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An Eastern European Perspective

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It is a quite challenging task to formulate some suggestions on possible future directions of our Lutheran churches in Eastern Europe now in these final days of January, 1991. First, as a theologian within the territory of the former German Democratic Republic, I am a participant in great changes within society and church. Due to that special situation the question "Whither Lutheranism?" is really a question of our life. In addition, we have all been challenged by the war in the Persian Gulf regarding our ability to live in peace and our understanding and actions vis-à-vis the relationship between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. This essay cannot address all these questions. What is possible is to describe some chief areas of theological concern and the theoretical basis for decisions which must be forthcoming.

I. THE CHURCH IN THE POLITICAL ARENA

The central area of interest will continue to be that of the political agenda of the church. The Lutheran churches of the former GDR look back to a very specific history. The experiences of Nazi Germany teach the duty of being involved in developments within society. The church cannot stand aside, seeking to keep its hands clean, for even if it tries to do so, it will end up siding with some group or force within society. A church which is confident in the grace of God must be willing to become sinful for the sake of the life of the people. Learning this lesson has presented us with two further difficulties since 1945.

On the one hand, after failing to destroy the church totally, the Communist government tried to relegate it to the private realm, and to deny to it any political role. It could serve the souls of those persons who were still *bound*—as they always said—to religion, but it was to say nothing concerning such things as the aims of the society, the education of pupils, and strategic planning for industry and agricul-

ture. Yet even the Communists slowly began to realize that their ideology did not work and, accordingly, to honor certain aspects of Christian life—the diaconal work in hospitals and homes for disabled persons and Christian values like honesty and dedication to work. I especially remember the celebration of Luther's birthday in 1983, when state officials applauded and welcomed Luther's stand on profession and work. From the present vantage point this is to be seen as a consequence of the realization even then that the socialist economy was declining. All these aspects—here only noted briefly—had a contradictory influence: the churches felt themselves called to action and responsibility, while at the same time they experienced being marginalized in the society.

On the other hand, consideration of the precise role of the church within society led to discussion among the GDR churches whether the doctrine of the "Kingdom of Christ" or the "Two Kingdoms" should be the theoretical basis for the church's political work. Because of its longstanding misuse in the history of German churches, there has remained a strong aversion to the "Two Kingdoms" doctrine. I still remember how important for us as students of theology in the early seventies was a paper by Heino Falcke presented to the Synod of the Federation of the Protestant Churches in the GDR. He reminded us anew of the church's task to evaluate the government and its policies from the point of view of the "Kingdom of Christ," that is to say from the point of view of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The result was to challenge not only the government—which really got the point—but also Christians and theologians who favored seeing a distinction between the realistic possibilities of action within society and the teachings and aims of Jesus.

This necessary discussion also promoted dialogue between different confessional traditions, the first position being mainly representative of a Reformed approach, while the second being a more typically Lutheran one. In order to fulfill a task assigned by the "Leuenberg Agreement" of 1973, a mixed group of Lutheran and Reformed theologians met to discuss the relation of the doctrines of the "Two Kingdoms" and the "Kingdom of Christ." They saw both doctrines, correctly understood, to be complementary: they are formulations of the same faith that is lived while looking to the possibilities of daily life and following the hope that is ours by faith.[1] Some years later a colleague from my diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Thuringia told me that some Lutherans would say: Even the "Kingdom of Christ" has to work here in our world with that "left hand" which was for Luther the way God governs our lives. Is there any possibility of implementing directly the visions of our faith in the life of a society?

Then came the strong call of various groups for responsible church action—for democracy, for the environment, for persecuted people, for a renewed society. Since the mid-eighties the churches have thus found themselves more and more in the situation of needing to act on all the visions about which they had already been preaching. The peace movement, for example, used the biblical image of beating swords into plowshares (Isa 2:4; Mic 4:3) and incorporated into its work this vision of a world without weapons, a heritage the church has kept and proclaimed. This task of the church was always present during the subsequent years of struggle for a better world. Yet, when they did not always take the initiative, our parishes often

[1]*Kirchengemeinschaft und politische Ethik: Ergebnis eines theologischen Gespräches zum Verhältnis von Zwei-Reiche-Lehre und Lehre von der Königsherrschaft Christi* (Berlin: J. Rogge and H. Zeddies, 1980).

had to be forced by concerned groups. But, finally, it became an integral part of church work in our country. No Christian—and this meant also no Lutheran—could be uninterested in the developments of the society and only strive for the salvation of the soul. We all felt that the time might be coming when we would be able to influence the policies and the shape of our society.

When the Fall of 1989 came, it was a time when—as I would put it—the spirit of freedom supported by the Spirit of God spread out of the churches into the streets. It was a "kairos" that one can experience only once every hundred years—if we are fortunate! The vision of peace, of *shalom*, became a reality among the demonstrators on our streets. This was not an easy accomplishment; it meant fearful action against violence. But it was a sign of the present and

governing God that in each demonstration people were willing to act in service of "No violence." In the posters and candles carried by the thousands the Spirit of God was present, the "Kingdom of Christ" was at work in the streets. In the beginning phase of the demonstrations a Communist state official asked a person of the church, "How is it possible that thousands of people wait until the prayers in the churches are completed and only then start the demonstration?" This question is a sign pointing to the apparent presence of the Spirit of God these days. But is such talk of the "Two Kingdoms" doctrine, therefore, only an expression of our own faintheartedness?

I think not. The events of the Fall of 1989 and the developments during the first part of 1990 were a very special experience that we will long treasure. But it is not the experience of every day. Especially the war in the Persian Gulf has shown us how difficult it is to give the desire and convictions for peace a realistic and successful political shape.[2] At this point the doctrine of the "Two Kingdoms" is for me an important reminder of the possibility and the need to live with the tension that belongs to the fact that the peace of the kingdom of Christ is not yet manifest for all. This doctrine enables me to endure the tension between the "already" of the power of Christ and the "not yet" of his coming for the whole world. This response is not a cheap escape; it is a call to very serious understanding and decision.

"Whither Lutheranism?" Lutherans will continue to go from one daily challenge to another knowing that God is in power, but that we on earth always have to take into account all the aspects of life and act responsibly according to the will of God *and* our best understanding.

II. NEW STRUCTURES FOR A NEW SOCIETY

In Eastern Germany, Lutheran churches had to learn the lessons of a church in diaspora—of a minority church. I have already alluded to the fact that during the developments in our country under Communist rule different groups found it advantageous to gather and work under the protective umbrella of the church. Thus our churches had become interesting for a variety of persons despite the fact that their members represented only a minority within our society. The Communist

[2]Another area where we see the necessity of differentiated or "realistic" action by Christians is that of the church's positions on issues of economic order in individual countries and in the whole world. Here the church has to point to special concerns—especially it has to take the side of the poor—but it also has very carefully to take into account economic processes. For these concerns, see the publication of the Theological Study Commission of the National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation within the GDR, to which I contributed: *Verantwortlich wirtschaften: Studie zu Fragen christlicher Wirtschaftsethik* (Berlin, 1990).

party and government did not overcome us, but they strongly influenced the process of secularization. Because there was no acknowledgment or benefit in society for being a church member, membership in our parishes declined significantly over the years. Although after World War II nearly all people counted themselves members of a church, now we have only approximately twenty percent of the population on our records. This does not mean, however, that all these people are active parish members. Only ten percent or less of these twenty percent attend Sunday worship services. Church life has become a matter of small groups, so that even in large towns a parish is a group of persons who are relatively familiar with each other. Since the church is thus a kind of home, this is a real opportunity for our work!

Over the years our Lutheran churches have kept the old structures of a *Volkskirche*, a folk church. Because of the donations of our parish members, the help of Protestant churches in West Germany, the readiness of all church employees to work for a very small income, and certain aspects of the typical socialist economic system, our churches managed with difficulty to maintain most of their inherited buildings against decay or ruin and to do good work in their area. Still there was a slow process of learning going on about changes that might have to be made, namely, what to do when not enough pastors were available to serve all regions, or a decision not to restore a church because a parish had not survived in that region. The accompanying process of developing structures of cooperation between the churches in our country has been a painful one.

Some dioceses had been members of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church, while others belonged to the Church of the Union (united churches of the old Kingdom of Prussia which had Lutheran and Reformed parishes). In addition, all dioceses of our country were members of the Federation of Protestant Churches. Because it was thought unwise to continue such duplication in structures and work, and because we hoped that the communion within the Federation could attain an ecclesiological character that would no longer necessitate two parallel unions, the Synod of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church decided in 1988 to dissolve and to become part of the Federation and its work. From January 1, 1989, the United Evangelical Lutheran Church no longer existed in the GDR, and this remains true now in the territory of the new eastern provinces of Germany.

I must confess that I voted in support of this decision during the Synod. As Lutherans we do not need such structures to do our work. More important is the clear sign it displays in our situation, a sign of renunciation, a sign that day to day serving of needs is more important than maintaining traditional structures, which need much money. We hope that we will still be able to serve evidently as Lutherans wherever such cooperation takes shape.

Because of the revolution and the unification of Germany, the weight of the Lutheran churches of Western Germany now determines our activities in a new way. Most persons realize this because we in the new provinces of Germany have also adopted the system of church tax collection through the Tax Inspectors Offices. Though the question of church tax is mainly a question of sufficient organization, and though some would argue instead that it is really an important ecclesiological issue, still most important are the new tasks within our society that these changes imply. The church has become a new factor in the society. It has to be able to act in

a new way, open for the whole people.[3] We have been asked, for example, to support a new course in religion in our schools. These new challenges will mean quite a change in our thinking. We are used to working in small groups with active and concerned people. Now we will have to discover totally new ways of missionary work and responsibility within the society. An example of one shape of these new tasks is that many parishes have started to employ so-called "social stations" for caring for the elderly, the sick, and other persons in need.

One important issue, inherited from former times but not yet sufficiently addressed, is the relation between the church, the parish, and the different groups within society which call for support. The church has learned that we are able to be open—that we have to be open!—for such requests and to understand ourselves as a "Church for others,"[4] one which has to take the needs of people seriously even if they are not members or don't want to become baptized Christians.

This was precisely the question at the end of the eighties. Not all who started working together with our church groups and using the facilities and equipment of our parishes have been on the way to becoming believers. They just used the "turf" and the "space" of the church, feeling that its openness to such demands was in the final analysis the meaning of the church's existence. "What else is it good for?" the artist Wolf Biermann asked.

Now after the revolution within our society these special interest groups have left the church. They continue their work without connection to the parishes because they do not need them anymore. One area where this discussion had already started was that of what importance environmental work might be for the church in the future. In theory we have generally been open to these demands in the past, but in practice it has been beyond the strength of many parishes and pastors. During the difficult weeks and months of 1989 some persons simply collapsed. The point is, as Christians we have to be open to bearing the cross, whatever its present shape. But attempts to develop theological and ecclesiological concepts must begin from our basic understanding of the meaning of the church. In these times of change the inner core of Lutheran ecclesiology thus remains important. The church is the gathering of the believing people where the gospel is preached responsibly and the Eucharist celebrated in communion with the whole catholic church (CA VII).[5] Only from this basis will we be able to build and shape the church in the coming years. "Whither Lutheranism?" Lutheranism will continue to go from one daily challenge to another knowing that only from com- munion around the table of the Eucharist and in hearing and speaking the Word of God will we be enabled to do our missionary task, to be Christians within and for our society, our culture, and our nation.

[3]Here I remind the reader of the importance of the fact that I'm writing this article as a Lutheran from East Germany. A colleague from Lithuania, for example, might have pointed more clearly to the obligation and opportunities for our Lutheran church for the building of the nation. As Germans we have some difficulties in this connection. But perhaps just there we have to learn new aspects of our work.

[4]"Kirche für andere" is a concept which has developed especially from the theological insights of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

[5]Augsburg Confession, Art. VII, paraphrased, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 32. "The church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly."

III. A FINAL REMARK

Some readers may wonder why so many of these remarks refer to events prior to changes of 1989. Is that a sign that I am unwilling to learn lessons from my time and place? We Lutherans in Eastern Europe are witnesses of a fundamental upheaval in which all the old values and ideals seem worthless. For many people, forty years of their lives seem to have been just tossed out the window. Is it any wonder that we as the church should feel the same crisis?

If anything, this essay reveals that there are still very real and open questions and uncertainties within our churches. We will have to learn new ways and new truths, but our fundamental message and our main duty remain the same. Most of the changes we now face have to do with so-called *adiaphora*, aspects of church life that can be organized in a variety of ways. We are still in the same world. Our transformation here in Eastern Europe is not an eschatological one. We are still *in* the "old world," and *there* we have to proclaim our hope in the resurrected Christ.