

On the heretic — trial against Most

Johann Most

1878

(Defense speech of the defendant)

Gentlemen! If one has read the pompous announcements in the official newspapers of the time when this trial was brought, one will certainly be very astonished today to realize that almost nothing of the expected evidence, after such a fuss, has been produced. And of the little that the prosecutor had in store for me, he had no choice but to drop a large portion without further ado. One can certainly say: The mountains circled, and they gave birth to a tiny and, to top it all, lame little mouse. The prosecutor retreated before the fighting could begin and therefore seems to have considered it advisable to hide behind strange entrenchments. He talked about the “Berliner Freie Presse,” Vera Zassulitsch, assassinations, “Madam President” Stägemann or Hahn, Trepoff, revolvers, and all sorts of things that have absolutely nothing to do with the prosecution. Therefore, it doesn’t even occur to me to criticize these phrases or to bore you further with them.

The prosecutor’s comment regarding an omission in the “Berliner Freie Presse” about the 6th and 7th deputations of the local city court seems, incidentally, to have had only the purpose of turning the court against me; but I am convinced that this beginning hasn’t received the slightest attention, and I could now move on to the actual matter, were it not for a statement by the prosecutor, which, although not directly related to the trial, nevertheless cannot be left unanswered, prompted several comments.

The Public Prosecutor considered it appropriate to explain that the Socialists had not submitted a motion to discontinue the criminal proceedings in the Reichstag only because such a motion would have clearly had no prospect of being accepted and, given the prevailing “general indignation,” would have led to very unpleasant discussions. This is, after all, a claim made entirely out of the blue. As reported in the newspapers, I in fact only initiated the process of not submitting such a motion because I was and am firmly convinced that this trial would fail, and because I wish this to become clear as soon as possible. Had the Reichstag been requested to discontinue the criminal proceedings, it would not have caused the slightest offense. For whatever one may think of the Reichstag, it must be stated that it is composed of educated men. And educated people judge such heresy trials quite differently than the Public Prosecutor. As for the “general indignation” that is said to have prevailed in the widest circles over my speech regarding leaving the State Church, I must note that I am unaware of any such thing.

On the contrary! The liberal press, which otherwise truly has a negative opinion of Social Democracy and me personally, has almost without exception felt compelled to declare the initia-

tion of this process highly miraculous and unnecessary, and to castigate the intellectual authors of my contract, the “court demagogues.” Indeed, even more so! Even snobby newspapers, such as the “Reichsbote” and others, have expressed their astonishment at my persecution. They felt that such procedures could not serve the cause they represent. If any indignation about this affair had taken root anywhere, it was directed, on the one hand, against my persecutors; on the other hand, to the extent that it was truly directed at me, it was found at most in a very small circle of orthodox zealots.

Before I move on to the specific points of the accusations made against me, I must, for better or worse, address the genesis of my speech, albeit only very briefly. Several court chaplains in Berlin, in association with some other not particularly well-reputed individuals, formed a Christian-Social Workers’ “Party” and brought Christianity into public assemblies. They declared their intention to take the solution to the social question into their own hands, praised the Christian faith as a universal panacea, and demanded the trust of the workers. In doing so, they exposed Christianity and the clergy to criticism, indeed provoked it. And my incriminating speech and the entire agitation for withdrawal from the State Church constituted the response to this worker entrapment. From this it is already clear that the point of the second part of my speech was directed primarily against the Christian-Social agitators, who as such, even if they were clergymen, were undoubtedly not in the exercise of their profession, and that therefore the Supreme Church Council was not authorized to file a criminal complaint.

With regard to the alleged insults against religious communities, I am of the opinion that the testimony has proven my innocence in every respect. The word “disgusting” was an invention of the reporter of the “Reichsboten” and was subsequently retracted by him.

All witnesses confirmed that I did not say of religious systems that they were “laughed at” by many, even though they had not yet left the Church, but that I remarked that they were “ignored” by them. And although one of four witnesses claims not to have heard me say that anyone who considers religious systems from the standpoint of common sense is “inspired to skepticism,” whereas he, in line with the prosecution, claims that I had said that religious systems must, under such a premise, “disgust” everyone, I nevertheless believe that on this point, too, the evidence has sufficiently demonstrated the untenability of the latter interpretation. The public prosecutor, however, expressed the opinion that the word “skepticism” could not have appeared in my speech because, apparently, of the approximately 3,000 people present at the meeting in question, not five would have understood such a word. But with this, the prosecutor has only demonstrated that he has highly peculiar ideas about Social Democratic assemblies. Were he to personally observe such gatherings from time to time, he would certainly come to a completely different opinion in this regard, as with regard to Social Democracy in general, than the one he has expressed so far. Social Democratic assemblies are not made up of savages or rude hordes, but are notoriously composed of highly decent people. The socialist worldview has penetrated virtually all social circles, and the labor movement has raised even the simplest proletarians who have joined it to a level of education that is truly no less than that of certain individuals. At that meeting in particular, there were many highly intelligent people present, and the word “skepticism” certainly found acceptance.

Thus, not a trace of insults against the Christian religious community can be found in my entire speech, but I would have had to insult them to be punishable, since Section 166 places the emphasis on the word “insult.” Critical discussions about the nature of Christianity and related agitation without the use of insults are not punishable. The public prosecutor seems to know

this, too, by not daring to criminalize my objective attacks on Christianity, my devastating blows against it, presumably to avoid giving me an opportunity to once again take up arms from the dock against a religious system that, in my opinion, cannot stand up to science.

But because he couldn't discern any insult to Christian religious institutions in my speech, he simply labeled a few other things as such, and because I treated them somewhat drastically, he constructed religious insults from them. First and foremost, he challenges the sentence: "The nonsense that God created the world in six days, which is still taught to children in schools, must finally be removed from educational institutions." And secondly, he considers me punishable because I called "theology with its hell and its heaven" nonsense. While it is not entirely clear whether he ultimately upheld the first accusation, since no one could have made sense of his statements on the subject, he seems at least to have been unclear to himself about whether the Genesis of the Bible is a religious institution within the legal sense or not. In any case, under such circumstances, it is not superfluous for me to provide the necessary clarification of these matters.

Let us first ask: What does the word "nonsense" mean? Is it perhaps a swear word? Not at all! Nonsense is the opposite of sense; that which makes no sense, that which is illogical, must be described as something nonsensical. Every educated person knows, however, that the Mosaic creation saga indeed discusses things that make no sense, things that, when compared to the results of modern scientific research, are characterized as sheer nonsense. What, for example, should one say about the fact that Moses created light on the third day and "the sun, moon, and stars" only on the fourth day? Isn't it nonsense to claim that light already existed before a fixed star shone? And the naiveté with which the celestial bodies are spoken of is, by our modern standards, so nonsensical that only people like Pastor Knaak, who imagines the earth nailed to the ground and the sun dancing, can take it seriously. The absurdity inherent in the Mosaic creation saga is illustrated most dramatically by the fact that it appears twice in the Bible, in completely different and contradictory forms. Even the deity appears under two different names. In one text, it is called Elohim and in the other, Yaveh-Elohim. In one text, man appears last on the scene, and in the other, he is created first, even before any food was available for him. And such things aren't supposed to be nonsense? Undoubtedly, this part of the Bible is also very uncomfortable for theologians, and they make every effort to give the matter a somewhat acceptable appearance.

One of the most important biblical commentators, Bunsen, for example, believes he can gloss over the double and contradictory occurrence of the creation story by saying that one text is historical in nature, but the other that it is philosophical in nature. Before the judgment seat of reason, however, one doesn't get very far with such sophistry; there, the nonsense remains simply nonsense.

Incidentally, the Mosaic creation saga has never been proclaimed by any church assembly, any pope, or any supreme church council as a dogma that must be believed. It has wisely been left to the faithful to subject these secular books of the Bible to various interpretations. And so we see that, for example, within the Protestant Church, an entire group is forming that describes Genesis and many other incomprehensible passages found in the Bible as figurative poetry. While the word "nonsense" is not an insult when applied to truly illogical discussions, it is, on the other hand, clear from my explanations that the Mosaic creation saga is not an institution of the Christian religion. This point of the accusation therefore no longer has the slightest basis.

I now come to theology, which I have called "nonsense," a view I still hold today. Since when, I ask, has theology been an institution of the Christian Church? Theology used to be considered

a science; nowadays, every truly educated person knows that it can't even be called a science, because it concerns itself with absolutely unscientific matters and establishes tenets that are on the most strained terms with the tenets of science. Theologians are constantly floating in the dark, speculating about invisible, incomprehensible, supernatural, or rather, extra-natural or non-natural, and thus unprovable things. And when they occasionally arrived at paradoxical statements that, in the light of science, took on a highly ridiculous appearance, they simply cast science under their spell, far from recognizing their foolishness. In short, all the theologians' mirror-fighting can be characterized as childishness, even nonsense! But this is only in passing. Theology, as I said, is undoubtedly not an institution of Christian religious communities. Admittedly, the accuser believed that, from the fact that my speech referred to "theology with its heaven and its hell," he had to conclude that it was necessary to at least address heaven and hell. Doesn't he know that these, too, are not specifically Christian institutions? And didn't he notice that heaven and hell were expressly associated with theology, and therefore not with Christianity? Almost all religious systems, after all, exhibit a kind of heaven and hell. Some have several kinds of such places; some are content with just one. There is hell and limbo, there purgatory; sometimes one speaks of a "seventh heaven," sometimes of a "lowest hell," etc. On the other hand, there are already very many Christians who only conceive of heaven and hell in a very figurative way. Scientifically, however, heaven and hell are completely impossible things in the common sense of the word, and anyone who places them behind the firmament or beneath the earth's surface is simply talking nonsense. Therefore, my statements in this regard are not only exempt from punishment but also irrefutable.

Finally, the public prosecutor believed he could state that I had caused terrible offense among the believers with my speech. He believes that, while I had expressly emphasized at the beginning of the contract that I did not want to disturb anyone from continuing to live their religious feelings, in the course of my discussions I had become increasingly vehement and had increasingly insulted the Christian religion. However, he is also grossly mistaken in this regard. I have notoriously called on only those who have already violated their statutes to leave the state churches and who are therefore committing hypocrisy by remaining incorporated into such a corporation. Furthermore, the assembled people demonstrated by their entire demeanor that they considered themselves unbelievers. Therefore, there can be no question of any offense to religious feelings. Even the editors of extremely pious newspapers seem to have thought the same way, otherwise they would hardly have rushed to publish my speech and thus bring it to the attention of believing souls. I believe I have now sufficiently demonstrated that the speech, which was the subject of an accusation, does not contain any insult to religious institutions, and I now move on to the accusation that I insulted the Protestant clergy in the exercise of their profession.

There I find the only expression "black gendarmerie," which could at best be directly applied to the entire clergy, but I cannot fathom how it should be considered offensive. As long as the accuser does not prove that the profession of a gendarme is a defamatory one, I cannot see how anyone could feel offended by the designation "gendarme." The clergy, as is well known, are passionate about discipline and order, and since the gendarmerie is used precisely to facilitate discipline and maintain order, it must appear to them as an ideal. It is precisely this spiritual kinship that prompted me to use the expression in question, and the epithet "black" was evidently chosen only to describe the uniform. Surely the pastors aren't ashamed of their official attire?

Everything else that the Supreme Church Council considered aimed at the clergy in general was directed solely at the preacher-agitators of the Christian Social Workers' Party and the city

missionaries, as is quite clearly evident from the entire context of the latter part of my speech. For example, there was talk of “black magicians” who sneak into people’s homes and who should be shown the door. Now, the preachers—with very few exceptions—have no inclination to undertake such work. They send their commis voyageurs, the tract distributors, and the like. These go into the laundry room, lie in wait for women at the stove or while they are looking after their children, and try to delight them with their heavenly pamphlets. And since these infiltrations are usually accompanied by all sorts of sugary phrases, I also called these people “wolves in sheep’s clothing.” Finally, I proceeded from the empirical conviction that most of these evangelists themselves believe nothing, and quoted Heine’s famous verse about secret wine and public water.

The reference to Spain, where the priests first stole the land and then fed the population melopia (begging soup), and the suggestion that workers should be on their guard if they are now also being served meager handouts in Berlin, must exclude any doubt that the Christian Social Party, and not the entire Protestant clergy, was the target here. For it is the firm Stöcker & Co. that is trying to lure unemployed proletarians into the Christian Social net with begging soup, that is holding out the prospect of the imminent construction of a workers’ home for the disabled, and that is laying other limesticks to catch fools. In doing this, the court demagogues are truly not exercising their profession, and the Supreme Church Council had no authority to file criminal charges. If the individuals in question wish to confront me in court because I have applied the same standards to them as they apply, they must sue me individually. Until now, however, they have been content to rant about Social Democracy and myself in the media available to them. But that should be enough.

Thus, nothing remains of the entire accusation, and I consider my acquittal a given. This acquittal is appropriate not only because I am absolutely not guilty, but also in view of the century in which we live, the culture that surrounds us, and even more so in view of the reactionary desires that Orthodoxy has revealed in recent times. This society must finally be brought to a halt!

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In January 1878, Most was tried for “blasphemy” and “insulting the entire clergy.”

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