Vajta's "Die Diakonische Theologie in Gesellschaftssystem Ungarns" - Book Review

Joseph Pungur
University of Alberta

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree
Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol8/iss6/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.
BOOK REVIEW

Vilmos Vajta: "Die Diakonische Theologie in Gesellschaftssystem Ungarns"

Professor Vilmos Vajta is one of the most distinguished Hungarian Lutheran theologians living abroad. He was professor at various Universities in Europe and always closely followed the life, leadership and theology of his native Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hungary. He is considered a leading expert of that Church.

His book, published in German under the above-mentioned title, is titled in English: "The Theology of Diaconia in the System of Hungarian Society." In the first part he offers a description, analysis and criticism of the so-called "Theology of Diaconia" - the official theology of the Church. In the second part of his book he deals with the Christian-Marxist dialogue in its Hungarian context.

On the opening pages Professor Vajta talks about the beginning of the Theology of Diaconia and its basic ideas (pp. 11-38). He makes it clear that it does not refer to the traditional "Church Diaconia," that is, of charity which was so characteristic of the 19th century home mission movement. Rather it is a new phenomenon in theology, which gradually came into existence in the Evangelical Lutheran Church after World War Two. It means "Diaconia for Society" (Gesellschaftliche Diakonie).

The roots of this Theology may be found in the Reformed Church of Hungary. Bishop Tibor Bartha of the Reformed Church traces its commencement to the end of 1944 with the sermon of the late Bishop Imre Révész delivered at the opening session of the Provisional National Assembly at Debrecen, the biggest town in East Hungary, under the control of the Soviet Army. In the following years Bishop Albert Beretzky and his circle (Sándor Makkai and János Victor) gave a new turn to this new theology by saying that the nation and the Church are under the judgement of God for their sins committed in the past. As a consequence of this the old society is disappearing and for the church only a "narrow way" is open toward the future by the mercy of God.

Elemér Kocsis, a former professor and now a Bishop, is one of the representatives of the so-called "Theology of Service" of the Reformed Church. He underlines the importance of an "Agreement" struck between the state and the Reformed Church in 1948. Among other things this statement said: "The Church has to take seriously the social teachings of Jesus Christ" (p. 14). This in practice means not only to accept the objectives of a Socialist Revolution but to offer help in realizing them.
Karl Barth, who visited Hungary in 1948, endorsed this new theological trend. However, later he wrote a letter to Bishop Beretzky in which his warnings were voiced. Despite Barth's warning and despite the insurgence of 1956 the relationship between Church and State not only existed but deepened - a it is stated by the "Teaching of the Synod 1967."

Elemér Kocsis summarizes the tenets of "Theology of the Serving Church." The basis of this theology is Christ the Lord who served others. This serving Christ is an analogue for the Church. Consequently Christ's example must be followed by a serving Church. Out of this flows the basic principle that the Church acknowledges the validity of the socialist revolution, that it abandons the theory of private property in favor of collective property and that a new socialist patriotism will be followed. The problems of the family in the changing socialist society are also to be addressed, and participation in the socialist-oriented Peace Movement is expected.

Next the author turns to the Lutheran Church and deals first of all with the case of Bishop Lajos Ordass. While the change of the theological basis of the Reformed Church occurred rather smoothly, the events took a different turn in the Lutheran Church. There were two important issues on which Bishop Ordass and the state could not agree. These were the nationalization of the church schools and the autonomy of the Church.

Bishop Zoltán Turóczy seemed to be ready for some kind of compromise but Bishop Ordass stood his ground. Consequently he became the target of the onslaught of the government-owned mass media. Finally he was arrested, prosecuted and imprisoned on trumped up charges of "currency offences". This was the fact also of the General Inspector and the General Secretary of the Church. Bishop Ordass wanted to lead his Church on the road of the German and Norwegian Confessing Churches.

Soon a new leadership appeared in the Church including Bishop Lajos Vető, Bishop László Dezséry, along with General Inspectors Ernő Mihályfi and József Darvas. A process of rehabilitation of Bishop Ordas has been launched just before the insurgence of October, 1956. The resignation of the Church leadership at the end of October 1956 actually hastened the come-back of Bishop Ordas and Bishop Turóczy, and the state recognized both of them.

Problems emerged rather quickly when the state wanted to "normalize" the relationship on the basis on an "Agreement" between the state and the Church in 1948. The old problem of "Church Autonomy" came up again. The struggle ended with the dismissal of the two bishops. Bishop Vető was reinstated in the Northern Diocese, and Zoltán Káldy—a former senior—was elected Bishop of the Southern Diocese. He was the sole candidate approved by the state.
Bishop Káldy wrote an article in the *Church Weekly* in July 6, 1958, entitled: "How can we go forward?" In it the contours of the "Theology of Diaconia" are present. Bishop Káldy emphasized that the Church has to serve God in a socialist society and he warned against false alternates which were: 1. Saying "No" to socialism (there is no need for "Confessing Church"); 2. an unconditional accommodation with the state; 3. a church not interested in the surrounding world; 4. a mingling with socialist ideology. He concluded that "the Church must be a Church in a socialist society" (preaching, administering the sacraments and rendering the service of love).

Bishop Káldy and a circle of theologians, mostly professors, such as M. Pálfy, E. Ottlyk, Gy. Nagy, K. Prohle, Gy. Groó and T. Fabinyio worked out the basic tenets of the Theology of Diaconia and systematized them. This theology has been accepted as the official theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hungary. (p. 39). The biblical foundation of this theology is in Matthew 20:28 where Jesus said: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." In this theology Christ is understood as "Diakonos" which is one of his "Kyrios titles" (p. 45).

Professor Vajta evokes an incident at the Executive Meeting of the Lutheran World Federation, Budapest, 1984. Here Rev. Zoltán Dóka in his open letter criticized the Theology of Diaconia by saying that "Diakonia" is not a central theme of the New Testament; neither in the Synoptics nor in the Johannine or the Pauline literature. "Diakonia" in the New Testament context simply means the service around the Table where the Life of Jesus Christ is a ransom for many.

Besides an exegetical problem there exists a systematic one as well, namely how does this Theology of Diaconia relate to the theology of Luther and to the standards of faith? The Theology of Diaconia defines "Diakonia" in a wide sense, transforming it into a "Social-ethical Diakonia", which includes the questions of the society and that of humanity. This kind of "Diakonia" is also the task of the Church, insist the representatives of this theology. Jesus sent out his disciples not only to preach the good news of the Kingdom of God but to cast out deamons and to heal illnesses.

Professor Vajta's opinion is that apparently this theology does not distinguish between the work of God and the work of the human being. Bishop Káldy often said that "A Church which only preaches the Gospel is not a Church at all" (p. 50). This theological thinking led to the situation—and here Professor Vajta quotes Rev. Doka's open letter—in which "The Theology of Diaconia is subjected to a social-ethical conception. This ethical ideologization steals away the merciful word of God for the sinners... This false theological basis of the Theology of Diaconia makes the theological thinking and the preaching of the ministers uncertain" (p. 51).
After having dealt with the historical background and the main tenets of this theology, Vajta analyses the four "Wrong Ways" (Irrwege) of the Church, which are: "Hierocracy" (The Church is in dominant position in the society); "Conformism" (by identifying itself with the society, the Church actually becomes a servant); "Ghetto" existence (the Church separates itself from the society out of a false pietism); and the way of "Opposition" (antagonism towards the surrounding society). Avoiding these ways the Church is following the "fifth way" of the Theology of Diaconia which is allegedly the only right way. Here Vajta warns that, beside other lacks it lacks critical self-examination. Only this would prevent it from slipping toward the "good works" i.e.; to disrespect the "justification by faith in Christ's saving work and lead toward justification by work". This is the most important question in Lutheran theology and no church or theology can neglect it (pp. 72-110).

Professor Vajta reminds the readers that one has to consider the content of the Theology of Diaconia, i.e. Marxist-Leninist socialism with a dominant state ideology. This regards the Theology of Diaconia as an ideology and calls upon it to enter dialogue. Despite the differences in ideologies, church and state find common goals to pursue such as peace, security, disarmament, elimination of nuclear weapons, peaceful coexistence and social progress. The church entered into a friendly alliance with the political program of the regime. Whether this behavior of the church is theologically neutral remains an open question (p. 112).

The final part of the book deals with the dialogue between theologians and Marxists (pp. 117 ff). Where a working-together exists a dialogue between the partners is at hand. It arrived in the '80s. A symposium of Marxists and Protestant theologians was held in Debrecen in 1981. It aimed to help the Protestant churches to find their place in a socialist society. There was a second consultation at Sopron in 1983 (Luther's year). The third conference was held at the Hungarian Academy of Science at Budapest. This prestigious institution organized an International Consultation of theologians and Marxist philosophers on the theme of War and Peace. Karl Rahner, Wolfhart Pannenberg and Erwin Falbusch were among the speakers.

In the final chapters of the book Vajta studies such issues of the Theology of Diaconia as: "The meaning of Lutheran Theology and Karl Marx's Criticism of Religion" (p. 125 ff); "Individual and Community: The Collective" (pp.134 ff); "Man and History: Progress" (pp. 140 ff); "Church and Society: The Problem of Structure" (pp. 149 ff) and lastly, "Church and Peace: The World Catastrophe" (pp. 164 ff).
Professor Vajta's book is an objective and excellent analytical work on the present history, current theology, everyday-life, the struggle and problems of the Evangelical lutheran Church of Hungary in a Marxist and atheist society.

Dr. Joseph Pungur
University of Alberta
Calgary, Alb. Canada