

Theological Observer

Martin Stephan: The Other Side of the Story or At Least Part of It

For over a half a century, Walter O. Foerster's *Zion on the Mississippi* (CPH, 1953) introduced seminary students to the circumstances of the 1839 Lutheran Saxon immigration which led in 1847 to the founding of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), whose chief architect was C. F. W. Walther. The formidable leader in the emigration was the now less-known Martin Stephan, pastor of St. John's in Dresden, who gathered confessional-minded Lutherans for the voyage to America. Chosen as bishop on January 14, 1839, as the four ships waited to dislodge their Lutheran passengers in New Orleans on January 29, his episcopacy was short lived. His relations with Louise Guenther, which came to light in her confession on May 5 to Pastor G. H. Loeber, led to his expulsion from the Perry County colony on May 30 and his being escorted across the Mississippi to Illinois, where he died on January 26, 1846. Like the English Pilgrims two hundred years before, these Lutherans had found it increasingly more difficult to practice their faith in a land whose king was Roman Catholic and whose Lutheran pastors were enamored with the Lutheran-Reformed détente in neighboring Prussia. Though two centuries separate the two migrations, their stories are strikingly similar: flight from oppressive government intrusion, chartering a ship, making a compact (charter) with regulations before landing, the prominence of clerical leadership, and the eventual disbanding of the colony.

During my seminary days (1955-1960), I came to know Phil Stephan, who spoke of his forefather, the ill-fated Bishop Martin Stephan. When I saw that the author of *In Pursuit of Religious Freedom: Bishop Martin Stephan's Journey* ([Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008], 327 pages, hardcover) was a certain Philip G. Stephan, I had to assume this was my classmate. Here he tells the other side of the story, which he and other family members have long desired to tell. Fascinatingly told, the book is well documented. Its thirty-three chapters are clustered under eight parts, followed by six appendices containing community regulations, Stephan's investiture as bishop, and O. H. Walther's hymns written for the sea voyage from Bremen across the Atlantic. Parts one through four tell of the origins of the Saxon Emigration Society and those of Martin Stephan's family in Bohemia, his ministry at St. John's in Dresden, his legal problems over his religious and personal activities, his wife and family, and his departure for America. Part five tells of the group's internal problems, which were exacerbated by a hostile press in St. Louis. Stephan's deposition as bishop is told in part six. Part seven relates his last years in Illinois (1839-1846), his vindication in the courts, and his four-month pastorate in Red Bud, Illinois. In part eight, the author reflects on his forefather's place in history.

A certain bias can be expected in a book written by a descendant of its subject, but in this case it is a useful antidote in coming to terms with a man who, in spite of his infractions, tilled the ground from which the LCMS sprang. Even those who became his critics admired his preaching and his counseling skills, which drew admirers from all over Germany. He and his wife Julia, a woman of high social rank, had twelve children, four of whom died. Three daughters were born deaf and were later institutionalized. Family problems were exacerbated by legal charges, among which was organizing a sect. These proved to be unfounded. Before Stephan left Germany he was placed under house arrest for one year and could not minister to his congregation. He suffered from eczema, especially on his feet, a disease often caused by anxiety, and sought relief at the baths in Radeberg, a village twenty miles away from Dresden. There he gathered a group of followers, Louise Guenther among them. In her twenties and about thirty years younger than Stephan, she emigrated with him, was in charge of acquisitions for the society, and served as his housekeeper in his last years. This relationship has arguably prevented putting his detractors under the same scrutiny they applied to him and allowed others to attribute to him views he did not hold. For example, Stephan was not a chiliast, as Paul Burgdorf claimed (54).

The most intriguing, and perhaps tragic, part of Stephan's life is told in part six, "Deposing a Bishop." Shortly after arriving in this country, Stephan encountered bad press in St. Louis about his handling of the Emigration Society's property. When Pastor Georg Loeber shared Louise Guenther's confession with Pastors Keyl, Buerger, and C. F. W. Walther, they were embarrassed by their published defense of their bishop (May 4, 1839), which they retracted on May 27. Assisting them in their intent to remove Stephan were the attorneys Vehse and Marbach (182). Louise Guenther was unaware that her private confession had become the reason for deposing Stephan as bishop. Though all this had become public knowledge, only on May 28 was Stephan confronted by a deposition signed by the pastors demanding his resignation. These pastors served as his accusers and his judges in requiring him to leave the community. At first Stephan refused what he considered an illegally constituted tribunal, but, in seeing a mob armed with whips outside his cabin, he acquiesced and was deprived of his possessions. He was bodily searched and was given only a shovel and pick to make a living and clothing which did not ward off the cold of winter (190, 237-238). His being forcibly taken to Illinois could legitimately be seen as kidnapping (247). Stephan's last years (1839-1846) were lived in pathetic misery. Once he returned to the colony for medicine, food, and clothing, but was refused. Loeber went to Kaskaskia to give him communion under the condition that he sign a confession. He refused (229). Four months before his death he became the pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Red Bud, Illinois, where he lies buried.

In the minds of his accusers and in common synod folklore, Stephan deserved all the misfortune he experienced, but this hardly exonerates those

who administered it. First, a confession made privately to a pastor is privileged information. It is one thing to ask the advice of other clergy and another thing to make it public, as Loeber and others did. On July 7, the same pastor told the congregation that two or three other women had come forward with the same claims. One of them wrote a letter withdrawing her allegations. Though current LCMS guidelines disallow making confessions public, the disposal of Stephan might be a warning for some to withhold potentially disastrous sins from their pastor (200–201). What was then considered a sacrament is looked on with suspicion now. Another unresolved issue is the society's forcing Stephan to surrender his personal belongings and property. Stephan's son, also Martin (V), returned to Germany where he studied architecture. After his mother's death, he returned to St. Louis and graduated from the seminary (1853). Walther's attitude to him as a student, and then as a pastor, was hardly positive. On one occasion the younger Martin was publicly called a "Judas." The book recounts how the seminary president persuaded him to relinquish all claims to the family property (269). This harassment continued into his ministry. He used his architectural skills acquired in Germany to design buildings for the seminary and several churches. The amazing legacy of the Stephan family is that, in spite of both proven and unproven allegations against their forefather, four generations served as pastors in the synod.

While the synod's crucial events 170 years ago may seem remote, those who choose to ignore them, as they are presented from another perspective, are depriving of themselves of coming face to face with an account of how we came to be as a synod. Things may not be as golden as we thought. The Lutheran Saxon experiment in Missouri was, in a way, an attempt to set up the kingdom of God on earth (hence the title *Zion on the Mississippi*). Quakers were doing the same thing in New Harmony, Indiana, as were the Mormons, first in Nauvoo, Illinois, and eventually in Salt Lake City. This is the dilemma of any church which sees itself as the true, visible church on earth. It may be that there is a little bit of chiliasm in our history, but then reality sets in. These Lutheran immigrants exchanged one set of problems in Germany for another set in America. Some of the problems faced in Germany in the first half of the nineteenth century reared their heads in the latter half of the twentieth century in America and, ironically, in St. Louis where the forefathers had come to find refuge from them. If there is a parable here, it is that we can never run away from problems without exchanging them for others, or maybe the same ones.

Should *In Pursuit of Religious Freedom* have a rightly deserved second printing, a few changes might be in order. In reference to a church government supervised by a bishop, "episcopal" should be substituted for "Episcopal" (e.g., 267), which refers to a denomination. German verbs appearing in an English language manuscript should be lower case (*erweckt*), not upper case (29). Nouns are reversed: not *beichtvater* but *Beichtvater* (65), preferably in italics. Followers of Pietism at the University of Leipzig are called "Disciples of Christ" (67) but should be "disciples of Christ." The third ship carrying the

Saxon immigrants arrived on January 12, 1839, not 1838 (129). Since its passengers left on November 12, 1838, they would have arrived in New Orleans before they left Bremen. Loeber's Rogate Sermon, which stirred the conscience of Louise Guenther, was preached on May 5, 1839, not March 5 (179). "Sacrament of holy absolution" should be either all lower or upper case, not both (266). "Emigration Society," yes, but the author does not address why they used the title "Society" (e.g., 8-9).

Its author has not yet responded to my letter sent in care of his publisher to confirm that we were once seminary classmates. If the heroic element of Bishop Stephan's story is that his family continued to give pastors to the LCMS for over a century after he was deposed, the tragic element is that the one descendant who wrote a book to show the other side of the story is no longer a pastor of the synod of which his great-great-grandfather was really the patriarch. Other classmates took the same path. That is a tragedy, too. Some have left the church. This is still even a worse tragedy, all of which is the subject for some other historian to recount.

David P. Scaer

Religious Belief in the USA: The Need for Creedal Christianity

The latest report of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life on the religious landscape of the United States mostly gives a picture of a deeply religious nation, though with changing beliefs (<http://religions.pewforum.org/reports#>). Sixty-five percent say that religion is important in their life, and 92 percent believe in God. This is impressive data, especially if compared to similar polls in Western Europe. I cannot help but be impressed by the vitality of religion and the sheer number of people active in churches here compared to my homeland, Germany.

For decades the United States has defied the secularization thesis, that the growth of an industrial society, with science replacing religion as the way to explain the world, leads inevitably to a decline of religious beliefs, which are relegated to the backwaters or to the economically deprived—a variation on the theme that religion is the opium of the masses, numbing their pain, just that the proposed solution is not socialism but scientism. For decades Peter Berger, professor of sociology at Boston University, has deconstructed this hypothesis, and books like *The New Faithful* by Colleen Carrol show the resurgence of traditional religion among the younger generation. The growth of Christianity in the developing world and the less-welcome resurgence of Islam seem to refute the smug thesis of secular Western Europeans and their American counterparts that they are the *avant garde* of history. Thus, all is well on this side of the Atlantic.

Well, not quite. Religion is strong, but not necessarily what the readers of this journal would define as orthodox Christianity. Although 92 percent

believe in God, only 60 percent believe that he is personal; the rest waver between "impersonal force" or "both" (personal God and impersonal force). Sixty-three percent believe that the Bible is the word of God, but only 33 percent believe that it is literally the word of God. Evangelical Protestants, among whom the researchers grouped The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, score high on this question (59%), but mainline Protestants (among them the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America) scored rather low (22%). Although a majority believe in absolute right and wrong on moral issues, only a slight majority (52%) of evangelical Protestants say that their ethical views are mostly shaped by their religion, while the majority of other beliefs rely on "practical experience and common sense." Not surprisingly, among all believers, belief in the existence of hell is less popular than belief in heaven.

What is most surprising and alarming, though, is the fact that a majority of believers in all groups hold that there is more than one way to heaven. The blight of relativism has infected Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Only cultic groups like Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses resist. This is disconcerting because it contradicts not some outdated philosophical notion about "absolute truth," but the core Christian confession that, though there are many who are called gods and lords, there is but one God and one Lord, Jesus Christ (1 Cor 8:4-6). The "I believe in my way but yours might be just as good" attitude is not only a threat to a narrowly defined confessional Lutheranism, it is also a threat to a creedal Christianity that believes the true faith can be articulated, confessed, and distinguished from misbelief.

In turning to a religion that is eclectic and "non-dogmatic" (i.e., subscribing to the dogma of inclusivity and condemning the dogma of exclusivity), modernity and its tail, post-modernity, shape beliefs, not by destroying them completely, as the secularization thesis assumed, but by assimilating them and transforming them into a benign therapeutic model that is served cafeteria-style. In this surrounding, the church is more than ever challenged to confess clearly Christ as the one and only Lord and to be a creedal church. That includes a strong emphasis on life-long catechesis. Her loving care to those inside and outside the church will witness that such strong commitment to the one Lord is not hateful but an expression of love to those who are in need of this one Lord.

Roland F. Ziegler

Erratum

In *CTQ* 72:1 (January 2008), the word "death" in the Dio Chrysostom quotation on page 8 (fifth line from the bottom) should read "dearth."