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A REPORT ON LUTHERAN CHRISTIANS IN THE SOVIET UNION*

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

By **Wilhelm Kahle**

The last 15 years has seen a breaking of the silence concerning the history and present status of Lutheranism in the Soviet Union due to renewed interest by churches in West Germany and increased availability of information concerning the present-day situation of Protestantism in the Soviet Union. This renewed interest in Lutheranism in Eastern Europe was awakened in large part by increased sympathy in England and America for the situation of the Baptists, which was not the case with West German Protestants.

There is plenty to say about the causes for the lack of interest by West German theologians about Lutheranism in the Soviet Union, but this is not the proper place for such a discussion. Suffice it to say that the inner development of the West German Churches after 1945, its failure in a general historical stock-taking, as well as an often naive ecumenism which lost sight of the "relatives of faith" (glaubensverwandten), all played a part. Hence it was possible for the valuable work of the Eastern Churches Institute of Münster, which dealt with Protestantism in the East, to be carried out in isolation. The major sources of information on Eastern European Protestantism can be found in Switzerland, Holland, England, and in Baptist centers in the United States. This isolation can be and is being broken down by Germans and foreign sources working together, whereby West Germans must respect their work and be thankful for others assuming an interest which heretofore had not been present in German churches.

For years these fields of work had not been dealt with at all or only inadequately. Hence the body of German theological work in these areas and the gathering of data have been meager. Up until now only occasional individuals other than theologians have contributed to his pool of information. There is a lack of contacts for those wishing to conduct systematic research as well as funds to conduct such investigations, making it difficult to increase knowledge in a manner common in other facets of theological work.

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The concrete work areas are evident. The theological investigation can not do without eyewitnesses and knowledgeable representatives even if their information is often oversimplified. Such reports are necessary building blocks in developing a comprehensive body of scholarly knowledge. For example, one needs to respect the work of the pastors Bachmann and Schlundt when they report on the resumption of work after 1955. One can be thankful for a report by Bertha Bachman, Erinerungen an Kasachstan [Memories of Kazakhstan] (Wuppertal, 1981), which tells of her path since 1941 in Trudarmya, the organization of forced labor, until the years of unhampered reorganization [of a church] in Kazakhstan. It will also be necessary to make a collection of all of the brief oral and printed comments in which Lutherans in the Soviet Union as well as those who have emigrated to West Germany try to establish their identity and often vehemently express their greatly different concept of the church. The latter issue goes beyond mere brotherly traditional relations within Protestantism to presenting an urgent current question.

Such publications can be of interest to a large audience. This is the case of the work of Harald Vetter, born in the Soviet Union, Gottes Kraft ist in den Schwachen mächtig [God's Strength is Powerful in the Weak]. The author added the subtitle "The Wonder of the Rebirth of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Soviet Union." Such titles and subtitles promise a popular, inspiring presentation of church historical data that has been missing and which need to be combined into a whole that was the expectation with which this critic picked up the book. But he ended his reading highly dissatisfied and disappointed. The title promises information about the present situation of the church. Only the third and last part of the book discusses today's situation; the first two parts treat the history of evangelism in Russia from the Reformation on. There's nothing wrong with repeating history from different aspects; but such an undertaking appears questionable when numerous quotations are made from a publication, Und siehe, wir leben [Look, We are Alive], written in 1977, whose second edition came out the same year (1982) as Vetter's work.¹ It is not clear why many of the quotations used by Vetter are made without additional explanatory statements! The

repetition seems superfluous. In addition, in this historical portion of the book several serious, inexcusable errors are made. On p. 123 it states that Bishop Malmgren was sent into exile in December 1929 and returned five years later, very ill. It should be stated that this false information from 1930 still causes sad misunderstandings (in fact, Malmgren was not interned in a prison camp). Although it is better to go back to one's original source, this information has been passed on from one person to another right up until the year 1982 and it is logical to expect that this will not be the last instance of passing on this misinformation. On p. 97 it states that the church of 1917 was still divided into eight districts [Konsistorialbezirk]. The fact is that the districts had long ago been reorganized into Kurlandic [Kurdländisch], Livic [Livländisch] and Estonian [Estländisch] consistories.

The book even begins with a lack of clarity as on p. 9 one reads: "In the 1970's, Christianity pricked up its ears to hear the surprising news of the existence of Evangelical-Lutheran parishes east of the Urals." What sort of attentive Christianity is this? Was Christianity asleep in the 50's and 60's when this information was already obtained? One only had to read the information publications of the established church, listen to returning POWs or increasing correspondence, or to take a glance at the information of Baptists, Mennonites or churches in exile in order to be aware of the existence of Evangelical-Lutheran Churches east of the Urals long before the 1970's.

Is the reference to such unclarity not exaggerated? We believe that it says something--beyond Vetter's work--about the broken and unclear relationship of domestic German Protestantism to the questions of Protestantism in the Soviet Union. The level of information about churches in South Africa or South America has been, for years, practically decades, more intensive and higher than about the Lutherans of German descent in the Soviet Union who suffered for their origin and church tradition.

One must also mention a word about the Lutherans of other national origins in the Soviet Union. It is more than an embarrassing oversight when, in Vetter's presentation, Lutheranism is naively assumed to be identified only with the German minority. The fact is that the Latvian,

Estonian, and to a lesser degree also Lithuanian and Finnish Lutherans have had a great deal to do with Lutheran life in that country; the bare mention of it on p. 173 is inadequate. Here the Hungarian Reformed in the Carpathian Ukraine are mentioned. The history of the Baltic and Lutheran churches was influenced by the events of 1917 and the civil war in the neighboring Soviet Republic; the years up until 1939/40 were a time of actual Lutheran development in the Baltic states. This period was much shorter than the period from 1941 until today in the Soviet Union.

It is absolutely essential that the presentation and comprehension of Evangelical-Lutheran Church existence include the non-German Lutherans, otherwise the term "Evangelical-Lutheran" will become an empty word shell implying only the religious life of a majority of Germans in the Soviet Union. It appears disdainful for non-German Lutherans practically to be overlooked or insufficiently mentioned. That is all the more important due to the new contacts between Baltic and inner-Asian Lutherans which also pick up on the old history prior to 1917.

In order to understand the Baltic churches, intensive, specialized work will be necessary due to their uniqueness and language difficulties. But this must be done in order to establish an overall view of Lutheranism in the Soviet Union.

Vetter's work leads to further questions. They have to do with the emphasis on statements and phenomena in the church. He practically makes a leitmotiv out of the statement of Bishop Theophil Meyer in Moscow, that the general priesthood of all believers is now realizable (pp. 14, 128, 132, 165). Meyer's statement is falsely given official character. When the bishop made this statement he was referring only to the Moscow congregation which was listening to his sermon. Any contact between fictitious church leadership in Moscow and the scattered congregations throughout the Soviet Union had long since been interrupted. Other congregations, not having heard of Meyer's words, had long since lived according to this maxim, which is part of the common inheritance of the Lutheran Church in Russia.

Vetter comments on the current events in church life saying that

"now a rather clear picture of the events can be gained. The information has only to be gathered and carefully compiled." One would have wished he had taken his own advice and had mentioned the tension present in those events. There is tension regarding the understanding of the relationship of "brotherhood circles" [Brüderkreise] to their leaders. It is simply not the case that the brothers were helpers everywhere in originating and sustaining congregations. The picture of the distribution of power of congregations in the individual regions and republics ought to have been shown more precisely. The question of the relations between Lutherans and Baptists, or to sects is not satisfactorily answered. The appeal to the reader to take an active interest can not compensate for this deficiency.

For the above reasons, Vetter's book can not be considered an adequate contribution to the questions at hand. Further attempts are necessary to present the available information to a greater, interested public.

Translated from German by
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¹Johannes Schleuning, Eugen Bachmann, and Peter Schellenberg, second completely revised edition (Erlangen, 1982). The first edition appeared in 1977.