Scholar Between Worlds: Adolf von Harnack and the Weimar Republic

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Among the relative handful of the intellectual elite of post-World War I Germany who pledged their active allegiance to the Weimar Republic, none enjoyed the national and international prestige of the Protestant Church historian at the University of Berlin, Adolf von Harnack. From the death of Theodor Mommsen in 1903 until his own passing in 1930, Harnack was the acknowledged leader of the German academic community and its most honored member. At the time of his death, the Deutsche全明星e Zeitung wrote: "In Adolf von Harnack... ist vielleicht der letzte deutsche Universalgelehrte dahingegangen."1 Walter Goetz, writing in 1936, eloquently described Harnack’s standing among his colleagues:

"Er war der erste Gelehrte seines Faches, aber zugleich ein Mann von universaler Anschauung, in Theologie und Geschichte ein Meister, für alles andere scharfblickend aufgeschlossen, ebenso gewissenhaft wie bescheiden, von tiefer Menschlichkeit, die aus echter Frömmigkeit und Menschenliebe kam. Schon damit überragt er die meisten seiner Kollegen um Hauptsänge... Harnack war Repräsentant der deutschen Wissenschaft in jenem höheren Sinne, der von Fichte und Humboldt herkam; er verkörperte das Seinsollen; und es war kein Wunder, wenn er bei seinen Vorträgen im Ausland eine Bewunderung für die deutsche Wissenschaft und den deutschen Professor erweckte, wie sie schon damals nicht mehr ganz berechtigt war."2

In one sense it was paradoxical that a church historian should be recognized as the model of the highly-touted, sophisticated German Wissenschaft in an age when the importance of religion in life had seriously declined. However, Harnack’s reputation as a scholar was built precisely upon a combination of incredible productivity and meticulous scholarship whereby he rescued theology as a scholarly discipline from the premature obsolescence to which it had been consigned.

1 Karl Ludwig Schmidt: Zum Tode Harnacks, Theologische Blätter Nr. 40, IX (1930), 170. The author has compiled excerpts from various newspaper’s accounts of the death of Harnack.
In the 1870's and 1880's, when Harnack stood on the threshold of his career as a theologian, the opposition to organized religion as well as to Christian principles had mounted a formidable offensive. Nietzsche and Overbeck in Basel were only the most articulate of those who anticipated the imminent disappearance of religion from modern life. Indeed, young men were dissuaded from choosing careers in theological scholarship because of its impending bankruptcy at German universities. In any case, the times seemed singularly unpropitious for the success of Harnack's plans.

Harnack, however, refused to be overcome by the pervasive pall of gloom. On the contrary, he devoted his life and work to proving that scholarship and theology could be harmonized as a foundation for a more meaningful existence both for himself and for his fellow man. At the end of this career, Harnack was able to look back over several decades of accomplishment which had contributed to the reversal of the trend and to the fulfillment of his goal. Theology had gained a new respectability, particularly among the educated classes, and its place in the university curriculum had become more securely established. Young men with inclinations toward theological study had gained new confidence in the worthiness of their pursuit. Thus, by 1930, a generation of theologians, whether liberal or conservative, Protestant or Catholic, had come to feel a deep sense of gratitude to Harnack for the prestige he had given the discipline.

Harnack first attracted attention as a scholar in 1875 with the publication of the edited writings of the Apostolic Fathers which he and a friend, Oskar von Gebhardt, had completed while both were young lecturers at Leipzig. A year later the energetic scholar collaborated with another friend and budding theologian, Emil Schürer, to found and edit a scholarly journal, the Theologische Literaturzeitung, soon to be recognized as the official organ of the new historical theology. One year later, Harnack assumed full responsibility for the project, a responsibility which he faithfully and brilliantly discharged until 1910. By the end of 1878 Harnack already had over 90 publications to his credit, although he was not yet thirty years of age.

4 Karl Mülle: Aus der akademischen Arbeiter, Tübingen 1930, 43—44.
5 Agnes von Zahn-Harnack: Adolf von Harnack, Berlin: 1936, 84. This biography by Harnack's daughter is both a masterpiece of historical narrative and a mine of information. Harnack's complete papers were utilized in an effort to allow the subject to speak as much for himself as possible. This author found the volume the best single source available. Harnack was overjoyed at the approval which his work found among various recognized scholars, especially the English theologian, Lightfoot. Letter to Moritz Engelhardt; November, 1875.
6 Ibid., 85.
7 Ibid., 89.