Ziegler's "Doing Theology When God is Forgotten: The Theological Achievement of Wolf Krötke" - Book Review

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the conflicts in the Balkans during the twentieth century. As one raised in Yugoslavia and facile in
the South Slavic languages, he has first-hand acquaintance with the region and can utilize the
numerous sources which remain untranslated in the respective languages. Indeed, this is one of the
main strengths of this volume: Mojzes has carefully worked through the various reports of mass
crimes in the various languages, weighed them (often, as he points out, tendentious in the extreme),
and sought to interpret them responsibly. He points out and repudiates the common Balkan
practice of exaggerating the victim-hood of one’s own nation and minimizing the atrocities it has
committed. He comes to approximate conclusions about the numbers of victims and deals with the
particulars of the ethnic cleansing and genocidal activities as they were visited upon the respective
peoples by their neighbors.

The author makes this material accessible by dealing with the respective mass crimes in
historical sequence, sometimes breaking down a specific historical period into manageable but
related instances in discrete chapters (as, e.g., with World War II and with the wars of the 1990s in
the former Yugoslavia). This approach makes the intricately entangled batches of material
accessible for treatment and more readily understandable for the reader. A major strength of the
manuscript is the evenhandedness of the treatment: Mojzes strives to avoid any partiality or
chauvinism. That puts this volume in contrast to virtually everything on the subject emanating from
the region itself, as well as the literature produced by the expatriates from the respective countries
in the region.

In all this, he plays no favorites: his concern is with acknowledging and identifying what
happened, in order to forestall such horrors from recurring in the region in the future. To that end,
he does not hesitate to name names, assessing the degree to which individuals or groups
contributed to these atrocities. As well, he notes the tainted involvements of western nations, the
United Nations, and NATO in the 1990s, who too often played for easy answers or in their
(understandable) impatience manipulated supposed peace initiatives. In the last chapters he deals
appreciatively with the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia, pointing out the difficulties
under which it has pursued its charge, the considerable success it has had in prosecuting those
accused of mass crimes, and the western nations’ refusal to allow its citizens to be brought before
the tribunal itself.

No other book offers such a thorough, careful, balanced treatment of the topic. The
scholarship is sound: it is careful, even comprehensive (given the limitations of some sources), and
as complete as could be hoped. This is the best book in the field. It is warmly recommended.

Philip G. Ziegler. Doing Theology When God is Forgotten: The Theological Achievement of Wolf Krötke.
Mark Jantzen.

Wolf Krötke is one of most prominent theologians of the former German Democratic
Republic, but is not well known outside of German-speaking circles since relatively little of his
work has been translated. Thus Philip Ziegler’s dissertation at the Toronto School of Theology that
served as the basis for this overview and analysis of Krötke’s theological work is a welcome
introduction for English readers. The main thrust of the book is to examine how Krötke’s theology
uniquely addressed the challenge of speaking about God to people in a culture where due to state
pressure and social transformations God was “forgotten” by most of the inhabitants. At the heart
of Krötke’s approach, according to Ziegler, is an interest in making God, humanity and the church
concrete in the face of and in response to the abstractions of Marxist-Leninist doctrine concerning religion. Krötke, as one would expect of an East German theologian, closely followed the approach of Karl Barth and to a lesser extent Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Krötke was born in 1938 in eastern Germany and educated in the GDR. He spent almost two years in prison for writing satirical poetry during Marxist-Leninist class in the late 1950s. After serving as a pastor, in 1973 he started teaching systematic theology in East Berlin at the Sprachenkonvikt, the eastern half of the church-run seminary that was originally developed by the Confessing Church and was divided by the Berlin Wall in 1961. This school stood in contrast to the theology departments that existed at state universities, including at Humboldt University in East Berlin. In 1991 the Sprachenkonvikt was integrated into the Humboldt University and Krötke served as the first dean and professor there until his retirement in 2004.

After the first chapter that introduces the basics of Krötke biography, chapter two details the context in which he worked. The GDR was the only predominantly Protestant country to be ruled by Communism and church membership and participation rates fell to single digits in much of the country, making it along with Albania the most “dechristianized” areas of Europe. Little has changed in these statistics in the twenty years since the fall of the wall. Krötke’s theology attempts to orient the church and the pastors he educated to the task of proclaiming the gospel in a new minority situation that he characterizes as Gottesvergessenheit (having forgotten God). The term is more helpful for Krötke than atheism since it speaks to the everyday practice of most people, who are not necessary ideological or well-informed atheists. The task of the church is to find effective language to offer a “new announcement of the reality of God.” (27)

For Krötke, as the third chapter makes clear, the church’s need to speak to practical atheists leads to a sharp rejection of philosophical and anthropological arguments for God or for humans’ intrinsically religious nature. Such appeals to natural theology fail for Krötke because they do not take atheists seriously as human beings but rather insist that they acknowledge their own religious nature first before turning to talk of God. He counters that Christian theology should instead focus on scripture and on Jesus as a concrete experience of God. Speaking of this history as the event of God in Jesus makes Christianity concrete, if strange, but since there is not getting around the strangeness of God in talking with atheists, Krötke argues the church must not seek to abstract it.

Many of these arguments are sharpened in chapter four on the “Evangelical Concreteness of Humanity.” Citing Barth and Bonhoeffer against aspects of Wolfhart Pannenberg and Karl Rahner, Krötke rejects the attempt to define religious thinking as essentially humanizing because that approach must end with insisting that atheists are less than human. Since he can find no path from a philosophical God to the Christian God, he sees no point in making moves in that direction. Indeed the compulsion to adopt a religious anthropology is for Krötke analogous to the compulsion exercised by Marxist thought.

The final major chapter on the church takes up the oft-cited East German disconnect between a Volkskirche (people’s church) without people. Krötke is particularly critical of the two types of ecclesiastical abstraction. The first is a church that defines itself as that of the clergy and the administration providing services to the people who may otherwise be completely uninvolved in and uninformed about the church. The second and related practice is that of a church that maintains itself in every corner of territory even where there are hardly any members. Nonetheless both of these attitudes describe for the most part the current reality of the Protestant Church in eastern Germany. The mentality of the Volkskirche turned out to be even harder to remove from people’s heads than knowledge of and belief in Christian teachings. As a response Krötke calls for renewed emphasis on worship and for more expectations of involvement and service to others for
members. Other potential avenues to renewal are noted but not pursued, such as rejecting infant baptism to ensure more commitment from members as some East German Protestants have advocated.

Ziegler offers an excellent and accessible overview of Krötke’s substantial theological output, along the way demonstrating how the context of mass practical atheism both challenges and reinvigorates Christian theology. The biggest weakness of the book in my view is the lack of attention to the concrete social context of theological education in the GDR and to divisions within Protestant theology there. The main avenues of Krötke’s concern in this volume are Marxist thought and western theologians and other possible streams in the GDR were not addressed, despite the fact that the majority of pastors were educated in the theology departments of the six (not four as claimed by Ziegler) state universities, where it is claimed that theology could not thrive (1). Especially in Berlin the conformist approach of the theological faculty at Humboldt University was likely the veiled target of Krötke’s assertions about the need for a distinctly Christian witness, but this possibility is nowhere addressed. Likewise the difficult issues raised by the widely varying personal responses of Protestant individuals and leaders to state pressure are not addressed even in the section that deals with how to rebuild the church in the aftermath of Communist rule. All the same, this volume’s engagement with theology in the face of practical mass atheism is a good starting place for Christians and scholars who are interested in this challenge, one that is starting to sound more familiar to many in the west. Here we have an excellent opportunity to learn from the experiences of others who have for decades already been doing theology in a radically secularized society.

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*History and Mission in Europe* is a collection of twenty-one essays honoring the varied contributions and influence of Walter Sawatsky, particularly in Europe. As reflected in the title, Sawatsky’s work has focused on historical writings and mission activities. Hence, this volume is divided into three sections—history, missions, and future directions. He communicates in three languages: English, Russian, and German. Thus the essays are in these three languages—sixteen in English, three in Russian, and two in German. For the non-English chapters, there is an abstract in English. Moreover, most—but not all—the essays address issues relating to Anabaptist type churches and communities in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and Russia.

Chapter one is the preface. In his historical writings and mission work, Sawatsky was careful to understand the historical and cultural context of his various activities. Chapter two, “Taking Contextual Influences Seriously,” addresses his various roles: church ambassador, church missiologist, and church historian. Chapter three, “A sower went out,” regards Sawatsky as sowing seeds of the good news of Jesus in various parts of the world. Chapter four begins the historical section. As the title indicates—“The Religious Life of the Mennonites in the Mid-1920s through the Eyes of the Soviet Political Police”—examines the religious policy of the Soviet authorities during the 1920s.

Unknown to many and often forgotten is the Mennonite self defense force in South Russia during the Russian Civil War. Chapter five, “The Selbstschutz: A Mennonite Army in Ukraine, 1918,” chronicles this experience. Chapter six focuses on theological education in Eastern Europe