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Book Review: Church in a Divided World: The Encounter of the Lutheran World Federation with the Cold War

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Lehtonen, Risto. *Church in a Divided World: The Encounter of the Lutheran World Federation with the Cold War*. University of Eastern Finland, 2019, 194 pp. paperback, ISBN 978-952-61-3141-2.

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Research on the mutual impact of Christian churches and the Cold War is proceeding albeit slowly. One of the most important initiators of such research, the prominent church leader Risto Lehtonen of Finland, has now added his own study based on his personal experience in executive positions with the World Student Christian Federation and then more pertinently as Director of the Department of Church Cooperation of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). With occasional direct references to his own role in the historical development of the churches' role in the post-World War II rupture of the world into two hostile camps, the author has based his research, analysis, and evaluation on a wealth of primary sources such as proceedings of the Assemblies of the LWF, reports and archival material of unpublished sources, oral reports, and many secondary sources. Thus, the work has the authenticity of an eyewitness to many of the developments described in the book supported by archival material and published sources.¹

Norman Hjelm, an associate of Lehtonen's at the LWF, has provided a foreword, placing this study and its author into a clear context. The book also contains three appendices, one providing a chronology of events in the political world with a parallel in the Lutheran world. The other is the bibliography and the third is an index of names.

The content of the book can be divided into three main sections, of which only the first two will be included in this review. The first part (pp.15-56) contains the response of the churches in the form of relief to a Europe destroyed by World War II, with emphasis on the work by Lutheran churches and agencies, primarily from the United States and the Scandinavian countries. In addition to relief, the churches entered into ecumenical activity which resulted in the transformation of the Lutheran World Convention into the Lutheran World Federation at its first Assembly in Lund, Sweden, in the summer of 1947, followed by the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Amsterdam just a year later. These great ecumenical achievements took place in the early years of the division of the world into two great blocs, one a

¹ An excerpt and modified version of Risto Lehtonen's book was an article "The Lutheran World Federation under the Cold War" in Julius Filo, ed. *Christian World Community and the Cold War* (Bratislava, Slovakia: Evangelical Theological Faculty of the Comenius University, 2012), pp. 193-238.

Stalinist Marxist Communist and the other a Democratic Capitalist Western, led by the two superpowers, the USSR and USA respectively, often described in shorthand as the East and West. That period, which lasted roughly from 1945 to 1990, is commonly called the Cold War, marking a period which became an enormous challenge in the calling of the Christian community to unity in a divided world. Lehtonen points out that the leaders of the LWF and the WCC faced great challenges at the very beginning of the institutional establishment of these ecumenical organizations as they encountered unprecedented obstacles in operating across the Iron Curtain.

The second and third sections of the book are devoted to two case studies of the Cold War's impact on Lutheran Churches in two countries, Hungary, a member of the Warsaw Pact, which was directly impacted by Soviet domination which determined the policies of that country, and the other Ethiopia, as a part of the Third World in which the rivalries of the two great powers vied for influence and control. The developments in Ethiopia will not be included in this review due to their lack of direct relevance for this publication.

In the first section of the book, Lehtonen describes the readiness of the Christian churches to help in the reconstruction of the churches by the American Lutherans who were able to provide the greatest financial and material aid and leadership and the Scandinavian Lutherans even though they were still restricted by their role as state churches. Lehtonen provides very helpful sketches of the main leaders who spearheaded and gave direction to the process of organizing the LWF. At the first LWF Assembly in Lund, church representatives from Eastern Europe, specifically from Hungary, which had the second strongest Lutheran church in Eastern Europe, were able to participate and a Hungarian bishop, Lajos Ordass, was elected as the second vice-president of the LWF. This was to become a significant factor in the relationship between the LWF and Hungary.

The case study of Hungary (pp. 57-136) provides a fairly detailed overview of the external and internal pressures on the life of this church that played a significant role in the life of its nation from the time of the Protestant Reformation to the end of WWII. Hungary's aspirations to become a pro-Western democracy, after its ill-fated alliance with Nazi Germany during World War II, were stymied by the presence of the Red Army which determined to include Hungary in the Soviet bloc. In the initial postwar years, that takeover was slow and barely perceptible and Hungarian Christians were able to operate in relative freedom as they

reconstructed destroyed church buildings and church-related institutions. By 1947-1948, however, the country was firmly under Stalinist communist rule. Gradually, controls were imposed over the churches, first offering the churches voluntary submission, but subsequently and increasingly brutally requiring supervision and control by the communist government. Lehtonen very skillfully focuses on the courageous attempt by the very capable Bishop Ordass to keep the church proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ in the revolutionary society but this was interpreted by the government as a reactionary rejection of the country's new socialist orientation. Before too long, he was accused, tried, and imprisoned on false charges of currency manipulations. Most of the Lutherans in the country did not believe that the accusation was true nor did the international leadership of the LWF in Geneva, many of whom knew Ordass personally. After attempts to intervene with the Hungarian government on his behalf, the LWF decided to suspend all direct relief and assistance to the Lutheran Church in Hungary. Some aid did continue indirectly through the WCC and intermediary or personal contacts of friends and relatives. The government, however, replaced the leadership of the church with two new bishops (László Dezséry and Lajos Vető) who were more amenable to submit to government control.

The contest between pro-Moscow communists and those communists who believed that Hungary should develop its more independent path into a more humane socialism eventually led to the famed Hungarian Revolt of 1956 with pitched street battles between Soviet tanks and poorly-armed workers and students. During the relatively free period from 1956 to early 1957, Ordass was released from prison and acquitted of all charges, so that he was reinstated as a bishop, along with another former bishop, Zoltán Túróczi. During this short period, cordial relations between the LWF and the Hungarian Lutheran Church were resumed but this was of short duration as the Soviets again imposed a harsh dictatorial regime. Ordass and Túróczi were again replaced with a more amenable church leadership among whom Bishop Zoltán Káldy was the preeminent figure from 1958 to 1987. He was also regarded as a controversial leader but of the opposite orientation from Ordass, favoring a "theology of diakonia" or theology of quiet service in a socialist society. Both among Lutherans worldwide and within Hungary the two men, Ordass and Káldy, became symbols of two approaches to how to be Christian in a communist society—one of courageous non-violent resistance and the other of accommodation and cooperation with the authorities. Neither of them, however, took an ideological position of either opposing or favoring Marxism.

Lehtonen very effectively presents the dilemma, in which he had a personal role, of organizing the 7th LWF Assembly in 1984. Since no such Assembly had as yet taken place in a socialist country, Lehtonen and Paul Hansen of Denmark made some courageous, albeit unauthorized contacts with the controversial Bishop Káldy, which resulted in the Assembly being held in Budapest with the full support of the Hungarian government. This international gathering of Christians had a rather successful public impact upon the population. The Assembly was not without some convulsions as opponents of Káldy circulated a petition against him penned by Pastor Zoltán Dóka.² However, despite the misgivings of a sizeable minority of the Assembly the precedent of electing the presiding local bishop, namely Káldy, to the Presidency of the LWF did take place. For Christians favoring socialism this was a positive development; for those, particularly those who feared a communist takeover of the world, this was a bad choice.

Lehtonen ends his case study on Hungary with a short evaluation, focusing particularly on Bishops Lajos Ordass and Zoltan Káldy concluding that while the two men represented different attitudes on how the church of Jesus Christ should live and act in a socialist society neither was Ordass an ideological supporter of anti-communism nor Káldy an ideological supporter of Marxism; both were authentic Christians despite their controversial roles.

Lehtonen has an accurate and firm grasp of this turbulent period even within Hungary from which it was not easy to get reliable information because of the nature of a closed society. It is, indeed, regrettable that Lehtonen's book does not include a study of the church in the German Democratic Republic, the original "land of Luther" and the only Protestant majority country under Marxist control during the Cold War.³ We do know, however, that he has undertaken studies of churches both in East Germany and the vast expanse of the former Soviet Union. Serious illness prevented his inclusion of those studies in the present publication. His many colleagues and friends throughout the world are heartened by the important work accomplished in the present work. Those of us who have tried to assess the impact of the Cold

² See Zoltan Dóka, "Open letter to President Kíbíra, General Secretary Mau, the LWF Executive Committee, and to all those in the LWF who feel a sense of responsibility for the Hungarian Lutheran Church," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 5 : No. 6 (1984), Article 3.

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³ Indeed, two such studies have appeared in Julius Filo, ed. *Christian World Community and the Cold War*, Katharina Kunter, "Between Active Opposition, Dialogue, and Loyalty: Churches in the GDR, 1970-1989/90" (pp. 120-128) and Christa Grendel, "The Evangelical Churches in the GDR and Their Participation in East-West Cooperation," (pp.129-151).

War on the worldwide Christian community and view how Christians influenced the course of the Cold War owe a debt to Risto Lehtonen not only for enriching our understanding of the topic with this book but even more so for his initiative and organizational efforts to boost this endeavor.