political cooperation.

Keywords: *Protestantism, Trade Union Movement, Germany, 20th Century*

Introduction

Relations between Protestantism and the trade unions underwent a fundamental transformation in the course of the 20th century. Whereas, at the beginning of the century, Protestantism was frequently critical of trade unions, with sympathy being shown—if at all—only towards the Christian trade union movement, this attitude gradually changed following the First World War. Step by step, socio-political cooperation in a variety of projects helped to overcome the alienation between their different milieus and interpretations of the world, so that ultimately, by the end of the 20th century, it was often possible to talk of the opportunities and of the need for a reform alliance between the two institutions. Especially with regard to overcoming mass unemployment, they launched joint initiatives together and publicly took a stand for the interests of the unemployed. In order to properly appreciate developments in the 20th century, it is helpful to first give a brief historic overview of developments during the second half of the 19th century.

From Patriarchalism to a Gradual Acceptance of Social Responsibility—The Problems of Protestantism *vis-à-vis* the “Social Question” prior to 1914

Viewed in a the historic perspective, trade unions and the associated challenges for the Protestant church's practical action are to be seen in the context of the socio-political disputes which arose in the 19th century concerning the term “the social question”.¹ The catchphrase “social question”, a term used to denote the problem of the transformation crises arising in the wake industrialisation, can be defined more precisely by distinguishing three levels: it is a crisis of social security systems, a crisis in the shaping of industrial relations, and an emancipation crisis for the working classes.

In coming to terms with the critical situation of emergent industrial society in the 19th century, German Protestantism—meaning Protestantism in the full diversity of its groups, associations and individual personalities, and not necessarily the “*evangelische Kirche*” as such with its state-church ties—did indeed show an active commitment on the levels mentioned, albeit in a variety of fashions. In spite of the fundamentally patriarchal attitude of the clergy and a marked reticence on the part of the leadership of the church, a constructive contribution was made towards developing a culture based on social action and, practically, towards setting up the social or welfare state.² However, hardly any proposals were drawn up for solving the crisis in industrial relations or the emancipation crisis of the working classes, two factors that formed the central focus of the trade union movement's commitment. Relations between Protestantism and the trade union movement thus remained ambivalent, and the social democratic part of the German trade union movement—numerically its most important section—was largely rejected by Protestantism on both ideological and socio-political grounds.

Protestantism did have an innovative effect, though, through the initiatives of its “Inner Mission”³, as demonstrated in the establishment of concrete diaconal, social-welfare fields of work and the founding of a large number of institutions (for instance,

- 1 The term “social question” is a translation of the French “*question social*”, and the earliest record of its use in Germany (as “*soziale Frage*”) dates from 1840. See Eckart Pankoke: *Sociale Bewegung—sociale Frage—sociale Politik: Grundfragen der deutschen ‘Socialwissenschaft’ im 19. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart 1970.
- 2 Traugott Jähnichen/Norbert Friedrich: *Geschichte der sozialen Ideen im deutschen Protestantismus*, in: Helga Grebing et al. (eds.): *Geschichte der sozialen Ideen in Deutschland: Sozialismus—Katholische Soziallehre—Protestantische Sozialethik*, Essen 2000, pp. 867–1103.
- 3 The “Inner Mission” was founded in 1849, based on an impulse of Johann H. Wichern during the so called “Wittenberger Kirchentag” (1848). It was independent both from the Evangelical Churches and the State and coordinated the social and the missionary activities of a great diversity of protestant groups.

orphanages and houses of correction, hospitals, facilities for the disabled, homes for the relief of prisoners). Johann Hinrich Wichern especially is a case in point, combining, as he does, the essentially conservative underlying cause of popular mission with important rudiments of practical social work, social reformist thinking, and an impartial, unbiased utilisation of the fruits of civil society—such as clubs and associations and the press. For these reasons it is possible to describe Hinrich Wichern as a “conservative visionary”⁴ and his programme as a concept of “conservative modernisation.”⁵ However, apart from those fields of activity concentrating directly on the immediate casualties of the transformation process in the wake of industrialisation, the “social question” hardly exists at all as a labour question for Hinrich Wichern.

A further step worth mentioning, in the period subsequent to the foundation of the German Reich in 1871, is the variety of Christian social approaches which paved the way for, and, to an extent, shaped the development of the German welfare state. It were especially middle-class social reformers influenced by Protestantism, and described as academic or “armchair” socialists or—to use their own term—“state socialists”⁶, who actively championed the cause of socio-political reform. The decisive step taken by this type of social Protestantism—and extending beyond the work of the Inner Mission with its organisational principle of voluntarism—can be said to lie in its commitment to systematic social welfare action and to the legal recognition and social integration of the labour movement.

Whereas notions regarding state recognition and, at the same time, domestication of the trade unions foundered in the face both of conservative opposition and of the self-understanding of the emergent trade union federations, the development of the German welfare state model was substantially based on these so-called “state socialist” concepts.

- 4 Volker Drehsen: *Konservativer Visionär: Wicherns Forderungen als Fragen an die Gegenwart*, in: *Ev. Kommentare* Vol. 31 (1998), pp. 210–212.
- 5 This term is suggested by Wolfgang Hardtwig: *Die Kirchen in der Revolution 1848/49*, in: *ibid.* (ed.): *Revolution in Deutschland und Europa 1848/49*, Göttingen 1998, pp. 79–108, especially p. 106 to characterise the churches of this period. As evidence that the term is especially appropriate for Hinrich Wichern, see Traugott Jähnichen/Norbert Friedrich: *Geschichte der sozialen Ideen im deutschen Protestantismus*, pp. 898–901.
- 6 Liberal economists originally used the term “*Kathedersozialisten*” (roughly “armchair socialists”) to describe those opponents of theirs—Wagner in particular—who called for state intervention. See Heinrich B. Oppenheim: *Der Katheder-Socialismus*, Berlin 1872. The self-designation “*Staats-Socialist*” (“state socialist”) was the name given to the periodical published by the “*Central-Verein für Socialreform*” (1877), co-founded by the clergyman Rudolf Todt, in which Adolph Wagner was also involved.

Those trade unions influenced by social democracy strictly rejected such diaconal aid, also rejecting the route to a “patronising” social state as developed by Bismarck.⁷ A further factor was the ideological antithesis to the churches within the trade union federations, since Marxist influence led to parts of the labour movement regarding emancipation from religious traditions as a prerequisite for and/or a consequence of personal aspirations for emancipation. This involved not only massive criticism of the churches, but also a strident and fundamental critique of religion, tendencies which were not undisputed within the working classes themselves, however.

This, then, was the setting in which—starting with initiatives among mineworkers in the Ruhr Area—Christian trade union federations were developed in the 1890s, amalgamating in 1899 to form a Christian trade union movement. The consolidation of this movement occurred gradually, although in comparison to the social democratic trade unions it was to remain much smaller (its membership being only one-third of that of the social democratic unions) and less conflict-oriented, yet it did take an active part in many strikes—such as in the great Ruhr miners’ strike of 1905. The Christian trade unions were heavily dominated by social Catholicism, although important associations within socially conservative Protestantism (including Protestant workers’ associations, church social conferences, etc.) were also involved in this trade union project. Protestant influences played a major role particularly in the organisation of clerical workers, or so-called “commercial clerks”, whereby the talk in conservative Protestant circles was always of a “Christian and national” labour movement.

A new approach within Protestantism developed in the 1890s with the setting up of the Protestant Social Congress (*Evangelisch-sozialer Kongress*), which was to become the most important public forum for German Protestantism. The central focus of negotiations in the Protestant Social Congress prior to 1914 was on the so-called labour question, as reflected in its intensive preoccupation with the trade union movement, the collective labour agreement system, codetermination and strikes.

Economically speaking, the social-liberal Protestants who dominated this initiative sang the praises of increased efficiency thanks to capitalist economics, and they resolutely distanced themselves both from socially romantic and from socialist concepts of society. They were concerned with the transformation of capitalism from a unilateral system of rule into an “economic democracy” with extensive participation rights for the workforce and a legal regulation of labour relations, especially by means of collective labour agreements. By these means, they hoped to render economic life more ethical, to balance improvements in the efficiency of capitalism with socio-political responsibility, and thus to realise an economic order which would have the support of all sections of the population. This was the sense in which the Protestant Social Congress especially advocated the concept

7 Bismarck’s intention when inventing new forms of social security was to reconcile the working classes with the political status quo.

of collective labour agreements. In order for these regulatory mechanisms to function, it was imperative that recognition be given to the right of the workers to organise, thereby establishing an approximate balance in negotiations between employers and workers. It was for such reasons that the Protestant Social Congress declared its solidarity with the trade unions in major strikes such as the Hamburg dockworkers' strike or the Ruhr miners' strikes, whereby support was given equally to trade unions of all ideological orientations.

Friedrich Naumann, a clergyman and later a politician, was especially committed to the cause of a renewed, socially responsible liberalism.⁸ He regarded the core question of all socio-political reforms as being the development of a "method for universal participation in the management and in the yields of production. [...] This is the new liberalism, just as universal involvement in the state was the goal of the older, purely political liberalism."⁹ In his view, significant socio-political advancement would only be possible on the basis of legally recognised equal rights between the production factors "labour" and "capital".

Pragmatic and Conceptual Convergence of the Ideological Trade Unions and Protestantism during the Weimar Republic

During the period of the Weimar Republic, the ideological opposition between trade unions of differing persuasions faded into the background as a direct result of major conflicts with employers on the one hand and an increasing convergence of their socio-political concepts and everyday trade union practice on the other. At the same time, an appreciation of the concerns of the workforce also increased within the Protestant church.

Immediately after the November Revolution of 1918, an agreement was drawn up between central employer organisations and the trade unions, the so-called "*Zentralarbeitsgemeinschaft*" (Central Labour Consortium), in which the trade unions were recognised by employers as representatives of the workforce, and both sides undertook to jointly settle labour and wage conditions by means of collective agreements, to reduce the working day to eight hours, and to establish "*Arbeiterausschüsse*" (workers' committees)—the precursor of the works councils. The key points of this agreement were raised by the Weimar National Assembly to the status of constitutional articles so that, ultimately, Article 159 of the Weimar Constitution granted full freedom of association to the trade unions and

8 Peter Theiner: Friedrich Naumann und der soziale Liberalismus im Kaiserreich, in: Karl Holl/Günter Trautmann/Hans Vorländer (eds.): Sozialer Liberalismus, Göttingen 1986, pp. 72–83.

9 Friedrich Naumann: Neudeutsche Wirtschaftspolitik, in: *ibid.*: Werke, Vol. 3: Schriften zur Wirtschafts- und Gesellschaftspolitik, ed. by Theodor Schieder, Cologne/Opladen 1964, pp. 71–534, especially p. 534.

Article 165 recognised the parity of capital and labour in accordance with the Central Labour Consortium. This close cooperation between employers and the trade unions was only a short-lived episode, however. It was often only possible to resolve the conflicts that accompanied wage disputes by means of mandatory arbitration, a situation that became increasingly aggravated until the free trade unions declared their withdrawal from the “Central Labour Consortium” in January 1924. Even although the Christian trade unions did not follow suit, the Central Labour Consortium faded into insignificance forthwith. An extreme example of the ferocity of labour disputes was the “*Rubreisenstreit*” (Ruhr iron dispute) of 1928, when the employer Nord-West reacted to mandatory arbitration on the part of the state with a three-month lock out during winter and over the Christmas period. The lock out of large numbers of steel workers in the Ruhr Area led to dramatic distress for which, with the assistance of local authorities and voluntary organisations such as the churches, only makeshift solutions could be found. By the end of the Weimar era, arbitration legislation and emergency regulations meant that collective wage agreement negotiations were *de facto* no longer fair, added to which the power base of the trade unions was diminished as a result of increased unemployment and the radicalisation of parts of the workforce in and around the Communist Party of Germany and the National Socialist German Workers’ Party.

In the context of the developments outlined here, the traditional ideological differences within the trade union movement played an increasingly negligible role, and a process of convergence took place between the free, Christian and liberal trade unions. A key factor contributing towards this convergence was the concept of economic democracy, developed by the free trade unions in the Weimar era. This concept of economic democracy was an attempt on the part of the Social Democratic labour movement to win participative and co-determinative rights within the economic sphere, parallel to and as an indispensable supplement to political democracy. To this end, and drawing on the experience of the workers’ committees and work councils, this concept aimed to consolidate workers’ participative rights in democratic institutions, not only within individual enterprises, but also at the company level and at the level of economic policy. Whereas the Communist Party and the extreme right were vociferous and strict in their rejection of this concept, the reactions of the liberal and Christian trade unions were largely favourable, to a certain extent reclaiming the ideas of economic democracy as their intellectual property. Fritz Naphtali, the chief theorist of the trade unions and the main driving force behind the development of the concept, freely admitted in the course of discussions on economic democracy that there were “points of contact with the progressive views represented by

Friedrich Naumann.”¹⁰ From within the Christian trade unions too, opinions were largely affirmative, so that taken as a whole, a clear programmatic convergence of the ideological trade unions in Germany can be observed in the final phase of the Weimar Republic.¹¹

Similarly, within Protestantism, some traditional reservations towards the trade union movement in general, and the *Allgemeine Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund* (General Federation of German Trade Unions) in particular, were abandoned gradually and by degrees. The declaration of the first “*Kirchentag*”—this was the name given to the parliament of Germany’s territorial Protestant churches during the Weimar epoch—held in Bethel in 1924 paid tribute to human labour as a key economic factor, which is “not simply a commodity which can be bought and sold.” Accordingly, human labour should “not be depreciated to sillage or serfdom.”¹² This attitude constitutes the first instance since the onset of industrialisation of an official church statement that emphasises the dignity of human labour and demonstrates the first rudiments of the humanisation of working life. With respect to the roles of employers and workers, the wording of the declaration is cautious, particularly emphasising their shared responsibility towards the people as a whole. In this respect, the declaration spoke out in favour of equal rights and shared responsibility for employers and workers in their duty to shape economic affairs, whereby an emphatic appeal was issued to employers to respect workers “as national compatriots worthy of equal respect who are struggling for their social equality and who should not be prevented from entering freely into trade union association.”¹³ In addition to its general appreciation of human labour, therefore, this statement also explicitly calls for freedom of association, thereby acknowledging the role of the trade unions in the representation of workers’ interests. By way of concretising its declaration, the *Kirchentag* in Bethel further adopted a resolution on the “social question”, appealing to the territorial churches to appoint full-time staff for social work as a special means of cultivating contacts to the working world. Even although social pastorates were only established sporadically in the Weimar era—first in the Rhineland, and a little later also in Westphalia—this amounts to an explicit recognition of the responsibility of the Protestant church to play a role in shaping economic life which is further institutionalised in the formation of new structures.

- 10 Fritz Naphtali: Debatten zur Wirtschaftsdemokratie, in: Die Gesellschaft. Internationale Revue für Sozialismus und Politik 6 (1929), p. 218.
- 11 Traugott Jähnichen: Vom Industrieuntertan zum Industriebürger: Der Soziale Protestantismus und die Entwicklung der Mitbestimmung, Bochum 1993, pp. 183–185.
- 12 Kundgebung des Deutschen Evangelischen Kirchentages an das deutsche evangelische Volk vom 17. Juni 1924, in: Der Deutsche Evangelische Kirchenbund in seinen Gesetzen, Verordnungen und Kundgebungen, ed. J. Hosemann, Berlin 1932 (2nd ed.), p. 182.
- 13 Kundgebung des Deutschen Evangelischen Kirchentages vom 17. Juni 1924, in: Der Deutsche Evangelische Kirchenbund in seinen Gesetzen, Verordnungen und Kundgebungen, p. 183.

Individual social pastors and elements within the social bureaus continued to maintain a close affinity, especially to the Christian trade unions, but beyond that, diverse examples can be discerned in the Weimar period of greater openness towards the Social Democratic trade union movement. Thus, for example, the Protestant Social Congress of 1929 invited Fritz Tarnow, Chairman of the Social Democratic woodworkers' trade union federation, to give a talk on the subject of professional ethics amongst workers. In spite of the fact that Tarnow's line of argument, which drew a constructive link between a conscious class ethos on the part of the labour movement and the work ethic of the individual¹⁴, was controversially discussed, this demonstrates a remarkable openness towards the Social Democratic labour movement within liberal Protestantism compared to the period before the First World War. This attitude was expressed even more distinctly in the movement, albeit one which was to remain relatively small, of religious socialism, in which theologians, Protestant workers and trade unionists got together, on the one hand to represent the religious interests of their members in the Social Democratic labour movement, while at the same time campaigning for a worker-friendly attitude within the churches, especially the Protestant church. The religious socialists took up key demands of the Social Democratically oriented trade union movement, such as extensive controls of banks and large-scale industry, the reintroduction of the eight-hour working day, which had been abandoned again in the course of the Weimar period, improved legislation for the protection of workers and support for those on strike or locked out. The Deputy Chairman of the Religious Socialists' Federation was the trade union official Bernhard Göring, who took over the chairmanship of the movement when Pastor Erwin Eckert resigned to join the Communist Party of Germany in October 1931.¹⁵

On the whole, therefore, it is possible to discern a convergence during the period of the Weimar Republic of the three ideological trade unions, the Protestant church and key elements of Protestantism towards the Social Democratic labour movement. There is something quite remarkable about these programmatic socio-political and economic innovations compared to the period before 1918. However, these first beginnings of socio-political co-responsibility on the part of the workforce and the churches were increasingly on the defensive in the wake of the Great Depression of 1929/30, so that the Nuremberg Kirchentag of 1930 observed, without self-deception, that the Protestant church "has no opportunity, apart from the mediums of charitable assistance, pastoral influence and earnest appeals to consciences, to intervene in this economic development

14 Fritz Tarnow: Die Berufsethik des Arbeitnehmers, in: Verhandlungen des Evangelisch-sozialen Kongresses 1929, Göttingen 1929, p. 112.

15 Traugott Jähnichen: Vom Industrieuntertan zum Industriebürger: Der Soziale Protestantismus und die Entwicklung der Mitbestimmung, pp. 249–259.

(of mass unemployment as influenced by the Great Depression).¹⁶ Pioneering ventures in the realms of the Protestant Social Congress and the religious socialists also stagnated and, from 1930 onwards, concentrated their efforts on resisting National Socialism, which on the other hand succeeded in winning a not unsubstantial segment of “milieu” Protestantism—though less so amongst pastors and core parish church members—for its propaganda. With the transfer of power to the National Socialists in January 1933 and the church struggle (“*Kirchenkampf*”) which quickly ensued, most of the social and economic ethics experiments in the Protestant sector very soon ground to a halt. Only some smaller groups, partly in resistance against National Socialism, continued to work actively in this field, attempting, influenced by the World War and the Nazi campaigns of mass destruction, to draw up draft concepts for a reorganisation of Germany after the end of Nazi rule.

The Protestant Church and the Unified Trade Union as Advocates of a Humanisation of Industrial Society During the Period of the German Economic Miracle

The Protestant Church’s Active Advocacy of a Single Trade Union, Subsequent to Experiences of Persecution and Resistance in the Third Reich, in the Rebuilding Phase in the Federal Republic

Ultimately, it was the prohibition which the trade unions of differing persuasions each experienced of their respective organisations, the action they took—sometimes jointly—against the increasingly totalitarian National Socialist state, and their joint experience of persecution which were the key factors that led to concrete agreements being reached, even during the Nazi period, to overcome the division of the labouring classes into separate ideological trade unions and instead to form a single unified trade union with which to replace them, once the Nazi regime had come to an end.

In this respect, the fresh start made by the unified trade unions in the German Trade Union Confederation after 1945 also constituted a new situation for their relationship with Protestantism, since such unified trade unions saw themselves as representing the interests of all workers, free from any concrete party political concept of society and

16 Verhandlungen des dritten Deutschen Evangelischen Kirchentages in Nürnberg 1930, in: Der Deutsche Evangelische Kirchenbund in seinen Gesetzen, Verordnungen und Kundgebungen, p. 113.

without pursuing any ideological objectives in the narrower sense of the term. In addition, from the early 1950s onwards, the trade unions concentrated primarily on wage and working-hour policies and on company social policy, in all of which they achieved a series of successes¹⁷ and this impartial representation of interests was favourably acknowledged from the Protestant side. On the other hand, for its part Protestantism distanced itself from the authoritarian understanding of state and society which was prevalent prior to 1945, and consciously sought to establish new, constructive relations with the labour movement and, specifically, with social democracy.

On the basis of the above and in spite of their differences of mentality and tradition, the two sides grew perceptibly closer to each other. A pivotal factor in all of this was the enthusiastic opening up of the Protestant church for questions relating to the world of industrial labour, such as emerged in the 1950s. Starting from the 1955 German Evangelical Church Synod in Espelkamp on the subject of “The Church and the World of Industrial Labour”¹⁸, industrial society was grasped as a central challenge, both at the level of theological reflection and in respect of the creation of new spheres of church activity. The Protestant church perceived the world of industrial labour as a “different world”, as an “alien part of and an indispensable foundation for our own world”¹⁹, which first required to be accurately understood, in order to enable an appropriate reaction to it. According to this interpretation, technically determined processes—especially assembly line production—and a mentality essentially shaped by them, had led to a problematic “separation”²⁰ of the world of labour from the world of the church, a feature compensated for some by the connection of personal and family life to the church, yet which in many ways intensified the alienation between church and industrial society. In addition to the challenges for church action, the Espelkamp synod placed a similar emphasis on the socio-political dimension, criticising deficits in the integration of the industrial labour force in society. In this sense, the “industrial labour force question”—as Arthur Rich, the classic author on Protestant economic ethics post-1945, puts it—was identified as the central “contemporary social question.”²¹

17 Hans Limmer: *Die Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbewegung*, Munich/Vienna 1973, pp. 102–107.

18 Klaus von Bismarck (ed.): *Die Kirche und die Welt der industriellen Arbeit: Reden und Entschließungen der Synode der EKD Espelkamp 1955*, Witten 1955.

19 Helmut Gollwitzer: Geleitwort, in: Horst Symanowski/Fritz Vilmar: *Die Welt des Arbeiters: Junge Pfarrer berichten aus der Fabrik*, Frankfurt am Main 1963, pp. 5–8, p. 5.

20 Horst Symanowski: *Der kirchenfremde Mensch in der Welt der industriellen Arbeit*, in: Klaus von Bismarck (ed.): *Die Kirche und die Welt der industriellen Arbeit: Reden und Entschließungen der Synode der EKD Espelkamp 1955*, pp. 53–61, p. 53.

21 Arthur Rich: *Christliche Existenz in der industriellen Welt: Eine Einführung in die sozioethischen Grundfragen der industriellen Arbeitswelt*, Zürich/Stuttgart 1964 (2nd revised and expanded edition), p. 29.

Against the background of this diagnosis, it comes as no surprise that the theological and socio-ethical literature of the period, which experienced a significant boom towards the end of the 1950s (to no small degree on account of the establishment of institutes and professorships of social ethics), and the socio-political statements issued by the Protestant church both demonstrate a strong emphasis on the situation of industrial workers. This is also true of the newly developed fields of activity of church industrial and social work, with the increasing numbers of industrial pastors and Protestant labour and/or social secretaries trained after Espelkamp 1955 constituting the development of a new form of Protestant church presence in the world of industrial labour which sought in their special way to establish close bonds with the trade unions of the German Trade Union Confederation.

This responsibility of the church for the world of labour was to prove itself particularly in 1955 when individual groups within the Catholic Workers' Movement again set about establishing Christian trade union federations. In a "Resolution on the New Formation of Christian Trade Unions", the council thereupon categorically rejected any splitting of the unified trade union. For both theological and pastoral reasons, the council disapproved of the newly founded Christian organisations. Their claim to the attribute "Christian" was criticised, since trade unions are *per se* about the "representation of worldly group interests."²² Furthermore, the "intellectual exchange which had begun" in the unified trade union, and which had the potential to overcome the alienation between the church and the working classes, was perceived as being "hampered by the creation of some organisations, the intention of which is the separate gathering of Christian workers."²³ Instead, the Council called for the "active cooperation of Protestant Christians in the German Trade Union Confederation" and to "strive resolutely within the trade union organisations for a just social and economic order."²⁴ Active involvement in the German Trade Union Confederation was even commended as an "indispensable sign of the shared responsibility which every Christian has to carry along with all other members of his class and his people for the attainment of social justice."²⁵ The assumption of this unequivocal position marks "an epochal and pivotal point"²⁶ in the history of relations between the trade union movement and the Protestant church.

22 Entschließung des Rates der EKD zur Neubildung christlicher Gewerkschaften, in: Die Mitarbeit, Vol. 4 (1956), p. 31.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Eduard Wörmann, head of the social office of the Protestant Church of Westphalia until 1995, quoting the former President (Präses) of the Church of Westphalia, Heinrich Reiß, in: Einheitsgewerkschaft—25 Jahre nach der Erklärung des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland. Mitteilungen des Sozialamtes der Evangelischen Kirche von Westfalen, No. 28/1980, I.

Codetermination as a Core Element of Reform Programmes for Work Humanisation in Industrial Society during the “long 1960s”

Starting in the late 1950s, perspectives for the reform of general policies to the benefit of the workforce were increasingly addressed by the trade unions, as well as within Protestantism, with the aim of rendering the working environment and economic life more democratic and more humane.²⁷ The initiatives on the part of the German Trade Union Confederation for extending codetermination legislation are especially worth remembering here, since the new policy programme approved in 1963 declared codetermination to be central to trade union demands, an emphasis once again reinforced in a new 1965 programme of action which enshrined the demand for codetermination in the daily core business of the trade unions.²⁸

In engaging with these socio-political reform projects, a variety of models for socially upgrading the factor of “labour” were also developed, especially in the form of newly created post-1945 Protestant initiatives relating to the working environment and, in no small means, in the form of official church statements. A guiding principle in all of this was the intention of actively participating in the process of “making the industrial world more humane.”²⁹

The background to this central demand is an analysis of the living conditions of industrial workers, especially such as that gathered systematically by Horst Symanowski and others of the Gossner Mission in Mainz. The Gossner Mission developed a workplace-related research and training project in which vicars and pastors worked in a factory for a time, so that they might be enabled to better understand the workers’ living conditions, and thus of a large number of their own parishioners. In half yearly courses, practical work in various industrial plants—primarily in a rhythm of rotating shifts—combined with seminar elements served to impart elementary theoretical knowledge and to evaluate exemplary experiences on the basis of journals and interviews with industrial workers.³⁰

Generally, the dominance of technical processes during the production process was problematised, over against which the workers mostly experienced themselves as passive, defenceless and powerless. They were obliged to conform and/or adapt to

27 The works of Fritz Vilmar in the 1960s and 1970s are good examples that are worth referring to. Fritz Vilmar: *Forderungen zur Demokratisierung der Wirtschaft*, in: Horst Symanowski/Fritz Vilmar (eds.): *Die Welt des Arbeiters: Junge Pfarrer berichten aus der Fabrik*, Frankfurt am Main 1963, pp. 128–138.

28 Hans Limmer: *Die Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbewegung*, pp. 118.

29 Helmut Gollwitzer: *Geleitwort*, p. 7.

30 Anhang 4: *Seminar für kirchlichen Dienst in der Industriegesellschaft*, in: Horst Symanowski/Fritz Vilmar (eds.): *Die Welt des Arbeiters: Junge Pfarrer berichten aus der Fabrik*, pp. 151–153.

the cycle and rhythm of the machines, the mechanised work was experienced as being “monotonous”, while at the same time leading to “physical exhaustion.”³¹ The workers perceived themselves as “slaves of the machine”³², to which they had to totally subordinate themselves. Failure to conform to the cycle of the machines frequently led to conflicts with workmates who, for their part, were seriously affected in the performance of their own duties by delays, or with the supervisors whose job was to monitor compliance with the cycles. Thereby, the strictly hierarchical work regulations which were predominant at the time were often experienced as arbitrary and humiliating, such as, for example, in the large number of controls or in the frequently rigid fixing of cycle times³³ by the works management. From the workers’ reports, it is clear how the one-sided technical bias and the dominance of hierarchical decision-making powers in particular should exacerbate even the onset of solidarity. Against such a background, it is understandable how the socio-ethical verdict should have been arrived at according to which mechanised work constitutes “a permanent, daily insult of people”³⁴, which can be described theologically as “‘organised’ lack of charity”³⁵.

On the whole, most industrial workers complained of high levels of strain arising from the workplace, significantly more than half the workers questioned in the early 1960s declared themselves to be “consciously (!) dissatisfied”³⁶ with their work. A substantial aspect of this criticism was rooted in the fact that the consequences of their mechanised industrial work meant they were hardly able to undertake larger-scale activities in the evening or on weekends apart from seeking distraction or simple amusement and recreation. A sensation of general assimilation to their industrial work was definitively characteristic for many, their way of living reduced “to the triad of working—eating—sleeping.”³⁷

Alongside such real-life and/or more pastorally oriented considerations, both the staff of the Gossner Mission and the theological social ethicists developed ideas for far-reaching socio-political reform concepts, partly in dialogue with or even directly coordinated with trade union objectives. At root, this discussion was determined by the leitmotif of a social reevaluation of the factor “labour.” This perspective of a more humane environment is outlined in important German Evangelical Church position papers as well as in socio-

31 Fritz Vilmar: *Allgemeine Erwägungen*, in: Horst Symanowski/Fritz Vilmar (eds.): *Die Welt des Arbeiters: Junge Pfarrer berichten aus der Fabrik*, p. 44.

32 *Ibid.*

33 Disputes over appropriate cycle times were, besides wage payment issues, one of the key factors behind industrial action at the time, as, for example, in the successful selective strikes by the Industrial Union of Metalworkers (IGM) in North Württemberg/North Baden in 1973.

34 Fritz Vilmar: *Allgemeine Erwägungen*, p. 57.

35 Fritz Vilmar: *Allgemeine Erwägungen*, p. 55.

36 Horst Symanowski: *Allgemeine Erwägungen*, p. 36.

37 Horst Symanowski/Fritz Vilmar (eds.): *Die Welt des Arbeiters: Junge Pfarrer berichten aus der Fabrik*, p. 23.

ethical policy statements, according to which issues that were particularly addressed in the 1960s included a workers' commensurate share in the fruits of their labour, expanding rights of codetermination, and work organisation measures aimed at creating a more humane working environment.

Thus, the Council of the German Evangelical Church, in its first position paper of the year 1962, took a critical stance towards the question of the distribution of property in the Federal Republic and clearly condemned the "unilateral accumulation of capital"³⁸ which had occurred following the war. This trend ought to be corrected by having workers become "stewards over a share of the productive capital of the people"³⁹, thereby enabling them to practise economic co-responsibility. With this in mind, the position paper issued a call to establish capital-gain wages and, in the ensuing years, initiatives were developed in conjunction with the Catholic Church and some individuals in positions of responsibility within the trade unions, such as Julius Leber, to at least pave the way for new forms of capital accumulation for broader sections of society.⁴⁰

Voices from within Protestantism critical of the position paper on property pointed out that the social integration of the workers and their co-responsibility for economic development was not to be achieved primarily via a wider spread of property ownership but, first and foremost, by means of codetermination. Along these lines, the Gossner Mission, heavily influenced by Fritz Vilmar, presented comprehensive proposals in 1963 for the democratisation of the economy and for improving codetermination in work processes.⁴¹ The social ethicist Günter Brakelmann, following up on such stimuli, described codetermination as "the fundamental requirement of a Christian-Social conscience"⁴², corresponding, as it does, to the Christian understanding of human relations based on equality and partnership.

The German Evangelical Church (*Evangelische Kirche Deutschlands*, EKD) also used the opportunity presented by these discussions to voice its opinion on the subject of "codetermination." In the light of this, its research published in 1968 was primarily concerned with assuaging the fierce social conflicts relating to the subject by pointing to a line of compromise. With an emphasis on the dignity of working people as its

38 Rat der EKD (ed.): Eigentumsbildung in sozialer Verantwortung: Eine Denkschrift (1962), in: Die Denkschriften der EKD: Soziale Ordnung, Vol. 2, Gütersloh 1978, Thesis 14. Zur Darstellung der historischen Entwicklung cp. Thesis 13a-c.

39 Rat der EKD (ed.): Eigentumsbildung in sozialer Verantwortung: Eine Denkschrift, Thesis 26.

40 In a joint memorandum on "Recommendations for property policy" (1964) produced together with the Roman Catholic Church, this perspective was concretised, and it had a strong influence on the legislation for the second Capital Formation Act.

41 Fritz Vilmar: Forderungen zur Demokratisierung der Wirtschaft, in: Horst Symanowski/Fritz Vilmar (eds.): Die Welt des Arbeiters: Junge Pfarrer berichten aus der Fabrik, pp. 121–138.

42 Günter Brakelmann: Kritische Anmerkungen und Thesen zur Eigentums politik, zur Gewinnbeteiligung und zur Mitbestimmung, in: Christ und Eigentum: Ein Symposium, Hamburg 1963, pp. 148–175, p. 160.

starting point, the study is of the opinion that a “partnership relationship between social groups”⁴³ most closely conforms to the dignity of humankind as God’s co-workers shaping the world in freedom and in shared responsibility. Codetermination as a concrete implementation of partnership that is also occasionally marked by conflicts is derived from the interrelated laws of capital and labour, both of which are constitutive for companies. Property and labour, seen from this perspective, are mutually interdependent and are “to be understood as factors of equal value.”⁴⁴ However, in Günter Brakelmann’s opinion, the socio-ethical equal value of capital and labour as indicated by the study should only mark an intermediate stage in socio-ethical reflection, since he perceived an “incomparably higher anthropological and social significance of labour in relation to property”⁴⁵ as a given from a theological perspective. Accordingly, he developed the perspective of an economic order “in which the function of capital [should be] subordinated to the human productive factor of labour.”⁴⁶

Further to this, the German Evangelical Church study, drawing largely on the findings of the Gossner Mission, proposed new opportunities for the direct participation of workers in the context of the labour process, aimed at undergirding their codetermination in the regulation of questions immediately affecting them.⁴⁷ This demand takes on immediate relevance against the background of the reports from experience in the industrial workplace, since it is only thus that the status of workers as objects subservient to the technical and labour organisational processes can possibly be relaxed or, ideally, abolished. Arthur Rich incorporated this concept in his work on the subject of codetermination, demanding “representative-collective codetermination [...] in the form of individual codetermination at the workplace”⁴⁸ as an essential corollary. Only

so can the essential rights of codetermination for the individual worker be achieved, such that they form a direct and immediate experience enhancing him as a person.

43 Rat der EKD (ed.): Sozialethische Erwägungen zur Mitbestimmung in der Wirtschaft der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Eine Studie der Sozialkammer der EKD, in: Die Denkschriften der EKD, Vol. 2 Soziale Ordnung, Gütersloh 1978, Thesis 5.

44 Rat der EKD (ed.): Sozialethische Erwägungen zur Mitbestimmung in der Wirtschaft der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Eine Studie der Sozialkammer der EKD, Thesis 14.

45 Günter Brakelmann: Priorität für die Arbeit: Die sozialethische Herausforderung der Mitbestimmung, in: R. Weckerling (ed.): Jenseits vom Nullpunkt? Christsein im westlichen Deutschland: Bischof D. Kurt Scharf zum 70. Geburtstag am 21. Oktober 1972, Stuttgart 1972, pp. 205–220, p. 220.

46 Ibid.

47 Rat der EKD (ed.): Sozialethische Erwägungen zur Mitbestimmung in der Wirtschaft der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Eine Studie der Sozialkammer der EKD, These 25.

48 Arthur Rich: Mitbestimmung in der Industrie, Zürich 1973, p. 129.

The emphasis in this, however, is not so much on the participation of each individual as on that of the group of employees.⁴⁹

Such proposals supported the perspective of a humanisation of the working environment, such as has been assumed since 1969 as a reform programme, including by the new social-liberal German government.⁵⁰

In the early 1970s, widening the scope of codetermination legislation in the working environment and the programmatically central concept of striving for a more humane working environment were goals to which Germany's social-liberal government likewise naturally aspired, and these also turned out to be important areas of cooperation between trade union and Protestant (as well as Catholic) initiatives. In this respect, this era was the first in which Protestant church institutions campaigned together with the trade unions for advances in German employment law and codetermination legislation.

However, there is one factor which has developed and which, especially since the 1970s, has continued to put a strain on church-trade union relations. In the 1970s, the churches—with the exception of the North Elbian church—independently regulated labour conditions for workers employed in the church and diaconate sector without any constitutive involvement of the trade unions.⁵¹ With their clear demarcation over against the former practice of employer stipulation of labour conditions on the one hand, and collective bargaining agreements on the other, the resultant regulations—the so-called “Third Way”—categorically rule out strikes for church employees, appealing to the notion of a “serving community.” This feature of the “Third Way” contradicts the whole self-understanding of the trade unions, and they feel themselves excluded by the churches from making any contribution to what is a major, increasingly important area of social work. The churches do invite the trade unions to collaborate within the “Third Way” framework without, however, relinquishing their regulatory competence or the ban on strikes, with the consequence that there has been hardly any convergence of the two sides on this question.

49 Ibid.

50 Concrete concepts for such humanisation of labour, aimed at placing greater importance on the personal and social needs of the workers in a reorganisation of the production processes, include the switching, extension and enhancement of tasks as well as the model of semi-autonomous workgroups. As summarised in Günter Brakelmann: *Humanisierung der industriellen Arbeitswelt*, in TRE Vol. III, Berlin/New York 1978, pp. 657–669.

51 Andreas Henkelmann et al. (eds.): *Abschied von der konfessionellen Identität? Diakonie und Caritas in der Modernisierung des deutschen Sozialstaats seit den 1960er Jahren*, Stuttgart 2012, pp. 256.

Almost simultaneously—from the mid-1970s onwards—the economic and social model of the Federal Republic entered a state of crisis, putting the supposedly resolved problem nexus of the 19th century social question back on the agenda in a new, modified form. Since then—notwithstanding some minor successes during the first decade of the 21st century—mass unemployment has increasingly taken a firm hold in Germany as well, signalling a profound crisis in labour relations brought about by the decline of the traditional coal and steel industries on the one hand and further exacerbated by the intensification of globalised economic exchange. Since then, wages in Germany—and, with them, social welfare benefits—have come under severe economic pressure, a fact that, in the last decades, has tended to force the trade unions into a defensive position. In this context, church—and in particular Protestant—bodies and initiatives have proved, perhaps surprisingly, to be reliable partners.

Protestantism and Trade Unions *en route* to Joint Socio-Political Cooperation Facing the Economic and Social Crisis since the Late 1970s

A new dimension of cooperation between trade unions and the Protestant church was begun in the late 1970s which saw Protestant clergy and trade unionists together in the front line in many places, mobilising public opinion with regard to planned plant closures and demanding the creation of replacement jobs. Some of these disputes went on for years, so that their cooperation took on a whole new quality, Protestantism and the trade unions discovering through their joint commitment that they both shared a broad basis of socio-political objectives. Further factors were their support of each other in public, the critical position both took towards entrepreneurial decisions, and the personal reliability they experienced. Their commitment to those threatened and increasingly affected by unemployment constituted a shared objective which shaped their direct grassroots actions and, to an increasing degree, the statements made by representatives of their respective organisations.

This, ultimately, is the background against which the joint economic and social statement of the two major churches, “For a Future founded on Solidarity and Justice” (1997), is to be interpreted, emphasising, as it does, the equal status of economic and social developments.⁵² The current crisis in labour relations, as manifested in the

52 For a Future Founded on Solidarity and Justice: A Statement of the Protestant Church in Germany and the German Bishops’ Conference on the Economic and Social Situation in Germany, Hannover/Bonn 1997, Introduction, Point 2: “The quality of social security and economic performance condition one another.”

phenomenon of mass unemployment, is identified by the churches as a central socio-political challenge posing a serious threat to the humanity of social coexistence as well as to social harmony. In a similar vein, the churches and the trade unions identify tackling the problem of mass unemployment as a social task of prime importance. In the view of the churches—according to their social statement—there is no “silver bullet” solution in this regard, with the result that “many and varied are the ways that must be tried.”⁵³ The churches most emphatically spoke out in favour of the creation of a second labour market—thereby differing from the trade unions in their emphasis—since this is the only means by which those on the losing side of the dynamisation of the job markets can be given the prospect of independently managing their lives. Both sides are in agreement that the unemployed, especially the long-term unemployed, whose ability and willingness to work are generally considerably greater than is commonly alleged, must be given real prospects of integration into employment relationships.

But above all, there is fundamental agreement that mass unemployment should not be abused as a means of leverage, causing an overall deterioration in the job situation of those in regular employment. An insidious departure from regular working hours, especially on work-free weekends, the erosion of security of tenure, replacing regular employment relations with temporary workers and interim staff or internships—these are all steps on the way to a legal deregulation of employment relations. In contrast, in their public statements, the Protestant church is just as clear as are trade unionists in emphasising the creation of collective employment legislation as an expression of the dignity of human labour. Michael Kittner’s standard work on the subject, *“Arbeitskampf”*⁵⁴, demonstrates how trade unionists also draw on Biblical traditions in this context, for in it he invokes the Exodus motif, describing the defeat of pharaonic conditions as a fundamental motif of a culture shaped by Christianity.

General agreement is also to be found with regard to strategies for overcoming existing and emergent poverty, the latter looming increasingly large on the horizon. For both the churches and the trade unions, it is beyond dispute that the core elements of general public services should be neither privatised nor competition-driven, but must “remain a public sector monopoly.”⁵⁵ The Protestant church and the trade unions are united in their vision of maintaining a welfare state that has the wherewithal to act. Both are decisively opposed to concepts of a minimal welfare state such as the one advocated by adherents of radical liberalism.

53 For a Future Founded on Solidarity and Justice: A Statement of the Protestant Church in Germany and the German Bishops’ Conference on the Economic and Social Situation in Germany, No. 168.

54 Michael Kittner: *Arbeitskampf: Geschichte—Recht—Gegenwart*, Munich 2005.

55 *Soziale Dienste als Chance: Eine Studie der Sozialkammer der EKD*, Hannover 2002, Point 45.

In the light of all this, both are ultimately interested in good working conditions and in appropriate public funding for those employed in the social welfare work sectors. Here too, however, there are a few points of conflict, since the Protestant church operates as an employer in its diaconal institutions and, with regard to the organisation of church employment legislation, it has, until now, resolved the issue of appropriately integrating the trade unions in the process of diaconal labour legislation only inadequately.

Perspective

At present, similarities far outweigh the differences between Protestantism and trade unions in their perception of social problems and in their proposals for coping with these challenges. It is important to emphasise this all the more given the fact that powerful forces within society have pinned their hopes on solutions which are diametrically opposed to the scenarios envisaged by both the churches and the trade unions. Given this constellation, relations between the two key players are no longer as they were in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but are now characterised by what they have in common far more than by what divides them. The distance that still exists is more a question of general background and differing milieus, far less one of socio-political options. In this respect, the conditions for increased cooperation and occasional alliances certainly are currently far more favourable. A recent example is the Transformation Congress for Sustainable Social and Economic Developments which was jointly organised by the Protestant church and its diaconal institutions together with the German Trade Union Confederation and the German Federation for the Environment and Nature Conservation. This congress also clearly highlighted the major overlap in views shared by Protestantism and the trade unions, not only in the socio-political sector, but also with regard to ecological challenges. A renewed explicit appreciation of the trade unions with respect to their contribution towards the formation of a sustainable and social form of economic activity and their commitment to good working conditions was formulated in 2015 in a German Evangelical Church position paper on the topics of “Labour, Social Partnership and Trade Unions.”⁵⁶ In the light of the increased development of atypical employment relationships under precarious conditions, the German Evangelical Church emphasises the value of workers’ solidarity, as displayed in trade union involvement, as a means of redressing the “asymmetrical balance of power [...] between employers and the employed”⁵⁷ and of fashioning a more humane working environment.

56 *Solidarität und Selbstbestimmung im Wandel der Arbeitswelt: Eine Denkschrift des Rates der EKD zu Arbeit, Sozialpartnerschaft und Gewerkschaften*, Gütersloh 2015.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

According to the German Evangelical Church, the trade unions and the churches are both committed in a very similar manner to an ethos of solidarity in an increasingly individualised society. In this sense, the trade unions and Protestantism are both faced with the similar task of finding new means of integrally addressing solidarity and individuality. This involves cultivating a value-based ethics of solidarity while, at the same time, offering a differentiated response to individual needs and specific concerns. Facilitating internal diversity is an indispensable requisite for the organisation of new forms of solidarity in individualised societies. In view of this task, both organisations do indeed have a lot they can learn from each other. Finally, since 2013, church and diaconate relations with the trade unions have gained some momentum as regards the regulation of church and diaconate labour relations. There is an effort on the part of the churches to involve trade unions to a greater degree and to develop innovative regulations which are more in accord with the parties' respective self-understandings, basing these, for example, on the model of appropriately church-oriented collective agreements which has long been successfully used in North Germany.

The model of "just sharing" which has guided the thinking of the Protestant Church in Germany for almost a decade pursues the objective that each individual should be enabled to live a self-determined life in freedom and integrated into society. There is a good deal of overlap between this model and the motifs of justice and solidarity which determine the value systems of the trade unions, even if there is still some friction on the point of their exact individual manifestations. Both organisations regard it as one of their intrinsic tasks to flesh out their moral values and, especially, to work actively for their social implementation. In the process, the trade unions offer an important forum for Protestants to engage in socio-political action based on their own moral values and to share with people of differing theoretical paradigms and ideological backgrounds in shaping an integral segment of society. The tradition of the unified trade union after 1945 in Germany offers a convenient point of contact, making it easier for Protestants and trade unionists in the second half of the 20th century to discover what they have in common with regard to social objectives and, in this sense, to cooperate constructively with each other.

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