

Catholic Encyclopedia (1913) — Ludwig Windthorst

Martin Spahn



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Born near Osnabruck, 17 January, 1812; died 14 March, 1891. He came from a family of lawyers of Lower Saxony. As a pupil at the gymnasium he was industrious, shrewd and cautious, quiet, not carried away by the tendencies of his time, and these qualities he retained throughout life. He studied at Gottingen and Heidelberg, and in 1836 established himself as a lawyer at Osnabruck and soon married. There his professional ability and his attitude in religion won him the confidence of the Catholic clergy. In 1842, at their instance, the sovereign, the King of Hanover, appointed him president of the Catholic state board of Hanover for churches and schools. In this office Windthorst gained a knowledge of the great difficulties existing in Germany between nearly all the governments and their Catholic subjects. By the enactment of the Imperial Delegates of 1803, the great majority of German Catholics, who until then had generally enjoyed spiritual autonomy were made subjects of Protestant states. The Catholics had little interest in the rulers thus forced upon them; the governments were not accustomed to a policy compatible with the rights and freedom of the Catholic Church. Thorough knowledge of the subject and tactful caution were necessary before a reconciliation could be brought about. Owing to the efforts of Windthorst, such an adjustment was made in Hanover, while the tension in several other German states grew continually greater, and finally led to the

Kulturkampf. Windthorst's official experience especially impressed upon him the great importance to the future of Catholicism in Germany of a legal adjustment of the relations between the Church and the state schools.

In 1848, when the Revolution in Germany led to the restoration of the Hanoverian Constitution, which the king had annulled in 1837, Windthorst was elected a member of the Diet. This brought him into the career for which he had the most talent, and supplied him with the interests which thenceforward were most completely to occupy him. He at once developed great skill in the debate and a decided talent for bringing others into organization under his own leadership. He devoted himself to solving two problems which at that era were of the most importance for all German statesmen:

- After getting rid of absolutism and bureaucracy, how, and how far, were the people to share in legislation and administration?
- How could a national confederation be founded in which the unity of the German nation might attain politically powerful expression?

In his efforts to solve the former question Windthorst held in general with the moderate Liberals; to bring about a national confederation he joined the Great German Party (see GERMANY), without, however, disputing the claim

that the lead in economic and commercial policy as well as some other prerogatives should be conceded to Prussia. He soon attained such importance in the Hanoverian Diet that in the spring of 1851 he was elected president of that chamber — an honour that had fallen to no other Catholic of Hanover — and in November, 1851, was appointed minister of justice. He was minister only for a short period, as he did not consider the king's policy strictly constitutional. At the close of 1853 he returned to parliamentary life. In 1862 the king again summoned him to the ministry, where he remained until 1865. Up to this period Windthorst's activities and reputation had been limited to Hanover. In 1866 Hanover became a Prussian province, and in 1867 the North German Confederation was founded. This gave Windthorst the opportunity to acquire not only national, but also international fame. From 1867 he was a member both of the Reichstag and of the Prussian Landtag. By 1874 he had gained for himself in both of these bodies a very prominent position. He was at first a member of no party, but when, in 1868, deputies from Southern Germany appeared for the first time in the Reichstag, for the discussion of economic questions, Windthorst collected those deputies who did not hold with the National Liberals and combined them so skilfully with the particularist Hanoverians, Prussians, and Saxons that the combination was unexpectedly able to defeat a National Liberal bill designed to secure the intervention of the South-German deputies in all national affairs. This majority was a prelude to the organization of the Centre Party under Windthorst's

guidance. Windthorst did not found that party, neither did he assume its leadership at once. For although the Centre was formed as a purely political party with a definite constitutional, social, and ecclesiastico-political programme, still it should be taken into consideration that, at the close of 1870, it was largely made up of Catholics. Windthorst, from the beginning of his career, had performed the greatest services for the Catholic cause in Hanover, and had always been a loyal Catholic, but as a leader, he had not the reputation of Mallinckrodt and Reichensperger, because he had never taken an active part in the ecclesiastical and ecclesiastico-political movement among German Catholics. Now, however, he began to take part regularly in Catholic Congresses, where he soon became the orator for the final address, which he made famous. The outbreak of the Kulturkampf in Prussia gave him a splendid opportunity to show himself the champion of the Church in Parliament.

When Mallinckrodt died in 1874, Windthorst was proclaimed leader both of the Centre Party and of the German Catholics. In another direction, too, the years 1867-74 were decisive for him. As early as the fifties Bismarck and he were not in accord politically. The division between the two men was continually deepened by the course of events: in 1866 Bismarck excluded Austria from Germany and annexed Hanover; in 1868 he made an agreement with Windthorst concerning the restitution of the King of Hanover's private fortune, a contract which, however, Bismarck refused to carry out. In 1867 Windthorst had

indirectly opposed Bismarck in the Zollparlament, by forming a majority against the National Liberals. Bismarck's anger reached its height when Windthorst joined the Centre Party. Bismarck said that this party would maintain itself independently of him and would incessantly push their constitutional demands. The chancellor could not tolerate any rival to his own importance, neither was he really a friend of parliamentary government. He attacked the Church all the more violently, therefore, in the Kulturkampf, because it was defended by a strong and independent popular party (see KULTURKAMPF). On the other hand, Windthorst acted in harmony with his political past when he sought to make it plain that he opposed the Kulturkampf measures not merely as an infringement with Prussian constitutional rights in particular and the political convictions of the age in general. As the leader of the Centre, and in full agreement with it, he interested himself for all the rights and liberties of the German people, whenever these liberties were disregarded by the Government or the Police, or were limited by legislation; his efforts, on the contrary, were rather for their enlargement. He was not afraid to let his party wear out Bismarck with constant opposition, so that the chancellor might the sooner be ready to abandon the Kulturkampf.

At the same time Windthorst was on the alert to secure a position for his party which should offer better prospects than that into which it has been forced from the beginning. For in ecclesiastico-political questions the Centre was then

condemned to occupy the position of an isolated minority, because of the peculiarly obstinate sectarian antipathy to Catholics in Germany. The masses showed very little direct interest in the second article of the Centrist programme — the defence of the federal character of the empire, which was threatened by the Liberals. No matter what the Centre might do to prove its soundness in constitutional questions, the Liberals still remained, for the mass of the people, the party which had first begun the struggle against absolutism. As new political undertakings, there now offered themselves the increasing free-trade tendency of the nation and the need of a comprehensive labour policy. Sooner than the leaders of the other parties Windthorst comprehended that these problems were quickly assuming an absorbing interest for the German people, and by the end of 1876 he occupied himself zealously with them. The victory was his. In 1879 the Centre turned the scale for the introduction of a protective tariff, and formed the controlling spirit of the parties by the aid of which the government was able, after 1880, to pass the workingmen's insurance laws, and later the laws for the protection of workingmen. From a minority continually in opposition it became an active, influential part of the majority. The political character of the Centre Party received its final cast in its economic and socio-political labours. Windthorst, repeatedly maintained this character of the party against the misconception formed of it by the papal Curia — a misconception due to incorrect knowledge of the facts, and which saw in the Centre a Catholic party somewhat like that in Belgium. Nor did

politics prevent the Centre from repeatedly giving its attention to the interests of the Church. It was the influence which it attained during the eighties in the entire political life of Germany, in addition to reasons of foreign policy, that obliged Bismarck to abandon the Kulturkampf. Windthorst felt keenly chagrined that he was not able at the same time to secure the passage of laws settling the share of the Church in the Prussian common schools. The struggle over the Christian spirit in the schools had to be left to the future.

As recompense for all this he had the satisfaction that his party grew constantly more willing to accept his political views and methods. In order to make certain that the voters were trained in the spirit in which the Centre acted politically, he effected, in the autumn of 1890, the founding of the "Peoples Union for Catholic Germany", as a school for Catholic men with many hundreds of thousands of pupils to train them, apologetically, socially, economically, and politically. The spirit of Windthorst still lives in the Centre party and in the Peoples Union. His beautiful memorial is the Church of the Blessed Virgin at Hanover, where he is buried, and for the construction of which he generously gave the money presented to him for personal use by the Catholics of Germany.

HUSGEN, Ludwig Windthorst; SPAHN, Windthorst in Holland, V (1907-08); FINKE, Aus Windthorsts jungeren Jahren in Hochland, VII (1910-11); FULF, Aus Windthorsts Korrespondenz in Stimmen aus Maria-Laach (1912).

MARTIN SPAHN

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