LIBERAL QUEST FOR RELIGIOUS MODERNITY: MAX KLINGER’S “CRUCIFIXION” AND FRIEDRICH NAUMANN’S “LETTERS ON RELIGION”

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Introduction

Immediately after World War I, the Protestant Churches in Germany suffered their first significant wave of membership resignations. While in 1913, the year with highest number of resignations before the war, 29,255 members left their Protestant Churches in Germany; it was 313,995 in 1920 and 201,500 in 1926.¹ This increase was symptomatic of the end of the imperial state church after the abdication of Emperor Wilhelm II. However, the emerging ecclesiastical situation was, at the same time, the result of a longer preceding development. Can one recognize inner-religious changes in the late nineteenth century that helped to build a disposition for the abrupt decline of church membership after 1918? Are there facets in religious literature and art as two major forms of self-presentation in German Protestantism of the late 19th century that can be understood as symptoms of such changes? This essay argues that this, in fact, is true, and that it was especially the quest of Liberal Protestantism of that time for a renewed understanding of the meaning of the Christian religion, which led to a surrender of traditional Christian positions among contemporary Protestants and the subsequent increase in a wider public’s alienation from the institutionalized Protestant Church in Wilhelmine Germany.

¹ Cf. J.-Chr. Kaiser, Arbeiterbewegung und organisierte Religionskritik: Proletarische Friedensverbände in Kaiserreich und Weimarer Republik [Industrielle Welt 32] (Stuttgart 1981), 352. I would like to thank Dr. Renate Hartleb, Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig, Dr. Felix Billeter, and Mrs. Susanne Kröner, Stadtarchiv Naumburg, for their help in obtaining the material for this paper. I am also indebted to Dr. Glenn Sandburg, Blanche and Irving Laurie Music Library, Rutgers University, for his support and criticism. All abbreviations in this essay follow S. Schwertner, International glossary of abbreviations for theology and related subjects (2nd ed.) (Berlin/New York 1992).
In order to show this, I have chosen two examples of Protestant art and literature, Max Klinger's 1890-finished monumental painting "The Crucifixion" and Friedrich Naumann's "Letters on Religion" from 1903. Regarding Naumann, we know that he valued Klinger's depictions of Jesus in general as appropriate attempts to come to terms with the psychological meaning of the Christian religion. It seems natural, therefore, to study a painting like Klinger's "Crucifixion" on the background of the theological reflections of Naumann's "Letters", which represent, as we will see, a peak in Naumann's theological development and a landmark in the history of liberal Protestantism in Germany.

Both, Naumann's "Letters" and Klinger's "Crucifixion", reveal an extensive presentation of traditional Christian subjects and suggest new ways of finding their relevance in the Wilhelmine world: Klinger's painting delineated Jesus' execution in a way that was processed for a contemporary modern understanding, while Naumann's booklet discussed the possibility of Christian political ethics in Imperial society. Consequently, a large part of the contemporary criticism praised both works as sincere contributions toward a modern religion. Yet, both works also endured blame for profaning originally religious positions. More recently, both works have likewise been interpreted in

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5 Regarding Klinger cf. i.a. F.H. Meissner, Max Klinger: Radierungen, Zeichnungen, Bilder und Skulpturen (München 1914), XXXII, H. Schulz, Max Klinger als religiöser