The Religio-political Functions of the Present-day 'Kirchentags' in West-Germany in the Context of Post-modern Societies.

Summary

The following article analyzes a social phenomenon, which has considerable influence in- and outside the church in West Germany: the Protestant (and partly the Catholic) 'Kirchentag' ('church-gathering'). The theoretical background of the analysis is the discussion of whether and to what extent modern societies are indeed secularized ones. The Kirchentag serves as a forum where the participants try to interrelate spirituality with socio-political responsibility. They are highly interested in fundamental questions concerning the future of nature and mankind but they are by no means fundamentalists — quite the contrary. The findings demand for a more careful handling of the thesis of secularization, which sometimes seems to serve more as a legitimation of certain theological demands than as a description of social reality at a sociological level. They are an invitation to reflect on the theological criteria which we use when we define ourselves as 'secularized'.

1. The Scientific Focus of the Problem

'Secularization', in the sociological literature of the German-speaking countries after 1945, has been viewed from two perspectives. One approach understands 'secularization' as a process through which people become 'unchurched'. It mainly focuses on the manifest, religious behaviour in which the members of both Christian churches (Protestant and Roman Catholic) participate. The other perspective, which can be described as being more interested in aspects of the sociology of knowledge, treats the subject under the aspect of 'problems of transcendence-oriented consciousness and orientation in (post-)modern societies'. Both perspectives so far have been maintained in a nearly parallel and non-integrated way and both have been subjected to criticism.

On the one hand it is argued that the approach, which stresses the institutional and/or organisational perspective of membership, reduces the problem of 'secularization' to a question of minor importance of ecclesiastically institutio-
nalized claims, but at the same time interprets this (obviously existing) development of church-membership — so to say 'officially' — as a general loss of religious substance in social life.

On the other hand: the approach which mainly considers perspectives of the sociology of knowledge, is in strong need of a concept for empirical validation of its theoretical design; there are no solid, proven empirical data. The contributions of Luckmann and Daiber to the CISR-Meeting of Tübingen may illustrate the different focuses of the problem. This discrepancy (which exists at least in the German speaking countries) in the scientific analysis of 'secularization' is generally not denied. It has often been criticized but without any convincing concepts which are suitable for empirical research.

One reason for this lack of integration of the two perspectives on a solid empirical basis may be due to the fact that — at least in West Germany — both major Christian churches as well as their theologies still exert great influence on the process of formulating concepts concerning transcendence, both in society as a whole and in the scientific field. In fact it is difficult to find empirical equivalents for an institutionally and dogmatically defined 'independent religiosity', which is substantially and dogmatically stabilized and needs not be understood merely as an internal opposition to the way in which the traditional Christian churches deal with the problems of, for example, societal transcendence and contingency.

On the other hand, every-day experience makes it clear that there is a 'social reconstruction of the transcendent' (Luckmann), which is — at least partly — independent of theologically pre-defined codes and patterns of interpretation, though perhaps not independent of Christian heritage.

Within this scientific as well as social context of problems we shall now describe and interpret functionally an empirical phenomenon which is not only a matter of interest to public opinion in Germany, but which also seems to have considerable influence in- and outside the church: the Protestant (and partly Catholic) 'Kirchentag' (church-gathering). This event takes place every other year and lasts for about four days. Since 1975 there has been a growing number especially of young participants: in 1985, for example, when the Kirchentag was held at Düsseldorf, about 130,000 people came to this meeting; the theme of which was... 'The Earth is the Lord’s'. 140,000 came to Frankfurt in 1987, where the catchword was 'Behold the man'. In order to give a further brief description we point to the fact that the official program of this recent meeting comprised about 3,700 functions — services, Lord's suppers and bible studies, occasions for pastoral care, meditation and silence, as well as lectures, discourses and discussions about socio-political issues.

Though conceived and organized in the social context and with the financial support of the official church, the 'Kirchentag' offers elements of communication