

THE RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT IN GERMANY DURING THE WORLD WAR.

BY REV. JULIUS W. RICHTER, D. THEOL.

*Professor of the Science of Missions University of
Berlin. Vice-Chairman Continuation Com-
mittee Edinburgh World Missionary
Conference.*

(Translated by Rev. William C. Laube, D.D., Professor of Homiletics
and Missions, Dubuque German College and Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa.)

The war came to the entire German nation as a complete surprise. With the deepest peace tens of thousands had gone in the usual way into their vacations. Conferences and congresses for ecclesiastical, social and scientific purposes followed one another, as usual in July, in a motley succession. But suddenly the storm-clouds gathered,—in a few days the bolt of lightning struck down: Declaration of war with Russia, with France, with England. As by a violent shock the entire nation was shaken. Everybody down to the remotest hamlet knew: This means a struggle between life and death, a war so terrible, so great, as Germany never before has waged, a struggle for our very existence. But with the same elementary force the conviction arose in the soul of the people from the first day: This war has been forced upon us, Germany has not wanted it. Russia's insatiable hunger for land, France's thoughts of revenge, England's anxiety for its supremacy of the seas, unchallenged till now,—in short, all around us the suspicion against the new world-power in the heart of Europe, which is arising so mightily and developing so healthfully,—these things have conjured up this war. But the German people, from the Emperor down to the humblest laboring man, felt itself one in the struggle for a righteous cause, and for this very reason a mighty wave of religious enthusiasm

swept through the nation. The Kaiser closed his memorable speech from the balcony of the royal palace with the words: "Now go into your churches, kneel down before God and pray to him for aid for our brave army."

We will trace first the deep-going religious effects in the army at the front. Hundreds and thousands of field-letters and stories of eye-witnesses bear record how the seriousness of the grand and holy time, the constant danger of death, the consciousness to fight and to suffer for the Fatherland and for the beloved fireside, the feeling of absolute dependence upon the great invisible powers have called forth in countless warriors a quickening and deepening of the religious life. A plain merchant and non-commissioned officer writes: "Visit with me in spirit the field of battle, look once into the lines of the warriors as they listen to the words of the minister with their hands reverently folded, how they all without exception and without command uncover their heads in prayer and pray to God for grace and protection. How many a one among them has not remembered his Creator for years; yea, how many a one has even scoffed at religion, and has looked upon it as something old-fashioned, out of date. But here all his scoffing disappears, here he stands a believing Christian, seeking help, and finding help with no one, save only with our heavenly Father above. The words of the minister find a place in his heart, his eyes, which have seen the terrible misery of war, are moistened with tears. Here no one defies the Christian songs, every one sings the beautiful songs:

"Commit thou all thy griefs" and "A mighty fortress is our God," with a will and from the depth of his heart, if indeed too big a lump does not arise in his throat, because the words of the song strike down too deeply into his feelings in the condition in which now he finds himself. Or if you are forced to play the role of the idle spectator while grenades and shrapnels strike all about you, then look upon those warriors, who at other times are often ashamed of religion and will know nothing of it, and

see how in the hour of greatest need they fold their rough fighting hands in prayer and offer up a silent petition to God for His help and succor. And to a third place I wish to take you. Look into the eyes of those brave ones who perhaps for minutes, or hours or even days have struggled with death before they succumbed, with full consciousness, their looks raised up to heaven, their cold hands folded in prayer upon their breast. Their anchor of hope is God in the Heavens." This is religiousness, not as a straw at which the drowning man seizes, it is the life preserver which has always been hanging at the shore, which was always ready to help the drowning one, but which many have passed carelessly by who later will gladly seize it for their rescue. The son of a peasant writes: "Always when we have had field-service, I feel as if a stone had been rolled from my heart." A sergeant-major, who otherwise has shown no religious interest whatever, proposed to his men to hold a prayer meeting every evening at nine o'clock, and to remember especially those also, whose sons had fallen on the field of battle. In these prayer meetings they sing gospel songs, such as "Nearer, my God, to Thee." Many a one is often deeply touched and can not hide his tears. Another soldier writes: "It has become a real need for me to spend daily a few minutes alone with God in prayer." Still another writes from the field-service in which he took part; how the opening song: "If God himself be for me," which was sung with deep feeling caused a trembling to go through the hearts of the strong men and how tears of deepest emotion were shed. A deep religious emotion was manifest throughout this memorable service. We are told of a "Landwehrmann" who during all his free hours read in the New Testament. He called that the "breathing of his soul," and he read everytime until he was satiated. Before a night attack he gave the book from which he had read to a comrade with the words: "I will need it no more." An hour later he fell. Such testimonies could be adduced in unlimited numbers. It is by no means as

if these German men, of whom so many during the long period of peace had become estranged from religion and from the church, had now at once again become pious and churchly. But hundreds of thousands have looked the seriousness of death squarely in the face, and here they have experienced God. During the first months of the war it was a real distress that the number of field-chaplains could not be increased as rapidly as the needs which arose on every side required. Those who stand in the firing lines and in the trenches, those in the transportations, those who are heavily wounded and are taken care of in the emergency stations, the sick in the hospitals, all desired religious cheer and comfort and received them gratefully. And there is a desire for religious literature which can hardly be satisfied. The German people are always known as a reading people. But now above all the Bible, the song book, smaller and larger devotional books come again into their own, books which perhaps many of the soldiers had not taken into their hands in years during times of peace. To meet this need an auxiliary service on a grand scale was organized. Almost every home and every pastor made it his special concern to send to his congregation on the front such religious literature with a personal message of greetings. And just this close, thoroughly German connection between the pastor of the home church and the members away in the far distance has become a blessing and a tie which has brought back to the church and to God those who were estranged. This literary mission, as it may be called, has perhaps been taken up on the largest scale by the German Christian Students' Federation. This organization sent for the first time on Christmas to all students in the field—about 28,000 at that time—a beautiful book of real merit, prepared especially for this purpose, called: "Deutsche Weihnacht" (German Christmas); the most illustrious spirits of our Universities and higher institutions of learning had contributed to it. It was a Christmas greeting of the German universities to their young academic

citizens in the enemy's country. So gratefully was it received that the German Christian Students' Federation since then has provided in more rapid succession other similar books and sent them out in tens of thousands of copies, so "Der Deutsche März," an edition of the gospel of John especially illustrated and published for this purpose with an introduction by Professor Seeberg of a deeply spiritual and richly poetic nature, also "Die Deutsche Eiche" and other publications. Hundreds of thousands of New Testaments and other portions of Scripture have been sent into the field by other agencies. The attempt has been made to analyze the newly awakened piety of the soldiers in the field. To a large extent it is not an ecclesiastical Christianity in the forms generally found in Germany. It will need in many ways a deepening into the riches of holy Scriptures. But it is something original, something creative and new, a life swelling forth with new power, an experiencing of God, personal salvation. Without doubt it is for many a starting-point for a new life. From youth they have become men in Christ over night, as it were, men, strongly rooted in religious experience and with the confession: I believe, therefore I live. We expect a deepening of our religious life at home from these returning warriors with their rich, genuine, religious experience.

Not at all so simple is the picture which is shown by the religious life at home. The year 1913-1914, it will be remembered, had been the year of the centenary celebration of the wars of liberation. The whole German people had entered into this celebration with enthusiasm and gratitude. It was also remembered how that time had led to a strong deepening of the religious life. In the ecclesiastical synods during the year 1914, the topic was often considered: Church and Fatherland. It was realized again how in the life of the nation and in their decisive hours the religious-ethical forces were of decisive importance, and how therefore in Germany also everything depended upon it that simplicity, manly courage, a

spirit of self-sacrifice and fear of God would be practiced, in order to stand the test in the great historic turning points.

But it has been said that the fruits of the centenary celebration did not come up to their expectations, that perhaps severe dispensations might be required to bring these fruits to maturity. The great time of trial was nearer than any one at that time could have imagined. On the other hand there had come over Germany the two years just before the opening of the war the "Kirchenaustrittsbewegung" (the movement of withdrawal from the state church); popular meetings and papers re-echoed of the tirades of the demagogues hostile to the church and to Christianity. It had long been a well-known fact in ecclesiastical circles that owing to the peculiar conditions of our state churches numbers of people who had inwardly broken with Christianity only retained their church membership in an outward and superficial way. One was inclined to look at the secession movement as upon an autumn storm, which blows through the trees and tears off the withered leaves. But now the reaction sets in suddenly. The general day of penitence and prayer which the Emperor had called immediately after the opening of the war led hundreds of thousands into God's house. The churches could not contain the multitudes that crowded to divine service. And when the communion celebrations for the outgoing soldiers began, they were hours full of consecration to the men who in the presence of their God took farewell from wife and children, for the youth, who with glowing enthusiasm went forth with God into the holy war. War-prayer meetings were instituted, at first daily in many churches, then twice or thrice a week. And the Sunday services as well as these week-day services were surprisingly well attended. The participation in the services and in the other religious gatherings has increased very considerably according to testimonials from the most different portions of the Fatherland; and above

all other things the inward participation, the hunger for the word of God, the need of religious cheer and comfort is still on the increase.

It is almost incredible how much religious literature has been produced during this year of war, small leaflets, tracts, books, etc. Of course, much is of a mediocre nature, but there is also excellent, substantial food among it, and everything is being read. There is always a new need present. Especially as Christmas, this thoroughly German festival, drew nigh with its cheerful candles on the Christmas tree, with the joy of the children and the beautiful, touching Christmas hymns, there was felt so strongly as never before the tie of closest fellowship with those who stood out on the frontier. Millions of packages and gifts of tender love were sent out to them. But millions also were in the houses of prayer on Christmas eve (Holy Evening, as the Germans call it) and on the other Christmas holy days, there before God to strengthen the tie of fellowship in prayer and intercession. The willingness to sacrifice at home had reached most gratifying proportions. And this in spite of the gradual rise in the prices of the necessities of life and other economic hardships, especially in the countless families who had been bereft of the father and the bread winner. The "Evangelische Oberkirchenrat" (official board of the state church), arranged for three consecutive collections for the war, the first for the war-invalids, the second for the restoration of the province of East Prussia, devastated through the war, the third for the church needs in Alsace-Lorraine. The collections resulted in the liberal sums of 545,500, 1,026,329 and 430,496, marks, respectively.

The war, especially the declaration of war of England, brought it to our consciousness in a painful manner to what extent German Christianity is isolated from the rest of Christendom. It is part of German nature that it always has had much appreciation of things foreign, and it has fostered this appreciation. Often it has seen its

own defects and faults and the advantages of other people and churches so plainly, that it has become unfair to itself and has glorified the others. Now God was experienced and praised as the German God. True, there may have been mixed up vague conceptions, with this word with which at one time Ernst Moritz Arndt (German poet of the wars of liberation), had appealed to the German people, as he sang to them of the "ancient God, the German God." It should express nothing else but a childlike, pious German faith, as Albert Rentz has interpreted it:

Now in our greatest need, threatened by death a thousandfold, sneered at and scoffed by the enemy, questioned: Where now is your German God? We confess it frankly and boldly: He is the God of our fathers, the God who has called the German people for his purpose, who has broken the chains in ages past, the German God, let all men know, none other than He, than Jesus Christ, the Lord God Almighty.

The history of German piety is the history of the life of the German spirit and of German culture. Everywhere a gradual fusion of the German and the Christian spirit is noticeable and there is brought into relief a peculiar German piety of an inner, spiritual nature, which we must not overlook in its peculiarity, but rather the fostering of which is our special mission. At the close of his famous "Addresses to the German Nation" in which during the days of the deepest humiliation under Napoleon the philosopher Fichte, then professor in Berlin, roused the German people to the struggle of liberty a hundred years ago, he said: "You are the nation among all the nations, in whom the germ of human perfection lies most decidedly, and who are charged with the progress of the development of the same. If you perish in this, your very essence of being, then there will perish with you at the same time all hope of the entire human race for rescue out of the depth of its fogs; if you sink,

there will sink with you all humanity, without hope of future restoration." Had this been spoken by a pan-German of the year 1913, he would have been accused of pan-Germanic magalomania, and one would deduce from it expectations for a position of German world-power. Spoken in the days of Napoleon, in the time of the deepest degradation of Germany, these words were the innermost conviction of faith of the German philosopher concerning the mission of the German people to humanity. In this mission we have now learned to believe more than ever before. We are convinced that God has still destined the people of the Reformation, the people of the Gospel, to a great mission for humanity. This gives our religious life a peculiarly intimate relation to our nationality.

The religious life of Germany has always contained unusually great difficulties. The division into the many state churches, which is not conducive to a healthy Christian piety, the unbridgeable denominational contrast between Roman Catholicism and German Protestantism, the harsh ecclesiastico-political wranglings of the various theological parties, these and other things had always made the religious life indeed one of extraordinary agitation, but one received the impression as if the German people would tear each other to pieces with these struggles. With the day of the declaration of war there was declared the truce in the political as well as in the ecclesiastical life; an armistice was concluded all around. The happy saying of our Kaiser: "I know no more parties, I only know Germans," carried the day also in the religious life. Even upon the hotly contested ecclesiastico-political ground of Berlin the final decision of the pending questions was adjourned until after the conclusion of peace. On all sides hands were joined in the common task. It was soon evident that a surprising number of common and great problems were to be solved: Out in the field the religious and ecclesiastical care of the soldiers; in the military hospitals and the convalescent homes the many-sided care of the wounded, many of

them forever incapable of earning their livelihood; for the women and such families whose providers were taken away by the war; for the relief of the economic needs. If the year 1913 had united all classes and strata of our nation over the barriers of denominationalism and ecclesiastical fences in the collection of the National spende (national offering) in memory of the silver jubilee of the reign of the Kaiser, as a common gift for Christian missions in the German colonies, there sat now side by side in committees, again and again, Catholics, Jews and Protestants, positives and liberals, state church and free church Lutherans, Methodists and Baptists, in order to consider the common tasks and to relieve the pressing needs. Here was a new experience and an unexpected one, opening up a perspective for the future extending beyond one's vision of sight.

A special field of labor of love and religious work was found in the concentration camps of the prisoners of war, especially when their numbers increased to a million and beyond. Here religious cheer and comfort and friendly kindness were to be shown to those large numbers in a strange land, separated from their families, destined to inactivity, for whom the lot of imprisonment was frequently hard to bear. This work is in the nature of the case difficult. The danger of espionage compels the military authorities to put many obstacles in its way, but it is being carried on in ever increasing measure by a special interdenominational committee representing the various churches. Here also the German Christian Student's Federation is doing an important share of the work, and it affords us pleasure to be able to emphasize that the American Young Men's Christian Associations, especially Dr. John R. Mott, who is loved and honored throughout Germany, are also supporting this work among the prisoners of war with considerable pecuniary gifts. This work is exclusively for the benefit of non-Germans. For this reason we gratefully accept the help offered us from Christian America.

We do not indulge in the illusion as if the religious movement among our people had already led to a regeneration. There are new impulses, there are new starts, there is something of a budding, blossoming spring. We also know that there is no lack of counter-currents. Every now and then dismal voices are hoarsely raised that tell us that this religious awakening is an atavistic retrogression into medieval superstition, or that after the war the nationalistic idea must be put into the center so exclusively, that the religious idea must simply be subordinate to it. These are plotters or cranks who can not understand the morning dawn of the new day. But the tasks that lie before us in the ecclesiastical and religious field are overwhelmingly large. Professor Dr. Deissmann has given characteristic expression to them in a series of theses. We quote here a few of his guiding principles:

“The question of destiny for the soul of Germany today is this: Will the tremendous psychic exertion of religious and moral forces spend itself gradually in the violent convulsion of this great war, or can an essential portion of these given energies be stored up as a power-center for a German Christian future? This important question is all the more serious for us, the more honorable, politically considered, the peace shall be which we expect to win.

“As the psychic forces awakened by the war are a trust committed unto us by God, we have a right to reckon with their preservation. Therefore it is self-evident to us that the individual effects of these war-forces are not to be conceived of by us as irksome and merely temporary emergency measures of a band of anxious alarmists who are suddenly humbling themselves in times of danger, but as the God-willed and God-blessed new beginnings of a national community of believers which through the war has been ennobled and purified and which is stretching more earnestly toward the coming Kingdom of God.

“To these religious-ethical effects of the war which are new beginnings for the time of peace belong; (a) The simplification of the entire mode of living and the restoration of a true conception of the aim and duties of our national existence; (b) The peace of God in the social, the interdenominational and the inner-protestant relations; (c) The more heroic conception of Christianity, nourished by Jesus and His Evangel; (d) The deepening and enriching of the soul through the tremendous sacrifices that have been made, and the stronger concentration upon the assurance of life eternal which is connected with these sacrifices.

“The full working out of these war-forces in time of peace is possible even with the strongest development of the social, denominational and inner-ecclesiastical peculiarity.”

Perhaps we can illustrate the religious condition of Germany best by a great biblical parallel. When upon the small people of Israel the great world powers: Babylon, Assyria, Persia, Syria and Egypt rushed in and threatened it with destruction, then this greatest national crisis cast the people upon the religious foundations of its strength. Here the prophets wrought that profound, deep-reaching experience of God, which for all times has constituted the divine mission of the people of Israel to humanity. In this struggle for its existence which has been forced upon it, a struggle against crushing odds, a struggle that according to mere human calculations would be hopeless and without prospects of success, Germany feels itself in a similar desperate condition as Israel in the days of the royal prophet Isaiah. But Germany also is beginning to realize the religious foundations of its strength; Germany is again struggling through to its God; Germany would experience anew God, the living God, great and mighty, and it knows when it has experienced Him, has seen Him, then its soul shall be saved.