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A CHAPLAIN'S CONTACTS WITH EUROPEAN PROTESTANTISM

THE title of this article makes it clear that no general or detailed survey is being undertaken. Having regard, however, to the absence of information and the chaos caused by the War it is felt that first-hand information, though seriously limited in scope, will be welcomed by readers of *THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY*.

With regard to Italy, it must be remembered that about 1 per cent. of the population is Protestant, yet many denominations are represented. Of prime importance is the native Waldensian Church, which has congregations in most of the large towns and a theological seminary in Rome. There are Baptist churches in some towns which maintain a very faithful witness to the Word. Methodist churches are found in the large towns and in some villages from Palermo at the extremity of Sicily to Trieste on the Yugoslav border. The Salvation Army is restarting its work in Milan and some other cities and there are a few Brethren assemblies and other independent bodies. There is at least one assembly in the south commenced by British soldiers but with their departure it is now entirely Italian and functioning well. Erroneous Protestant sects such as the Seventh Day Adventists are also comparatively strong. There is also the famous Spezia Mission which is independent of denominational attachment. Its institutional and out-station work is very impressive and it employs native and British ministers. This mission has found favour with the authorities and the workers are seeing very definite results.

The influence of the Protestant Church is out of all proportion to its size, although officially it is usually ignored. In the Abruzzi country there is a vigorous Methodist church of nearly three hundred members, centred in a large village. Here, where we are making headway, opposition has been quite serious—not because the people are against us, but at the deliberate instigation of the priests. Twice to my knowledge open-air meetings have been suspended in Naples by the authorities. These meetings have been organised by British and American troops for servicemen, but in order to reach the

Italians who gather round messages in Italian have been delivered. Priests have stimulated the opposition and the authorities have suspended the meetings. So much for the much publicised "Five Freedoms".

It was the writer's privilege to preach to a crowded working-class congregation in one of the Genoese Methodist churches, about a hundred people being present. There is a number of healthy Methodist societies in such places as Rome, Florence, Milan, Trieste, etc. The difficulty of Methodism in Italy is the finding and training of pastors. There is no college, and devotional and theological literature in Italian is practically non-existent. No agreement with the Waldensian Church has been effected as yet. The section of the Italian Church under the British Conference is sending its ordinands to Great Britain for college training. There are some signs of worldliness and worldly methods being adopted in some of the Methodist churches, but others, for example the Florence congregation, seem sound in the Scriptures and bold for the Lord in face of considerable persecution.

The Waldensian Church has a wonderful history of faithfulness and suffering behind it. Though traditionally and geographically its home is in North Italy it even has influential congregations in Catania and Syracuse in Sicily. The pastor of the church in Catania is also editor of the chief daily paper of that city. In Milan a vigorous sermon was heard preached by the Waldensian pastor to a considerable congregation. The people themselves appeared to be a good cross section of the community including a goodly proportion of the cultured and business classes. The pastor preached from Acts xxiv. 25, and one was really conscious of the Spirit, although from our point of view, "righteousness, temperance and judgment" were not very closely applied to the congregation. The preacher concluded very solemnly with the words: "Today, if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts."

In conversation with some Waldensian Christians the writer was informed that several of the younger pastors have been strongly influenced by Karl Barth; and modernism is definitely present. The writer preached to part of this congregation and found himself receiving a comment common in the home land. His hearers expressed appreciation of the public preaching of the Cross of Christ and complained of a general dearth of such

a ministry! So the situation among the Protestants of Italy is not absolutely dissimilar to that in our own land.

In Austria one found that the Methodist Church is thoroughly sound, evangelical and loyal to the Word. It was a great joy to be able to preach to an overflowing congregation (by interpretation) and a prayer and testimony meeting followed which was a true reflection of the keenness and intensity of these humble believers. At another service a number of new members were received—each one giving his testimony before the assembly. There are about half a dozen Methodist churches in Vienna. Some have lost their meeting places due to the war, but although none have large premises a vigorous work is being carried on. Their weekday Bible classes are well attended and follow the question and answer method. There is a training home for deaconesses in the suburb of Pötzleinsdorf and these godly women do a wonderful work among the poor, and they also help to supply the serious lack of pastors. In Vienna there is a Methodist Church for the Czech-speaking people. At Graz a vigorous Methodist Church also caters for our occupation troops, and the military non-Anglican service is held there. In Vienna Brethren and Baptists are united¹ and use a large modern building having a regular congregation of over four hundred under a scholarly pastor. The Lutheran Church is stronger than the others numerically, but appears to have little spiritual influence. The four-hundredth anniversary of Luther was celebrated by liturgical and choral services, but it does not seem to have been an occasion for evangelical witness. There are also one or two lesser and independent bodies represented in the evangelical life of Vienna but no actual contact was made. Both American and British military personnel have been used to present the Gospel to civilians and there are known cases of conversions during the last year. Careful instruction is given and every attempt made to link the converts with the local church.

Czechoslovakia has also a vigorous Protestant minority and in visiting Bohemia one is constantly reminded of the fact that in the seventeenth century the Protestants were in the majority. The moral, spiritual and cultural loss to this country by the removal of many of its best people after the battle of Whitehill (1620) and the coming of the Hapsburgs bringing Romanism

¹ As also now in Germany and the Soviet Union.

again, must have been immense. However the Union Church of the Czech Brethren (Lutheran and Reformed) on the basis of the ancient Augsburg confession is a very hopeful sign. The writer had an interview with the leader of the Youth Department of this Church. He spoke of the steady witness which is being maintained. During the Hitler régime the young people's classes had huge attendances as so many other Y.P. organisations were banned. Many Y.P. heard the gospel and some of these assemblies in Prague are overflowing their halls.

The Methodists have four or five flourishing churches in the capital and they include a considerable number of weekday activities in their programme. They have some very keen young pastors and appear to be working along thoroughly sound lines. The Y.M.C.A. is doing evangelical work running a hostel and Bible classes chiefly for students, in fact the officials are in close touch with all the evangelical witness in the area, a very happy contrast with some of our Y.M.'s at home. There is a Protestant theological college in Prague¹ but pressure of engagements and the huge May Day celebrations prevented any direct contact with this institution and its staff.

Thus during the chaplaincy work of the writer, he has been enabled to see a little of the evangelical witness in these three non-Protestant countries. One is impressed by the faithful witness under grave disabilities. One is also deeply impressed by the Romanist masses largely untouched by evangelical witness. It is very grieving to realise that regulations hinder and certainly discourage any aggressive activities on the part of our European brethren. Yet the presence of British troops in Italy and Austria has given opportunities for Roman Catholic people to get into touch with Protestantism and to learn of our doctrines. Political tendencies are weakening the grip of the Roman Church on the masses. There are other forces at work too. Our stock is high. Our influence is much greater than the size of our occupation army would suggest. It is unlikely that British prestige will be greater in the coming years. Now is the time to act with every available resource for the evangelisation of these nations. Prayer and effort must be more than redoubled. Our support of these evangelical brethren must be more informed, intelligent and active. They look to us almost pathetically.

¹ The Jan Hus Faculty of Evangelical Theology, to which Professor J. B. Souček, who contributed to our last number, belongs.

They have suffered much. Around them great schemes of rehabilitation and reordering are being engendered. It is essential that we should realise our responsibility to take the Gospel to Central Europe. Let us see to it that we prosecute vigorously our divine commission, trusting our Lord and Saviour.

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