THE BIBLE IN PROTESTANT RELIGIOUS LIFE IN GERMANY

A Comparison of Some Results of Research in West and East Germany

Summary

In this study, Bible-piety is understood as a phenomenon that includes several different aspects: Bible-piety as a diffused relationship to the Bible which is integrated into the cultural background; Bible piety associated with special biographical events (baptism, wedding, funeral ceremonies); and Bible piety as a strong and personal relationship to a regular and sometimes ritualized practice of Bible-reading. The research-work is based on various surveys done during the Eighties and Nineties. Aspects of Bible piety will be described with reference to a social and religious situation which has been very different in East and West Germany.

1. Preliminary remarks concerning theory and method

1.1. Aspects of Bible use and reference

Within the framework of the Protestant tradition, devotion to the Bible as a form of religious life enjoys a particularly high value judgment, and this as a matter of principle. In the Catholic church, recent decades have been marked by growing interest in this view. Bible devoutness represents an attitude or more specifically, a form of behaviour that is practised individually, but is dependent at the same time on social premises and a social framework. At the same time, the latter serves to support biblical piety with a degree of plausibility. Different views of the Bible and different ways of using it are therefore part and parcel of interdependent social structures. This means that any more concrete expression of such views is also dependent on the totality of social and cultural factors. The present study is based on a concept of biblical piety which includes a great variety of religious orientations and developments, that is:
- a form of biblical piety that is interwoven with the cultural context, which expresses itself above all in positive attitudes and views relating to the Bible, and less frequently on the subject of how the Bible is to be used in practice,

- a form relating to the crises and transitional phases of life, one that gains particular significance as a way of seeking comfort from the Bible; this is, as a rule, a form of piety that is based on the reading and digesting of particular biblical passages,

- a form, finally, that makes regular use of the Bible to express itself; for this purpose it makes frequent use of traditional and, to some extent, of ritualized patterns (e.g. Bible readings as part of family prayers, or of meditative exercises to further the individual’s devotions).

Within the limits of this enquiry we have not examined the rather syncretistically orientated forms of spiritual practice, such as the placing of the Bible, as the central feature of the Christian tradition, inside a framework of political action (cf. South American basic communities) or within the spiritual practices of a new religious movement.

1.2. Method

In 1991 the pastoral-sociological office of the regional Evangelical church published a study relating to Bible use and reference in Germany (Daiber et. al. 1991). It was based on a number of empirical examinations which were carried out in 1981 and 1987 on the former territory of the Federal Republic. The results which are cited below go back to a repeat-survey that was carried out in the spring of 1992. They have been complemented by a survey commissioned by the German Bible Society in connection with ‘the Bible Year’ and carried out in December 1992 and January 1993. As West and East Germany had meanwhile become united, it was possible to include the territory of the former GDR in this survey. The field work was done in both cases, as previously in the examinations on the subject of Bible Use and Reference, by the Emnid Institute in Bielefeld.

2. The church and religion in West and East Germany

Following the Second World War, the social situation in West Germany was marked decisively by a taking up (or resumption) of Christian traditions, also of traditions of Catholic provenance in particular. The 50’s and early 60’s therefore, represented a relatively secure and stable phase for the church. In his ‘Rückblick auf den Trend der letzten zwanzig Jahre’ (Review of Trends