

Looking at the past and present activity in German theological thought, men often ask, What is the influence of Christianity upon the masses? Is the supply of that vast theological literature to be attributed to a demand on the part of the common people? The answer will, however, appear less strange if we keep in mind what that influence has been in the past.

The Reformation was preëminently a popular one. When the Emperor and the Pope rejected Luther's cause his only remaining prop was the people, so that in the rulers and subjects of the petty States, whose interests clashed with those of the Emperor, the new creed found its strongest supporters. And when Luther's labors in the Wartburg had placed the Sword of the Spirit in the hands of the people, no earthly power could hinder them from embracing the new faith as their own.

That religion was the controlling motive of that age admits of no question. Until far into the seventeenth century it was the province of all, from the prince to the beggar, to enquire and to know in whom they believed, and to make their life conform to their belief. In the household the Bible and hymn-book were first and last—the surest guide in all critical periods of life, the strongest staff in the paths of sorrow and death. In the schools no higher science was known than the creed of the Fathers. In public affairs the ideal of those who favor the close connection between Church and State was realized in the purifying and Christianizing influence of the Church upon the State. Not a few rulers were known to have found time, amidst their many duties, to read the Bible through; fifty and sixty times. In short, faith was the rule in all relations of life, private and public.

To this period of the Gospel's power and purity succeeded one of dead orthodoxy—the middle ages of German Protestantism. House and school, Church and State, literature and art were all under the sway of an orthodoxy in which the new birth was rarely present. Christianity and worldliness stood side by side. The churches, indeed, were filled, but mainly with sleeping worshippers, and a church in Arnstadt actually found it necessary to appoint a special officer to keep the drowsy ones awake.

Then there arose, in contrast to the ossified doctrine and secularized life of the Church, the movement of Pietism. It made pure religion consist in the personal life alone; it taught men to love not the world. But it erred in being too legal and external, and in time gave place to Rationalism. This system made the intellect supreme and the measure of all truth; it attained its fullest growth at the beginning of this century, so that many of the generation now passing away have spent their youth and early manhood under its blighting influence. Religion in the life of the people then experienced its deepest decline. The churches were emptied and the theatres filled, for nothing but the skill of the speaker could draw hearers to the preaching of the Word. Hymns, usually witnessing for the truth when all other voices were silent, were altered to suit the times. To find a believing Christian was difficult; to find one who lived near Christ almost impossible. The German citizen of the olden time, who aspired to be a father of a family with a spotless name, a member of a respectable trade or profession, an inhabitant of a town whose joys and sorrows he shared, and, above all, a good Christian, had at this time subordinated everything to the greed of gain, wanting even the time to think of God.

A turning point in this evil tide came when the wars of freedom woke to life men's deepest longings, and produced a spirit of religious earnestness.