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The Relations between State and Religion in Germany in 20–30 years of XX Century: the Experience of Baptist Societies

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The Relations between State and Religion in Germany in 20–30 years of XX Century: the Experience of Baptist Societies

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The consideration of the example of Baptist church in Germany in 20–30 years of XX century with the aim to analyse the relations between state and religion requires speculation of the historical context of this process. Baptism was formed in Germany in the 30th years of XX century. It was pressed and persecuted by the state and Catholic and Lutheran churches that took the leading positions at the time; however, it rooted, spread and gained the important place in the religious life of the society¹. The formation of centralised German state, which occurred in the 70th years of XIX century, resulted in the polarisation of confession influence. In other words, the profession of Catholic and Protestant believes in Germany was separated on the basis of its territory under the condition of Protestant domination. On some territories, the number of Protestant believers amounted to 75%². Thus evangelical Christianity on this territory influenced various spheres of social and political life.

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¹ H. Luckey, *Johann Gerhard Oncken und die Anfänge des deutschen Baptismus*, Kassel 1934, p. 17.

² D. Süß, *Das dritte Reich*, München 2008, p. 120.

The process of German reunification in the 70th years of XIX century and the transformation of it into the strong and centralised Western European state favoured its great economic and social development. German Baptists saw God's blessing in the fact.

After a period of numerous prohibitions, oppressions and persecutions, the loyal attitude of German state to Baptism made its followers support Caesar's domestic and foreign policy. Gradually, German has become the strong state that played an important role in the political life of the universe. That resulted in the fact that Baptists as well as other Christians became proud of themselves.

Soon afterwards, German Baptists became national. According to Dietmar Suess, "German Christians believed themselves to be national and that is why they were responsible for the historic events that happened to their nation. During the World War it was there obligation to become a soldier and to fight supporting the interests of their state"³.

There were two opposite positions in relation to war. On the one hand, there was a belief that "truth is the only duty"; on the other hand, there was a claim to "love the enemies". The most popular mottoes sounded like "you don't have to hate", "never hate people from the opposing camp who attack if it is their duty". The reality was awful as Europe was in fire. There were no reasons for happiness. The question about whether the war comes from God or Devil was frequently set. The answer was that God allowed it⁴.

G. Balders says that German Baptists had their own position when the World War I started. "God is with us, who can be against us". Thus they trusted Caesar and followed him "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's" (Matthew 22:21). Baptists exhorted young soldiers, Baptist believers, to have a special mission in the army. The words they used were that "the life of soldiers is a good life if they can do something for their God"⁵.

Some pastors hoped that war would help in converting people to religion. However, the result was disappointing for Baptist church. Out of 10062 mobilised soldiers who were Baptists, 1451 were killed. The valediction with Caesar was difficult⁶.

The historic events of the following years demonstrated how dangerous the process of nationalisation was for the church. However, at the time, German Protestants as well as Catholics were much impressed by the defeat of German nation in the World War I. Later they lost vigilance and substitute national and material mission for Christian one.

³ Ibidem, p. 132.

⁴ G. Balders, *Ein Herr, ein Glaube, eine Taufe*, Wuppertal-Kassel 1984, p. 72.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 73.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 75.

Moreover, the effect of nationalisation in Christianity can be demonstrated by the historic set of events. The wide analysis of the events of the second part of XIX century is introduced in the works of well-known English scientist, Professor Norman Davies, who says that “religion was mobilised to sanctify the national feelings and build the barriers between ethnic groups. Christian, Protestant and even Roman Catholic churches (including the conflict between the Serbs and Croats) were involved, being driven by the idea to save Lithuanians from Russification and Polish people from Germanification. Welsh Baptist priests were dressed in the Druids while celebrating national holidays. German Gods were depicted on the stages and pages of the books published in Imperial Germany”⁷. In 1916 Oskar Wuttner in his work “About Evangelical Free Church in Germany” wrote that “Baptist church is not only Evangelical, but German”⁸.

Because of the feelings of national belonging Christians were involved in politics. The rapprochement between the state and church occurred at the time of religion and politics’ interrelation and penetration⁹. Erwin Lutzer warns that “we must always remember that God is neither Republican nor Democrat. When the cross is wrapped in the flag of a political party, it is always distorted or diminished. Even for some who have experienced its power, the cross has become an addendum to what is thought to be more pressing agendas”¹⁰. The assignment of the Church is scrupulously scrutinised by Yaroslav Lukasik, who says that the role of the Church is to be the conscience of the nation, society and government as well. If the nation chooses the good way to go, the church should encourage it. If the nation is in troubles, the Church should be its consolation. If the nation does not understand what happens to it, the Church should explain. If the nation is in sin, the Church should upbraid, because “For the priest’s lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts” (Mal. 2:7)¹¹.

Having become national, German Baptists were not able to use the knowledge of Bible in their analysis of the activity of the state concerning the set up of the World War I. Moreover, they could hardly believe the outcome of it. “I believe the union of the church and state is always dangerous for the mission of the church. Either it will change its function and will serve the aim of the state, or the political leaders can use the church in their own interests. Anyhow, the

⁷ N. Dawis, *Yevropa, istoriya (Europe, history)*, Kyiv 2008, p. 842.

⁸ G. Balders, *Ein Herr...*, p. 75.

⁹ D. Süß, *Das dritte Reich*, p. 142.

¹⁰ E. Lutzer, *Krest Hitlera (Hitler’s cross)*, Kyiv 2005, p. 136.

¹¹ Y. Lukasik, *Svitogliadni osnovy ta naukovi dokazy Rozumnogo Zadumu v genezzi zhyttia ta vsesvitu (Views and scientific proves of Rozumny Zadum in genesis of life and universe)*, Bibliynyi standart vidnosyn tserkvy ta derzhavy (Biblical standard of the church and state relations) 5 (2014), p. 183.

purity of the church will become dubious”¹². This truth is going to be proved in the history during the World War II, post soviet epoch and even now. No Christian confession in Russia has criticized the policy of Putin and the invasion. Moreover, the support of the Church makes him believe in his power. The church is to be “the salt [...] and the light [...] of the earth” (Matthew 5:13-14). It can function while being separated from the state and independent in its philosophy.

The revolution of 1918–1919 in Germany put an end to Kaiser’s monarchy. The country was proclaimed a republic. The Weimar Republic adopted a new democratic constitution, which abolished all forms of former dependency of church from state. However, the Weimar Constitution included no articles as to radical separation of church from state. It “guaranteed the church basic rights and freedoms, did not interfere in its property issues and recognized its autonomy and independence as a public corporation”¹³. According to the Constitution articles several German states, namely Bavaria (1924), Prussia (1929) and Baden (1932) concluded church agreements, or concordats, with corresponding churches, which resulted in establishment of state-church relationships in these states. The Weimar Constitution proclaimed a Catholic principle of religious freedom, as opposed to a Baptist one. This was the reason why gradual separation of church from state failed to take place. The adoption of the law authorizing the state to administer church taxes enabled the state to interfere in church affairs or affiliate with certain denominations¹⁴.

Regardless of contradictions and inconsistency of Weimer legislative base, historical sources used by us do not reveal references to significant oppression of Protestants’ rights and freedoms. The Weimar Constitution guaranteed religious freedom to all denominations. It meant that German Baptists could and had to become “light and salt” for the society. In that period, “The Union of German Baptist Communities” proclaimed themselves an absolutely apolitical organization¹⁵. Conversely, a number of Protestants were suspicious about the Republic as the state devoid of God’s legitimacy¹⁶.

The country was facing a hard period after the defeat in the World War I, abolition of monarchy and transition to the republican form of government. The nation was in search of a resolution and required direction. Unfortunately, the German Baptists overlooked their opportunities and did not use the situation to

¹² Y. Lukasik, *Svitogliadni osnovy...*, p. 24.

¹³ D. Süß, *Das dritte Reich*, p. 121.

¹⁴ A. Strübind, M. Rothkegel, *Baptismus. Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Göttingen 2012, p. 225.

¹⁵ G. Balders, *Ein Herr...*, p. 75–76.

¹⁶ M. Rothkegel, *1914–1933: Das baptistische Milieu vom 1. Weltkrieg zur Weimarer Republik. 175 Jahre Baptismus in Deutschland*, Folge 4 (2009), p. 4.

inspire spiritual revival of the nation. Having adopted “national” and “material” perspective, they joined the rest of country’s population in their fight for return of Germany’s lost might and glory. The church failed to show society the true reasons of its deep spiritual crisis that threw the German nation, as well as most of European states, into the bloody whirlpool of the world war, which resulted in the defeat of a flourishing nation, economic collapse and the necessity to face the humiliation of reparations. Although the causes of crisis were to be found inside, they were looked for outside, with Jews or Russian Bolsheviks being proclaimed as enemies.

The crisis did not only spread through the state, but also through church. As G. Balders states, “[...] in the Protestant states and especially in the big cities [...] the church life was marked by growing spiritual decadence. Only 3% of the population attended the service. Emerging bourgeoisie was in opposition to the working class, as middle bourgeoisie was increasingly becoming formally Christian, with people participating in religious practices like christening, confirmation, marriage and funeral”¹⁷.

When it became apparent that the Weimar Republic was not leading Germany to political and economic power, the German society produced strong opposition forces, soon joined by the Baptist Church¹⁸.

“For Evangelical Christians-Baptists”, Cherenkov states, “relationships with any ideologeme were negative [...]. The very connection of faith with a political system and implementation of faith in public order are unacceptable for the Baptist Church. Any triad (for example, church-state-people) encroaches upon freedom of conscience and church independence involving them in the totality of a political system”¹⁹. The author further explains that the hopes of Evangelical Christians-Baptists have to be linked to “the legal, and not sacred, character of the state, to its constitutional obligations instead of dangerous ambitions to unite political and religious forces in the total single power”. The results of close connections between the official church and state are well-known, especially regarding non-state, “non-historical” denominations and religious minorities²⁰.

Balders notes that Baptists armed themselves with a motto “A true Christian is a true patriot”²¹. Without thorough consideration, they adopted Hegel’s

¹⁷ G. Balders, *Ein Herr...*, p. 63–64.

¹⁸ E. Lutzer, *Krest Hitlera...*, p. 134.

¹⁹ M. Chernikov, *Baptizm bez kovychek: Ocherki i diskusii o buduchshem evanhelskih tserkvey (Baptism without quotes: Essays and discussions about the future of Evangelic churches)*, Cherkasy 2012, p. 227.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 228.

²¹ G. Balders, *Ein Herr...*, p. 72.

view that “Germany’s task is to become an instrument in God’s hands in order to deliver the world judgment against our enemies, because they are the spirit of the dark which is hostile to the Kingdom of God”. Herewith, the favourite lines of Baptists that divided the community and the nation were those from Ephesians 4:4-6: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called”²².

Let us acknowledge that in this context the tasks of the state equal those of church and the enemies of the state thus become the enemies of church. The existing conviction “God with us”, i.e. with Germany, and not with its enemies, was totally in line with Protestant war dogma²³. It is therefore clear that in such a position the notions of nation and Christianity are inseparable.

In spite of crisis in Baptism, there were forces inside the church that were attempting to return it to the Biblical basis. The conference of the Baptist Union of Germany, which took place in 1927, was aimed at “opposing Christian outlook to materialism, mammonism, imperialism and militarism”²⁴, as well as enhancing the role of Christian community in the life of society.

Albert Neufs stated in his work *Our Borders (1928)*, “We, German Baptists, are only evangelical and church movement. Social issues, capitalism, industrialisation, pacifism, racism and other issues do not overwhelm us. Even if certain community members are concerned with such issues, they do not impact Baptism as a whole. Where is our dogma? Where is our ethics? What is our influence on the state and church?”²⁵. In 1930, a “Christian politician” Paul Schneider was saying, “Our relationships with the state are tense. We are warned against idolizing the state and the cult of people, we are distanced from it”. In 1933, seven evangelists from Hamburg addressed the church with their understanding of their role, “We will never fully give away our hearts to the state and the people. The community’s duty at all times remains preaching the Word of God and awakening the people for the spiritual revival”²⁶.

In 1930, one of the leaders of German Baptism Paul Schmidt presented his report *The Attitude of the Community to the Current State Life* at the Federal Convention, in which he had thoroughly analysed the state of state-church relationships in the period of deep socio-economic crisis that struck Europe²⁷. The Baptists considered that the way out of the crisis was not in a political domain, but rather in missionary activity; therefore they directed their efforts to

²² Ibidem.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 85.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 84.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 88.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 85.

the social sphere. They established mutual funds and deaconesses' houses that carried out certain social services. Namely, the house of the sisterhood "Martha" was established in Rhine Westphalia as early as 1925. Various activities of assistance in social sphere were carried out. Those were the practical steps of love.

The Baptists were attempting to point to the causes of the crisis in the German society. In one of the issues of *Witnesses of Truth* (1930), they wrote, "Our nation is terrifyingly divided, just like the banks of a troubled river". In the same year, Paul Schmidt stated at the Youth Conference, "The world without God and worship is emerging". The Baptists believed the judgment day was close and time when they could freely preach the Word of God was coming to an end. They saw the main threat in anti-Christian bolshevism in Germany, which was represented by the atheist movement that included around one million members. However, there were few who could notice national socialists who were frantically rushing to power²⁸.

After the Nazi party seized power in Germany in 1933, the German Baptism faced the most tragic period in its history. However, the seizure of power by the Nazi remained virtually unnoticed by the Baptists. They hoped that the new government would not be interfering in their matters, as the Baptist Church was attempting to remain apolitical and was not a state church. The Baptist leaders believed that they would be safe and actively involved in missionary activity²⁹. The establishment of totalitarianism did not cause alarm.

As Dietmar Suess noted, "The clash between Christian churches and National Socialist ideology was unfolding on the background of considerable popular support of foreign policies of the regime. Hitler's revision of the Treaty of Versailles articles, fight against Bolshevik forces »hostile to God«, and finally Anschluss of (Catholic) Austria were part of national traditions of both the Christian churches"³⁰.

Lutzer wrote that after Hitler seized power "the workers got guaranteed employment, healthcare service, paid leaves, and if freedom meant starvation, they would prefer slavery"³¹. "Nationality" of the German Baptists prevented them from being cautious and realising the grave danger of the nationalist ideology.

Understanding the significance and influence of the church upon the society, Hitler started manipulating churches from the first days of his rule. He laid the principle of lies in the basis of the church policy and directed the nation

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 86.

²⁹ H. Buschke und andere, *Der Bund L'vangelisch-Freikirchlicher Gemeinden. Eine Selbstdarstellung*, Wuppertal-Kassel 1992, p. 50.

³⁰ D. Süß, *Das dritte Reich*, p. 131.

³¹ E. Lutzer, *Krest Hitlera...*, p. 41.

towards persecution³². On January 25, 1934 the church leaders were convened by Hitler only to be accused of not supporting his “peace policy”. In response, Himmler explained that he saw welfare of church, state and German people as his goal. Hitler replied to this, “You should only focus on church now whereas I shall take care of German people”³³.

These and other negotiations of church leaders with the Nazi state were regarded by the society as the act of reconciliation and accompanied by church bells³⁴. Hitler was given a blank check and he went on to act.

It is worthwhile to mention Lutzer’s words that, “a powerful state has always been a threat to existence and influence of church. Regardless of the kind of threat – Nazi, communist or humanist – the state, which is hostile towards religion, will always be attempting to push the church to the forced uselessness”³⁵. Therefore, the first steps of the Nazi regime as to control over the church aimed at isolating it from the society was establishment of the state (empire) church. On July 14, 1933 German Evangelical Empire Church was established with Ludwig Muller as its head. “German Christians (*deutsche Christen*)”, as they were called by the people, with massive support by the Nazi got majority everywhere. In September 1933, L. Muller became a Bishop of Empire³⁶. Nevertheless, Hitler failed to unite all Christians, Catholics and Protestants, under the single lead. Remaining healthy forces, though being minority in both churches (Catholic and Protestant), began their resistance to the regime as early as 1934. The church protests found their brightest expression in the encyclical *With Unbearable Care* composed together with the Catholic Church, which stated, “He who [...] deifies race, or people, or state, or a form of state power, perverts or distorts the order of things [...] created by God”³⁷. There were some Protestant activists, namely Waldemar Gurian, Fritz Friedrich, Friedrich Mukkermann, Dietrich Bonheffer, who rose against the Nazi regime. Although those were solitary voices, they would awaken mind and conscience of many German Christians who did not obey the Nazi in the years to come. For example, the Protestants who did not accept the views of “German Christians” separated from the state church during the first Synod that followed its establishment to found the Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*), whose activity was based on the regulations of the German Evangelical Church (*die Deutsche Evangelische Kirche*).

³² Ibidem, p. 147.

³³ Ibidem, p. 167.

³⁴ D. Süß, *Das dritte Reich*, p. 125.

³⁵ E. Lutzer, *Krest Hitlera...*, p. 20.

³⁶ D. Süß, *Das dritte Reich*, p. 125.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 129.

After the failed attempt to subdue all Christians in the country through the established empire church, the Nazi regime resorted to splitting resistant churches. For this purpose, the Brethren Council of Empire was established. It was comprised of 22 members led by Pres Koch. Additionally, the *Reichsminister* of church matters Hans Kehrl organized the Church Commission of the Reich in 1935, which was protested against by the Confessing Church. This opposition led to the Fourth Confessing Synod in Bad Oeyenhausen, in which the split into Lutheran and Dalem branches took place. From 1937, the Confessing Church remained in opposition in the church government, since the key positions were occupied by “German Christians”. As Dietmar Suess states, “The German Christians” strongly insisted on including the paragraph about obligatory holding of the highest church positions only by Arians into the regulations (constitutions) of the land churches. In 1933, this triggered a heated discussion among Protestants about true Evangelical faith. In the following two sessions of the Synod in Barmen (the end of May, 1934) the opposition to “German Christians” was formed. The Dalem branch became the basis of the Confessing Church, which would be severely persecuted by the Nazi³⁸.

The split and division of the Christian churches and denominations, which began in 1933, took place in other German states taking shape of a contagious disease³⁹. By means of Alfred Rosenberg Hitler introduces certain ideological tricks into the Protestant environment (e.g. about “brown cult”, “German faith”, “myths of the XX century”) that were filled with hatred towards Christians and Jews. These myths were accepted by the “German Christians” but strongly rejected by other Christian churches⁴⁰. Party and SS functionaries (Goebbels, Rosenberg, but most of all Bormann, Himmler and Heydrich) put forward the question of radical separation of church from the state for the purpose of its complete isolation. It resulted in the division of Protestants into the “German Christians”, who supported the regime, Luther’s Council, which was loyal to the power, and the Confessing Church, which was in the opposition. The separated Christians failed to produce single view on the National Socialism and consequently organize strong resistance to the godless and inhumane ideology. Dietmar Suess wrote on this account, “The official protest remained the matter of few bishops, primarily those of Catholic minority. It proved impossible for the Christianity divided by faith to develop efficient inter-denominational positions”⁴¹. Christian churches did not protest against persecution of the Jews,

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 127.

³⁹ Ibidem.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 128.

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 143.

namely, the boycott of the Jewish stores in April of 1933, *Nurnberg Race Laws* and mass pogroms in November of 1938⁴².

Although in 1934–1936 Hitler feared the protests of the church and did not resort to radical measures, but from 1937 he declared war on the resistant Christians. The Confessing Christians who openly and bravely demonstrated their position against the deportation of Jews, euthanasia and concentration camps were persecuted by the government, namely prevented from church service, prohibited from delivering sermons and speeches, incarcerated by Gestapo and sent to concentration camps. Hitler and the Nazi, in particular Alfred Rosenberg, who was “Fuhrer’s Commissar for Supervision of Intellectual and Ideological Education of the NSDAP” (1934–1945), attempted to prevent the church “dangerous for the power” from acting by means of threats, intimidation and denunciation. This policy resulted in the Baptist Church losing a half of 275 churches before the beginning of the war. The east of the country saw the demolition of all church buildings. The Baptist Theological Seminary in Hamburg lay in ruins. The publishing company and typography in Kassel were completely destroyed. Thousands of members of the Baptist Church were mobilized to regular army, the most active ones sent to concentration camps. Having dealt with the church that was not willing to compromise, the world was unremittently approaching the World War II.

The question to be posed is why the Christian church and the Baptist Church in particular did not become “salt and light” to the German society and failed to prevent those bloody events that were unfolding on the world scene in 1940s.

It can be inferred from the above written that:

1. Giving preference to material over spiritual, national over commonly human leaves the church lifeless and incapable of functioning in the society.

2. The fear of the external enemy (Soviet bolshevism) prevented from seeing the internal enemy (German fascism), which gravely affected the church from the inside. Paul Schmidt wrote, “On the left from the church the front of open and brutal godlessness is being formed whereas on the right the deification of state, race and blood is paving the road. If the lefts want to destroy Christianity, the rights want to subdue it. Both of them are dangerous for the church”⁴³.

3. Inner church conflicts, denominational division and withdrawing from Biblical principles (regarding the attitude towards the state in this case) enable the state to subdue the weaker ones and destroy the minority of rebellious ones.

Today, the events are unfolding according to the same scenario. Will the church be capable of fulfilling its mission?

⁴² Ibidem, p. 131.

⁴³ P. Schmidt, *Wahrheitszeugen*, Kassel 1934, p. 229.

STOSUNKI POMIĘDZY PAŃSTWEM A RELIGIĄ W NIEMCZECH
W LATACH DWUDZIESTYCH I TRZYDZIESTYCH XX W.:
DOŚWIADCZENIA KOŚCIOŁA CHRZEŚCIJAN BAPTYSTÓW

(STRESZCZENIE)

Autor analizuje relacje pomiędzy państwem a religią w Niemczech w latach dwudziestych i trzydziestych XX w. na przykładzie doświadczeń Kościoła Chrześcijan Baptystów. Wskazane zostają również przyczyny oraz konsekwencje dostosowywania się Kościoła Chrześcijan Baptystów do zasad obowiązujących w obrębie dwóch różnych i istniejących po sobie porządków politycznych: Republiki Weimarskiej i Trzeciej Rzeszy.

THE RELATIONS BETWEEN STATE AND RELIGION IN GERMANY
IN 20–30 YEARS OF XX CENTURY:
THE EXPERIENCE OF BAPTIST SOCIETIES

(SUMMARY)

This article analyses the relations between state and religion in Germany in 20–30 years of XX century using the example of Baptist societies. They also discussed the causes and consequences of Biblical principle deviation in formation of the relations between two types of states: the Weimar republic and Nazi regime.

STAATLICH-KIRCHLICHE BEZIEHUNGEN IN DEUTSCHLAND IN DEN
ZWANZIGER UND DREISSIGER JAHREN DES 20. JAHRHUNDERTS:
ERFAHRUNGEN DER BAPTISTISCHEN GEMEINDEN

(ZUSAMMENFASSUNG)

Im Artikel werden staatlich-kirchliche Beziehungen in Deutschland in den zwanziger und dreißiger Jahren des 20. Jahrhunderts auf Grund der baptistischen Gemeinden analysiert. Es werden auch die Ursachen und Ergebnisse der Abweichungen von den biblischen Grundsätzen beim Aufbau dieser Beziehungen mit den zwei Staatstypen der Weimarer Republik und mit dem Nazi-Regime genannt.