



Lutheran Churches of Western Europe

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I. SOME OVERALL PATTERNS

Western Europe is the cradle of Lutheranism. As most Lutherans learn in catechism, Martin Luther began the events we call the Reformation when, on All Saints' Eve, October 31, 1517, he posted his ninety-five theses on the church door in Wittenberg. Since then the majority of Lutherans have lived in Western Europe. According to the latest statistics, there are 59.7 million Lutherans around the world. Of these, 38.7 million, or nearly 65 percent, live in Europe; with the principal centers being Germany and Scandinavia. In Germany there are 15.5 million or 26 percent, and in Scandinavia there are 20.6 million or 34.5 percent.

In what follows we will review the essential challenges before the churches in Western Europe with an eye toward seeing what direction the churches are taking in response. It is especially significant that with respect to membership the Lutheran churches in Western Europe are stagnating. In the course of 1990 the number of Lutherans throughout the world rose by a million. This growth, however, occurred primarily in Africa and Asia.

The latest available statistics on denominational adherence in Germany, worked out after the census of 1987, show that out of a population of 61,077,042, 41.6 percent belong to the Evangelical church, while 43 percent belong to the Roman Catholic church. In comparison to the previous census of 1970, it is significant that for both churches this means a percentage decline in membership. The decline has been greatest for the Evangelical church, which in 1970 claimed 47 percent of the population while the Roman Catholic church claimed 44.6 percent. In the course of a seventeen-year period, then, the Evangelical church's membership figures fell by 5.4 percent, while in the same period that of the Roman Catholic church fell by

merely 1.6 percent.¹ A dramatic aspect of this development is that in the period from 1970 to 1987 the Roman Catholic church assumed the position of the largest church in Germany over against the Evangelical churches. However, with the amalgamation of the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic in 1990, the balance has been upset again to the advantage of the Evangelical churches.

The news service of the United Lutheran churches in Germany, VELKD Information, states that the cause of such declining membership is the lack of affiliation by the younger generation and the rise in the foreign population. Almost 70 percent of the foreign population in Germany belongs neither to the Roman Catholic nor to the Evangelical church. Of the native German population in 1987, 44.3 percent belonged to the Evangelical church and 43.8 to the Roman Catholic church.

The statistics from Germany reflect a general tendency in Western European Lutheranism. Both in Scandinavia and in Germany the pattern of the folk church has traditionally prevailed, such that, throughout Scandinavia—and in certain regions of Germany—one could speak of a synthesis between church and people. It is clear that in the present this synthesis is about to be broken. Behind the statistics there is a clear reality: a great portion of the population has been alienated from the church. Many of those alienated remain members of the church, but their membership is only nominal. As often as not, children are baptized, though the number of baptisms is also falling. One is generally buried with benefit of the clergy; one regularly goes to church on Christmas Eve, but, for the most part, much of the membership is strange to the church and its worship. Thus the Lutheran church in Western Europe has a problem making itself understood and credible.

Along with the tendency toward alienation has come a contrary development. Those of the population who are convinced and active members of the church make use of it more often. It is quite significant that in Scandinavia, while the number of members continues to fall slightly and the number of those baptized is dropping a little more, the number of those attending church and of communion guests is plainly rising. In the secularized and alienated world that Western Europe has become, a portion of the population is seeking out the church as never before. This tendency was, for example, quite striking during the months of the recent war in the Middle East.

It is thus a complex situation that meets us when we seek to evaluate the situation of the Lutheran churches in a Western Europe become pluralistic. At the Lutheran World Federation Eighth General Assembly in Curitiba, Brazil, in 1990, Professor Theodor Ahrens characterized the situation in his home city of Hamburg as follows:

Pluralism is also a social and cultural factor—and here I am referring to my own microcosm in Hamburg. For a long time the Lutheran church was not only the official but also the dominant form of religion in Hamburg. Perhaps it still has enough flair to remain the “official” church in a formal sense—the “best address in the area,” so to speak. But now it represents only a minority here in Hamburg. It is certainly no longer the dominant faith, that is, the religion which in practice

¹It is to be noted that in Germany the category “Evangelical” covers not merely Lutheran but also the Reformed and United churches.

determines how people run their lives. Many people have simply turned away from the church.²

The situation Professor Ahrens delineates is found throughout Western Europe. In many places it is not so pronounced as it is in Hamburg, but the tendency is quite clear and presents a difficult challenge to Western Europe’s Lutheran churches. The years to come will make clear whether, on the one hand, the church has met this challenge, or whether, on the other hand, it has allowed ecclesiastical institutions, with their structures and legislation, to become ends in and of themselves.

II. EMERGING PROBLEMS OF CHURCH AND STATE

Western European Lutheran churches are quite diverse in their relations to the state. While the Swedish, Norwegian, and Finnish churches are state churches and the Danish church is a “folk church,” in reality there is no great difference between state and folk churches. Quite to the contrary, it appears as if the Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish churches have greater independence over and against the civil authority than does the Danish folk church. The Lutheran churches in Germany are independent of the state, with ability to legislate for themselves and with unlimited freedom in the matter of appointments to ecclesiastical office.

The question of how the relation of the Scandinavian churches to the state will develop in the years to come is an interesting and important one. Given the advancing secularization of Western European society and the rising desire for ecclesiastical independence in the Scandinavian countries, there can be no doubt that the relation between the Scandinavian churches and the Scandinavian states will change in the foreseeable future.

Let us take the Danish folk church as an example. This church has ten dioceses, and in all a little fewer than two thousand pastors. Every diocese is led by a bishop and nine to fifteen deans, of whom one is the dean of the cathedral and in this capacity the representative of the bishop. The folk church has been in existence since 1849 when, in the context of the dissolution of absolutism and the introduction of democracy in Denmark, the constitution stipulated: “The Evangelical Lutheran church is the Danish folk church and as such shall be supported by the state.” Such support was by then conceived of as essentially “moral” support, since the church was an economically independent entity. As part of the events of the Reformation, in 1536 the royal government had assumed the expenses of bishops and diocesan authorities in conjunction with the royal authority’s confiscation of episcopal property. But both before and after the constitution of 1849 the church’s income consisted of obligatory tithes, ministerial income from church lands, and other special income. Due to haste at the time of the creation of the constitution, no actual church polity was developed. Rather, the constitution simply provided that “the polity of the folk church shall be ordered according to the law.” A real church polity has thus not yet been developed. In its place, the polity of the folk church has been

²“I have heard the cry of my people...FOR SALVATION,” in *I Have Heard the Cry of My People*, Proceedings of the Eighth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, Curitiba, Brazil, January 29-February 8, 1990, ed. Norman A. Hjelm (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1990) 48.

ordered by legislation in the Danish parliament, the *Folketing*, which in practice functions as the legislative synod of the folk church.

All matters pertaining to the folk church are prescribed according to law, whether through legislation by the *Folketing*, through royal proclamation, or through circulars from the church department. A cabinet minister always carries responsibility for the direction of the folk church, and all pastors, deans, and bishops are officials of the state appointed by the church department. Bishops and deans are named by the queen. Every individual diocese is led by a bishop who, together with the chancellor (*stiftamtmanden*), constitutes the diocesan authority. The bishop is the overseer of the pastors and the congregational councils and together with the chancellor is the highest authority in all questions pertaining to church buildings and church staffs including the clerk (*kordegn*), organist, sexton, custodians, etc. Deans and deanery commissions look after

economic matters and make decisions regarding the budgets and accounts of congregational councils. Congregational councils administer church buildings and are responsible for the employment of church personnel other than the pastors. Congregational councils can recommend whom they wish to serve as pastor, but appointments are made by the cabinet minister after consultation with the dean and the bishop.

Although the folk church was an economically independent entity in 1849, it has since then become dependent on the church tax and subsidy from the state. In 1903 a law requiring payment of tithes was abolished and the sum which was paid to the dioceses in commutation of the tithes has since been eroded by inflation. The same has happened to the compensatory sums paid to the dioceses where the land reform enacted in 1919 broke up the church lands. As early as 1913, pastors were put on fixed salaries, and during World War I the first state subsidy to the church was incorporated into the finance laws. By 1920 it was already clear that a special church tax would have to be introduced; since then the economy of the folk church has depended on state subsidy and the church tax.

Today the economy of the church presents the following picture. Altogether the expenses of the church amount to about 3 billion Danish crowns. Of this amount 2.5 billion comes from the church tax and about half a billion comes from the state subsidy. One half billion crowns of the church tax as collected locally are transferred to the church department in the form of the “national church tax,” while approximately two billion remains with the parishes to cover the expenses of the churches, parsonages, and staffs. The use of ecclesiastical funds is prescribed by the *Folketing* and the church department.

There is actually no national structure for the folk church apart from the *Folketing* and the church department. To be sure, the Danish folk church has recently acquired an official interchurch council which tends to relations with other churches and international ecclesiastical organizations on behalf of the folk church. This council cannot, however, be considered a synod or anything comparable to it, since its task is solely to look after the ecumenical and interchurch relations of the folk church. It is becoming increasingly apparent that it is untenable for the folk church to be without structural independence over against the state. In modern society the church is confronted by a succession of demands of a pedagogical and diaconal character, a responsible address to which is for the moment carried on by a host of

voluntary churchly organizations without direct, official connection with the church as such.

1. Spiritual Leadership in the Churches.

Against this background, two essential problems emerge in the relation between church and state in Denmark and, although situations differ, in the other Scandinavian countries as well. The first question has to do with the internal spiritual leadership of the churches. Most bishops and pastors would maintain that, in spite of their connection to the state, the folk church has an internal, spiritual governance of its own. In practice this means that insofar as a pastor's teaching conflicts with the confession of the evangelical Lutheran church—if for example, it includes notions about reincarnation—the bishop must have the right and the duty to withdraw pastoral credentials (*kollats*). Normally, this will mean that the pastor involved can no longer perform functions of the office. This is not however the case from the perspective of the church

department. The chief administrative official of the church department, *departmentchef* Preben Espersen, has recently argued this point of view:

The prevailing legal situation indicates, in the meantime, that there is no higher expert authority for the review of bishops' decisions in spiritual matters. There thus exists no possibility of referring matters to the bishops as a college or to hear from them as such. The bishops function in coordinate fashion, each within his own diocese, and they possess no legal legitimacy to act as a collegial organ. Against this background it appears that it cannot be accepted that the church minister should be without competence in questions touching "matters internal to the church." In this connection it should be said that one can hardly assume that the bishop has the right, as it is said he does according to the church's theory, to withdraw credentials.³

This position has been resisted by the church, and we can, therefore, foresee exacerbated relations between the civil authority and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark. Similar situations have also been described in Norway and Sweden for several years. In Norway there is a widespread desire among church people—including the bishops of the Norwegian church—that church and civil authority separate. It is possible that such developments will lead to divorce between churches and states in Scandinavia.

2. The Use of Church Economic Resources.

A second essential question touching the relation of church and state has to do with the use of the church's economic resources. As previously noted, the folk church—as well as the other Lutheran churches of Scandinavia—depends on the church tax. This is also true of the German Lutheran churches, who also use the expression "church tax," but in a quite different situation. Although the church tax for the German churches is collected by the public authorities, the churches have complete legal freedom to use their means as they wish. This is not the case in the Scandinavian countries, where the church tax is understood to be a public tax and subject to a number of limitations.

The economy of the Danish church has recently been studied in two deaneries.

³Preben Espersen, *Folkekirkens styrelse [The Governance of the Folk Church]* (1990).

Budgets and accounts were called in and made the subject of statistical analysis. Such analysis showed that 47 percent of the church's funds were used for the payment of church personnel functioning in connection with Sunday worship, while another 47 percent was used for maintenance and the payment of principal and interest on loans for church buildings. The remaining 6 percent portion "left over for the church" is unsatisfactory and results in skewed priorities for the church's use of resources. More and more church people are realizing this as a problem. Most recently, the bishop of the Århus diocese, Herluf Eriksen, has proposed drastic alteration of the church's budgeting. According to his proposal, the church itself, out of its own resources, ought to pay all the expenses related to pastoral salaries and the church's teaching, while expenses of the preservation of the ancient, medieval churches ought to be paid through the

state subsidy.

All the Western European churches stand before great and serious challenges in coming years. Many children, baptized in the church, do not receive instruction in the Christian faith. Their lack of acquaintance with elemental aspects of the Christian faith often makes them easy prey to the effects of new religious movements. Many members of the church have been alienated from the message of the church and do not experience Christian proclamation in their daily lives. Social developments in Western Europe have meant that many individuals live on the dark side of existence and do not have a human network around them. The aged often sit alone in their apartments in need of company and talk.

Given these novel challenges, it is all the more imperative for the church to engage in the work of teaching religion, diaconal ministry, proclamation, and visitation. Yet as it now stands, the economic and human resources of the church are employed almost exclusively for the external, structural apparatus and for the conduct of Sunday worship. A readjustment by the church of the priorities for the use of its resources is thus especially urgent. In my opinion it will be necessary and right to give far greater economic independence to the individual congregations. It is destructive of the responsibility of lay people when their chosen representatives in congregational councils occupy themselves with the administration of buildings and the assignment of tasks for employees of the church. The tendency of the Scandinavian churches in the direction of greater independence and away from dependence on the state is healthy and right.

III. THE CHALLENGE OF NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

A common challenge before all Christian churches of Western Europe is the new religious movements. As Western European society has become more secular, religions other than Christianity have advanced. The many immigrants to Western Europe—some migrant workers and others refugees—have set their stamp on all the larger cities. Significant numbers of these immigrants are of Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist background, and this meeting of religions has contributed to awakened interest in Eastern religions. Thus many Western Europeans experience unmet religious needs just at the moment when the Christian faith has been abandoned as the common basis for understanding existence and human life. Astrology, reincarnation, and other expressions of this new religiosity are thus gaining a footing.

During recent years nearly every existing religious tradition has established roots in Western European society. These immigrants, planted in a Western

European context, cannot of course continue their religious practices from home without hindrance. They must adapt in certain popular and cultural ways, but they continue to be Hindus, Buddhists, or Muslims, who merely live under different circumstances. Their adaptation thus demonstrates that it is possible to live in Western European society with a religion originally at home in another cultural context.

In the occurrent combination of Western European modes of life with Eastern religion, many Hindu gurus, for example, discover that their teaching and practice goes hand in hand with the relaxed view of religion many Western Europeans hold. The inner spiritual emptiness and the modern narcissism which put individuals and their needs at the center of things are two presuppositions essential for the advance of these new religious movements. The fact that at the

present time Western Europe has actually been selected for intentional Hindu missionary activity is, therefore, an important matter for Lutheran churches. As Professor Ahrens says:

A few new religious movements nourished on Eastern spirituality are even making some headway within the old Lutheran church, and indeed press for recognition. The established Lutheran church, of course, which still has a large nominal membership, stands out from other religions in terms of its worship, organization, and membership. But, to use a metaphor, it is like a porous tile. It stands out clearly from its surroundings, but is being permeated by seepage from quite a number of ideological and religious currents fashionable in our city.⁴

To a steadily increasing degree the churches of Western Europe are compelled to acknowledge that they are now in a missionary situation. The West has become a place where religions meet, and in that meeting Christianity is but one among many religions. Western European Lutheranism is thus now turned toward a more external orientation with an emphasis on evangelism and new forms of proclamation among secularized human beings.

The new religious movements also pose an internal threat to the Lutheran churches. Individual pastors and lay people have openly said that Christianity and ideas of reincarnation are not contradictory. This raises acutely an essential theological question for Lutheran churches: What boundaries are there to teaching in the Evangelical Lutheran Church? At a time when conservative-leaning theological movements are calling for biblical and confessional teaching in the Lutheran churches, there also comes from outside the church the demand that it shore up the boundaries around its teaching. For my part I do not doubt that the Lutheran churches of Europe are headed toward a clearer demarcation of the boundaries of evangelical Lutheran teaching. Those in the teaching offices of the churches will increasingly be employed for that task.

The future of Lutheran churches in Western Europe will thus be characterized by acute internal theological tension. In most situations, the provisions for a folk church such as we have in Germany and Scandinavia will be available to sustain the unity of the church. But if the connection between church and state were to be dissolved in Scandinavia, a group of diverse, internally contentious churches would appear. Thus for many the connection to the state is an essential presupposition to securing the unity of the Lutheran church in Scandinavia.

⁴Ahrens, "I have heard the cry," 48.

IV. IN CONCLUSION

A pluralistic picture emerges when one tries to describe tendencies in the Lutheran churches of Western Europe. For good and for evil the institutions of the church are often marked by the time in which they exist. The church, indeed, consists of elements that are both eternal and God-given as well as of human creation. That which is God-given is the Word, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the congregational fellowship. These are the inheritance of the church, delivered to it by the preceding generations, and the sign that it is not merely an association or a political party. The church is God the almighty's building and gift to us. In this gift we find the meaning of our individual lives and the coherence of life itself. To the humanly created elements belong the ordering of the church which characterizes the daily life of our churches. These

ordinances exist to advance the free course of the gospel so that humankind can encounter the God-given faith of the church, an encounter to which the structures of the church must not become an obstacle. When a particular church ordering becomes an obstacle to the free course of the gospel, that ordering ought to be changed. It is created by people and can be changed by people.

One of the greatest problems before the Lutheran churches in Western Europe is the common perception that the ordering of the church is something which cannot be changed—an insufficient discrimination between what is God-given and what is humanly created. In a secularized, pluralistic context like that of Western Europe, however, it is important that church order be flexible and alterable. Only when the Western European Lutheran church fully acknowledges the necessity of change and renewal will we live to see German and Scandinavian churches with the capacity and the will to create church orders which will aid the free course of the gospel.