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Confessional Lutheranism in Eighteenth Century Germany

Vernon P. Kleinig

In his highly original treatment of German Protestant apologetics in the nineteenth century, Der Kampf um das Christentum,¹ Werner Elert has shown how the apologists who thought they were defending the Christian faith were often the ones who ended up compromising it the most; because they were operating with an inadequate or incorrect conception of the Christian faith. This study, however, will examine the apologetic methods and content of the three bestknown Lutheran apologists of the eighteenth century. Here the problem is different than Elert's; we are more concerned to see why it was that people with a correct understanding of the Christian faith were unconvincing in their apologetic efforts. It may be helpful first, however, if we take some note of the background against which the three Lutherans under study here-Valentin Loescher, Melchior Goeze, and Georg Hamann-were operating. Here the emphasis will be not so much on the leading philosophical currents of the time, which have already been adequately examined elsewhere as on some contemporary figures who are worthy of more attention.

Fidelity to the Lutheran symbols was by no means as dead in the eighteenth century as the historical textbooks would lead us to believe. Since, however, confessionalism was no longer the fashionable thing or the leading tendency of the day, its survival has usually been considered unworthy of mention. Here we need to view its survival in terms of two different periods-up to 1740, when there were still a considerable number of theologians who held to Lutheran orthodoxy and the concept of pure doctrine was still understandable, and 1740-1786, when there remained in the main only isolated areas which still had pastors who adhered to the symbols of the Lutheran Reformation. There were men, in the first place, like Erdmann Neumeister, G. Wernsdorf, E. S. Cyprian, and M. H. Reinhardt, who were theologians sharing Loescher's ortho-Rostock, Wittenberg, Leipzig, and, to a lesser extent, doxv. Tübingen, and Giessen were still orthodox. Then, too, there were the confessional Pietists, Christian Gerber, Johann Bengel, J. F. Buddeus, Benjamin Schmolk, and Christian Scheidt, to name a few. It is debatable, indeed, whether any of these should even be called Pietists, since most of them spoke out against the excesses of the movement and repeatedly affirmed their loyalty to the Lutheran Confessions. In many of these we see the best of orthodoxy and of pietism coming together. Bengel was not in favor of changing the confessions and spoke of cheerfully subscribing them (*bona fide cum libertate animi*). And if we look at K. G. Kietmann's list of pastors still loyal to the Augsburg Confession in Saxony, the number is quite impressive. In his *Geschichte der Evangelische Kirche* Rudolf Rocholl claims that the Lutheran Church never had more loyal preachers than it had in the first half of the eighteenth century.

After 1750, however, the lines become harder to distinguish and our information less ample. Yet it ought to be noted that there was still a big enough demand in 1762 for J. F. Cotta to edit and bring out a new edition of Johann Gerhard's Loci Theologici. The notes show how orthodox Cotta was, and his brother was hardly the sort of person who would publish such a huge tome as Loci Theologici unless it was expected to sell. In 1758, again, the Tübingen faculty was still defending the Lutheran teaching on Holy Communion. In answer to the opposition which ensued, the reply of J. G. Walch and J. A. Ernesti (Brevis Repetitio et Assertio Sententiae Lutheranae) in 1765 was unyielding. These latter two both wrote famous studies on the symbols, as did also Professor J. E. Schubert of Griefswald. Other worthy adherents of the old Lutheran faith include F. V. Reinhard of Dresden, P. H. Brandt of Altdorf, Count Reventlow, Buchrucker of Bavaria, S. F. Trescho of Mohrungen (Herder's tutor), J. H. Ress (who made a famous reply to Lessing), D. Schumann of Hanover, and J. F. Burg of Silesia. In 1773 a controversy occurred in Jena when a student asserted the similarity of justification and predestination.²

I. Valentin Ernst Loescher

A. Loescher's Life and Works

Valentin Loescher was born in 1673, the son of a professor of theology in Wittenberg, where Loescher himself began his studies, first in history and then in theology. In 1694 he began his epochmaking lectures on the influence of Descartes and the misuse of philosophy in theology since Descartes' time. He undertook some archeological research in 1694, while in the following year he visited Amsterdam, Leyden, Antwerp, Utrecht, Copenhagen, and other cities of western Europe, to use their libraries and to meet important intellectuals there. He chose to spend the greatest amount of time in Holland, because it was the intellectual frontier of Europe at the time; and, while there, he met the historian M. Leydeccer and other opponents of Descartes. In 1697 Loescher became co-editor of Acta Eruditorum, Germany's leading intellectual journal, while in 1701 he inaugurated Germany's first theological journal, Alles und Neues oder Unschuldige Nachrichten, through which he came to be considered the leading Lutheran theologian of his time. In 1702 he took up a parish in Delitzsch where he immediately began initiating a host of reforms in education, the visitation of homes, and ecclesiastical welfare and supervision, suggesting fellowship-meals in order to strengthen ties among the people of the parish. He also issued the first pastoral magazine Evangelische Zehnten. Somehow in the midst of all of these things (trying some twenty-five different methods of preaching), he managed to keep up his scholarly pursuits, publishing a study of Hebrew (in 1704) in order to improve exegesis of the Old Testament, a history of the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches, and an exposure of the philosophy of the Enlightenment (in 1707).

In 1707 Loescher accepted a call to Wittenberg, where he immediately set about raising the importance of exegesis and initiating pastoral work among students. He was, indeed, so loved by the students that he was compared with Melanchthon; apparently no professor since Melanchthon had been read or applauded so much by the students.³ In 1709 Loescher accepted the call to Dresden, the metropolis of Lutheranism in Germany and the leading cultural centre of Germany. Here he was to stay as superintendent until his death forty years later (in 1749), despite calls to many good university posts. He wanted to live in Dresden, where he could witness the cultural and intellectual changes of the day, rather than be isolated from them in a university town. Here he continued his reforms, establishing poor-schools and orphanages, wrote textbooks on theology for laity and for teachers, tutored theological students, promoted home-devotions and funds for the poor, and in every way sought to bind together ecclesiastical doctrine and ecclesiastical life. In Dresden he produced his famous studies on the nature of Pietism (1711 and 1717) and his history of the Middle Ages and the

Reformation. Loescher was instrumental in preventing a union between the Reformed and Lutheran churches: but he also did his utmost to bring about agreement with the Pietists. The culmination of this enterprise was a joint statement of the orthodox theologians in 1716 (the fruit of his long attempts to form a union of orthodox theologians) and the Merseburg Conference with the Pietist leaders in 1719, which Zinzenndorf helped bring about. After these accomplishments Loescher's attention turned to a study of the new philosophies of his time (Noethige Reflexiones in 1724), and after ten years of further study, his study on the limits of philosophy (Quo Ruitis in 1735-1739). In 1736 he went out of his way to intervene on behalf of the Herrnhutters and show that, although they had a different church-order, they were still loyal Christians. He then turned to a study of exegesis on the basis of Bengel's works and also of English authors. In 1747 he was responsible for holding back the plundering of Dresden by Leopold von Dessau, while his last letter in 1749 was a request to Hofmann to care for the Pietists. Loescher left behind a library of eighty thousand books and a valuable collection of ancient coins.

B. Loescher's Critique of Rationalist Theology

Already in his book of 1692 Loescher sharply perceived that the greatest threat to Christianity lay not in Pietism, but in the new direction which philosophy was taking. Even in his first lectures on philosophy in 1694 he saw that the skepticism and subjectivism of Descartes would lead to far-reaching consequences. He established, in consequence, an order in apologetics. The most intense level of zeal is to be directed against atheists and heathen; the second most intense against those who despised the New Testament as revelation (Jews, Turks, and naturalists); the third most intense against the heretics of Christendom; and the fourth and mildest level against Protestant schismatics. He goes on to say that zeal is to be directed against errors, not against people, to whom obligations of love apply. E. W. Zeeden, at the same time, rightly says that Loescher's confessional attachment, while milder in form than that of his predecessors, is stricter in substance.⁴ Although he saw in Descartes the greater danger, it is against Christian Thomasius, the politician and jurist who was actually putting into practice the thoughts let

loose on western Europe by Descartes, that Loescher directed his strongest attacks, since he felt that to fight Thomasius was also to fight Descartes. It was for apologetic reasons, then, that Loescher founded the first theological magazine in Germany, *Unschuldige Nachrichten* (1701-1749). This journal was to become his main apologetic tool and a focal point for the orthodox, since, as well as critiques, the magazine contained reviews of all sorts of new and old books (even ones in English), historical articles, sermonic aids, and devotional material. Loescher felt such a journal was badly needed to aid pastors, teachers, and congregations in the defence of the gospel.

Loescher showed his new understanding of what was going on by writing against Thomasius already in the foreword to the first edition of his journal: "the incomparable politician . . . through public writings is doing here what others are in Holland-propagating indifferentism. What damage he has brought with his Ahithophelian counsel. Other writings are not being used as widely as his." Loescher sees behind the political rhetoric to the real danger; as he goes on to say, the real threat to Lutheranism lay in this, that its rulers were imbibing the French Enlightenment in the material propagated by Thomasius. "It is time we point out to our rulers the bias in this literature," he continues. Thomasius represents not so much individual new ideas as a whole new form of existence, for behind all his talk of tolerance and freedom of conscience is his absolute state, a state ultimately free of God; he promotes a natural inner law and an invisible church living in all churches, even in religious sects. Everything external in the church should be under the iurisdiction of the state, according to Thomasius. The worst error of Thomasius lies in changing truth to suit his own goal of an absolute state. Loescher sees the religious indifference of the rulers and the political non-religiosity of the absolutism promoted by Thomasius rendering all the old guarantees of the church useless; and the indifference of rulers to these ideas is worst precisely in the Lutheran lands. Loescher claims: "The widespread and crass indifferentism, wearing pretty clothes, dwells in the homes of our kings and princes and, like a bad root, yields so much corrupt fruit."5 A church reduced to subjective inwardness can do nothing against this absolutism. Loescher reminds his Pietist friends. "More than

individual moral and civic renewal is needed, for if we do not become politically involved, this only helps the spread of religious indifferentism. We need to become rooted in the means of grace if we are to deal with the problem" (1706, 402). Loescher asserts that God's commandment cannot be reduced to a social contract, since there is no right that is not rooted in His will. Far ahead of his time, then, Loescher calls for the formation of the laity so that the church can rule itself. The definition of Christianity by Thomasius as love reduces it to morality and leaves out the redemptive work of God in and for us.

Throughout his life Loescher continued to attack those political ideas which he felt were attacking in some way the gospel. He asserted, for example, in a sermon of 1748 just before his death: "We have rulers in name only.... With cries to heaven, the poor are made to surrender their efforts, so that the rulers might feast. ... O wretched land whose rulers have become faithless.... Our land is being ravaged by those who should protect, but have become its enemy. They will receive their reward⁶ It was particularly against the unionistic tendencies of the rulers that he levelled his sharpest criticisms; and he had good reason, for in 1721 he was prohibited from publishing his Unschuldige Nachrichten.

His Praenotiones Theologicae (1709) was his first comprehensive treatment of contemporary currents of thought. Loescher begins by noting that the present situation is different from all previous ones, because a new world-view is prevailing which is undermining truth in a different way. Now everything in theology is being called into question without any regard to the past. Worse, however, than all this radical doubting of everything is the fact that behind it is, not the question of the truth of God, but a purely immanent selfunderstanding which is unconcerned about what revelation sees as binding. Loescher is more concerned with defending Christian truth than with attacking certain people or philosophical positions. His concern is not with the problems of philosophical thought, but with their theological consequences, and therefore he criticizes a position only where it undermines the gospel. Otherwise one epistemology is as good as another. He does not, therefore, reject the use or study of philosophy. He urges his orthodox friends, in fact, to spend more

time in such examination. He feels it necessary, however, to point out the significance of philosophy to biblical interpretation. Here is where Descartes becomes a figure of importance; in Loescher's view contemporary doubts about Scripture go back to the skepticism of Descartes and his subjective starting-point, which is what has enabled philosophy since his time to free itself from the claims of revelation.

If subjectivity is the decisive criterion, there is ultimately no difference between "cogito ergo sum" and the "inner light," and reason becomes lord instead of servant. Loescher then reminds Locke how little philosophy itself sees its assertions as absolute. At the same time, however, we need not exaggerate the power of error or think the problem of doubt insoluble. Here Loescher introduces his biblical premises and sees the question of certainty resolved in faith. Reason then makes its peace with faith, not as partner with partner, but as inferior with superior. Faith, then, is not so much opposed to reason, as beyond and above it. Since reason stands in the service of faith, it may then be used against the critics of faith. When reason, however, no longer agrees with faith, Loescher refuses it the last word, for such absolutising of reason would be nothing less than apriori prejudice. Loescher is fond of Luther's image of reason as the ass which Abraham had to leave behind, and he goes on to declare: "I can say with greater right than Luther: 'Philip, your philosophy is a nuisance to me."

Loescher's real concern here is that Christianity not be judged by criteria extrinsic to the Christian faith. For faith has its own evidence; theology has its own foundations (*demonstrationes*) which we believe and defend against all uncertainty. Theology is not a science and need not, therefore, offer demonstrations which satisfy its demands. Yet it is, at the same time, certain knowledge (*vera notitia*) in which the demonstration of the Spirit is present, who both refutes our unspiritual ideas and positively convinces us of the truth. Here we see the new apologetic argument—no longer arguing on the basis of the divine origin of Scripture, but using a Pauline epistemology (1 Corinthians 2:12-16). Ultimately Loescher views the question of both reason and epistemology in the light of the cross. This view is due to what Martin Greschat calls the "soteriological concentration" of his thought. Disregarding every rationalist objection to such an approach, Loescher concluded his arguments again and again with Scripture, as he felt that the analogy of faith which made Scripture clear was not as arbitrary as the "enlightened" practice of finding only morals there.

In his Ouo Ruitis? of 1735, Loescher's critical comments on the new philosophical directions of his day are more thorough, even though his language is milder. Here we have the resolute "No!" of an otherwise positive theologian, as Karl Barth put it. Unlike the Pietist critiques of the system of Leibniz and Wolff, Loescher here attacks it from within, at its very heart-its attempt to unify rationalism and faith-and not merely by dissenting from individual points. In this way he attempts to criticize the system as a whole. Behind Wolff's "sufficient ground" Loescher sees a sort of omniscience being attempted; and, in attacking Wolff's attempt at universality, Loescher strikes at the root of the system. Wolff's desire for a philosophical infallibility is seen by Loescher as the desire to know all, the original sin. He admits, at the same time, that Wolff and Leibniz are great mathematicians and that their philosophy is at least an advance on Spinoza. He treasures what is good in the new philosophy but wishes it were less systematic and mechanistic: "I am convinced that we can have no philosophy a priori but must be satisfied with it a posteriori, since the greatest part of our knowledge is a posteriori and in this way is recognized and proved" (1735, 140; and 1737, 265).⁷ Theology would be well advised not to attach itself to any one system of philosophy, but rather to retain its basic freedom in this area; Christianity can never allow itself to be accommodated to philosophy. We must also remember that not everything can be demonstrated logically; mystery is an indispensable element of life. The history of philosophy ought to impress on us the relativity of all system-building and the eclecticism of true philosophy by its very nature. Nor can philosophy think up the truth of itself, but can only seek its traces in the world. To Loescher, consequently, philosophy can have no value in itself. Loescher then attacks the determinism of Wolffian philosophy---as also its view of prayer, the conscience, miracles, and the duration of the world-as being inconsistent with the gospel. What distinguishes Loescher from others is his attempt to wrestle with the responsibility of faith to the world and his refusal to retreat into either a shallow rationalism or an easy irrationalism in the face of his lack of success. After Loescher's death faith and reason were long regarded as antithetical. His historical perspective (considering things worse in the late Middle Ages) enabled him to remain convinced that God's truth would ultimately prevail.

C. Loescher's Critique of Pietism

Because of its often fluid boundaries and its unstructured nature. it is often very difficult to analyze Pietism. S. Hagglund's view is that Pietism was a new theological position based on a different view of reality.⁸ Hagglund sees at work here a new epistemology: experience is now the ground for certainty, and faith is seen no longer as knowledge and trust, but rather as a productive power. Loescher, too, saw something more basically wrong in Pietism than aberrations in individual doctrines. Loescher saw through Pietism, because he was of the same temperament as its adherents and shared so many of its concerns; he knew the nature of Pietism, indeed, better than many Pietists. At first, in fact, he even sided with Philipp Spener, defending him against the theologians of Wittenberg and introducing many of his reforms. His initial criticisms (until 1708) were directed only against the more radical forms of Pietism, but after 1708 he saw the movement already beginning to decay and was dragged into a long and painful debate with J. Lange of Halle, in which, however, Loescher consistently showed restraint, charity, and propriety. He did not allow himself to be side-tracked by the slanders of those orthodox who thought he was conceding too much to the Pietists or by the slanders of the Pietists themselves.

Loescher admitted firstly, that there was much to be faulted on the orthodox side. This situation, however, warranted not a special new reformation, but rather the fulfilling of each one's Christian calling:

> The complaints about fallen Christianity in our evangelical church have become so common that every person who is not traitorous and lazy will [now surely] come to his senses and zealously think about renewal and concern for the shame of Joseph. And each must honestly admit that in our Israel a great devastation has occurred as in the sinning

Israel of Jeremiah's lifetime. Therefore it is necessary that one raise up the fallen. Yet this thing does not require a reformation, but is part of our ordinary calling.⁹

Loescher acknowledged that Halle was more churchly than Dippel and the radicals, but he went on to observe that unfortunately many of the more churchly Pietists still saw the radicals as their brothers in the faith. Loescher conceived of Pietism as a movement opposing the church which had existed since the time of the Reformation and had at last found its way into the church. The danger lay in this, that a movement which valued experience more highly than the means of grace would finally end up destroying the church altogether. Loescher wanted to protect the objective working of God at all costs. He warned the Pietists that no certainty of faith could rest on subjective feelings, while God could work in us even when we did not feel Him doing so. He could give experiences and feelings, but He also wanted faith to live without depending on them. Loescher saw the danger of perfectionism behind the placing of greater emphasis on the fruits of faith than on its object-on what faith does than on what it receives. It is this need to be perfect which the Pietists pressed with such rigor; not only was the simul justus ac peccator undermined, but the law took the place of the gospel:

Now it is clear that the teaching regarding the absolute necessity of a practice of piety to religion, the means of salvation, the ministry, and theology—and the dependence of these on piety—brings such danger with it that the church of Christ cannot be helped, but might once more be torn apart. . . . Here we have the danger of the whole law with all its rigor being again placed in the order of salvation instead of the gospel.¹⁰

Loescher saw here a threat to the objective validity of the word and also to objective theological scholarship, and he temporarily thought that one way in which he could guard against this threat would be by speaking of an "illumination of impious theologians." It soon became evident, however, that this approach was not viable, and in the end he reacted to the idea strongly:

It is terrible that it can come to this, that a man who is

engaged very deeply in the study of pure doctrine, but remains spiritually dead and estranged from the life that comes from God, has let the practice of piety disappear.¹¹

His concern was to show that it is also through knowledge that God moves the will, while bad theology can only have the effect of corrupting the will. Loescher found it necessary, therefore, to defend attention to the intellect against its neglect by the Pietists, for he saw in this indifference and neglect a capitulation to rationalism. He saw, indeed, in their indifference to questions of religious truth and doctrinal differences, the Pietists becoming "children of their time." He correctly forecast that it would lead ultimately to a total indifference to all religion to which Pietism itself would end up being sacrificed. A pietistic victory over the orthodox teaching of the church would end up being a victory, not for true Christianity, but for indifference to the church.

Loescher further felt that the Pietists had replaced an objective view of the Christian faith with a subjective one with its query whether a person had been born again or not. In Loescher's view it was untenable to draw an antithesis between the letter and the spirit of Scripture, when these two belong together with neither being absolutised. Loescher then defined piety as the right worship of God based on the means of grace and affecting all that one is and does. Since piety included all these things, it was fallacious to talk about the relationship of piety to life. Pietism thereby became a new form of religion in which the means of grace were no longer central and where legalism concerning trivia could lead to the ignoring of more important things. Things which were adiaphora were neither good nor bad in themselves, but depended on one's relation to God and neighbor. The Pietists, however, misunderstood Loescher's discussions of adiaphora, seeing not a defence of Christian freedom but, rather, moral indifference behind it. Loescher saw their legalism as an error, not as a sin, although he observed that it could easily lead to sin. What was needed, then, was not more ecclesiola but more use of the means of grace and more devotions in the home. As the situation changed, so did Loescher's approach, so that, because by 1716 he felt that things had improved in the Pietist camp, he then worked for rapport with the Pietists. He did so, in addition, because he needed, he felt, their aid in the battle against the Enlightenment.

Through a churchly theology Loescher hoped to overcome the antithesis between Pietism and Orthodoxy. He saw the church as the connecting link between pure doctrine and pure life. He formulated the theory that, although in times of ecclesial controversy, we may have to work with a particular party within the church (as now with the orthodox), all our work is devoted to the interests not of this party, but of the church as a whole. This approach may mean standing alone, as Loescher did, but only because we are representing the church, not ourselves. In the name of the church Loescher supported what was right on both sides and attacked what was not. Everything Loescher did (including all his pastoral care) was done in and for the church, since he believed that without the church the preservation of the true gospel would be nearly impossible. The church does not demand that we condemn those within it who differ from us, but it must reject those who, when warned, still urge dangerous teachings in opposition to the truth. One can warn a brother and still consider him a Christian. Loescher's approach differed from earlier criticisms of Pietism in never calling it a heresy or sect, but simply showing its promotion of erroneous religious attitudes. His foremost goal was the reinstatement of the treasures of pure doctrine, not of moral discipline, within the church. One of the first things he did was to call for a revival of biblical studies. since he argued that the low state of theology was due to a neglect of exegesis in the original languages. For a sound linguistic interpretation of the text, however, one needs good lexical tools. Loescher did his share to answer this need by producing a study of the Hebrew language of the Old Testament: "One could argue, therefore, whether it might not be better to learn our whole theology-all that we believe-only through an exegesis of Scripture and to lay aside all books, large or small, that are irrelevant to this" end.12

We must also, however, look for new ways in which to preserve the old truth and so come to grips with the thinking of our time. Loescher saw it is as important to avoid over-simplifications. He does not, for example, lump all Pietists together, but distinguishes between the various types. In his analysis of Calvinism, likewise, he points out that it is generally more acceptable in Germany and England than in Switzerland. Loescher, in the same way, distinguished between the basis of justification and its results, without putting doctrine and piety into opposition to each other. He and the Pietists, he concluded, agreed on the goal and necessity of improving lives; now the issue was the means. The saddest thing about the Pietist movement was the down-grading of theology as a whole, its attitude to the *publica doctrina* of the church, rather than its aberrations in individual doctrines. It was just because Loescher held Pietism in such high esteem that he regarded his criticisms of it as correct. We can now understand why Ernest Stoeffler, a leading authority on Pietism, considers Valentin Loescher to have been the greatest representative of Lutheran Orthodoxy.¹³

II. Melchior Goeze

Born in 1717, Melchior Goeze undertook his theological studies at Halle, completing his thesis on primitive Christian apologetics there in 1738. After serving in Magdeburg, he received the high honor of being called as chief pastor in Hamburg in 1754, a call which he was reluctant to take. His sermons there show he by no means lacked heart or was an obscurantist, but an examination of his writings shows his comprehensive knowledge, even of authors writing in English. He wrote a good history of the biblical text, an important history of German translations of the Bible, and one of the best works on the Lutheran symbols of his time. It is, however, *The True Nature of Religious Zeal* (1770) which is his best defence of Christianity. His debate with Lessing (1777-81) was not his first attack on the Enlightenment; he had already written against Basedow (1764), Schlosser (1769), Bahrdt (1773), and Alberti (1769).

It is not easy to evaluate Goeze's attack on Lessing for his publication of the radical and skeptical *Reimarus Fragments*. The surface evidence seems to be that nothing was achieved by the attack but the production by Lessing of some of the strongest invective since the days of Jerome.¹⁴ For, in his use of language, Goeze was no match for the cunning of Lessing. Henry Chadwick, however, rightly says that scholars have created a distorted picture of Goeze

by drawing it only from Lessing's writings. Chadwick also gives an excellent account of the contradictions in Lessing's position on theology.¹⁵ Lessing maintained that he was a true representative of Luther; since, unlike the orthodox (such as Goeze), who only held to the dead letter of Luther, he held to the spirit of Luther (which he saw as freedom from the letter!):

I will not have you run me down as though I meant less well by the Lutheran Church than you do. For I am conscious of being a far better friend to it than the man who would persuade us that his own delicacy of feeling towards his remunerative pastorate (or whatever it may be) is holy zeal for the things of God. Do you suppose, Mr. Pastor, that you have the slightest spark of the Lutheran spirit? ... [Luther,] thou didst free us from the yoke of tradition. Who will free us from the unendurable yoke of the letter?¹⁶

Goeze was quick to point out that here was a "Christian idea" (freedom) shorn of all its religious content. Lessing wanted to be set free from the one thing that alone was able to set us free (John 8:31-32), said Goeze.¹⁷ Where word and spirit are antithetical in the New Testament, law and gospel are meant, argued Goeze; otherwise, as Christ says in John 6:63. it is precisely His words which are spirit and life. Goeze could only judge anyone else by his fruits, and Lessing's claim to be a true Lutheran because he took refuge in Luther's spirit and freedom caused Goeze to cry: "From this preserve us, good Lord!"

Goeze saw the real thinking behind Lessing's statement that no religion was true because the apostles taught it but, rather, they taught it because it was true. Goeze saw therein a denial by Lessing of the objectivity of the Christian faith. How could we find the inner truth of Scripture, which Lessing claimed was all that was valid, without the use of Scripture, which Lessing said we could do without? Goeze saw the heart of Lessing's position in this revealing statement of his: "My whole reason rebels against the assertion that God has a Son who shares His nature." Goeze wondered why Lessing's reason did not rebel, then, against the natural religion and morality of current thinking. It is true that Christianity could not be proven in the sense of a mathematical equation, for then all freedom would be destroyed, and Christ would make no real disciples in this way. The way shown by Christ in John 7:16-17 was wholly different; it was the inner testimony of the Spirit through the power of the Scriptures that revealed the truth to us. As certainly as the gospels existed, so certain was the resurrection; if the apostles lied, the joy of the early church in the resurrection was impossible to understand. So ran Goeze's arguments. That his interests in this apologetic battle were wholly pastoral, and not merely intellectual, can be seen from these words which he still addressed lovingly to Lessing:

Dear Mr. Councillor,

Please do not be angry if on this occasion I speak to you differently from the tone you have wrung from me hitherto. God knows, I love you dearly. Nor do I underrate the admirable talents which the goodness of God has bestowed on you, nor the superior knowledge and perceptions you have acquired by the right use of these talents in various branches of the arts. I forgive you wholeheartedly for applying all your powers to ruining me in the eyes of the church, of the world of learning, and of my parishioners, through childish and pointless fobs; ... my battle-axe does not compare one-seventh with yours. But it is this very love and regard for you which moves me to entreat you, before the face of God, to ponder deeply what I have to say, in some quiet hour when your passions are not seething. You declare, and my whole heart trembles at this declaration. that you will not shudder at the hour of your death on account of the printing of this piece and what was done thereby. For God's sake, and for the sake of your eternal salvation, reflect on what you wrote. Ah, do not shut yourself off from the ways of repentance.¹⁸

Chadwick calls Goeze a compassionate pastor protecting his parishioners from attacks which they in no way were equipped to answer.

For Lessing the battle was largely a game in which he could enjoy

putting an end to orthodoxy once and for all. For Goeze the battle was a matter of life and death. He was well aware of the strength of the opposition, yet felt it was his pastoral duty to speak out. He dared to do what most pastors would not do today-speak out against a beloved intellectual of his day (as he also spoke against Goethe's glorification of suicide). The amount of slander he endured in return was immense. Yet he was every bit as learned as his opponents, a fact which Lessing acknowledged by always visiting him when in Hamburg (though he did not exactly publicize this fact). The thing to which Lessing really objected was Goeze's answer to his historical criticism of revelation with both a theological and a historical defence. If we look at some of the thirty other critiques of Lessing written at the time, we see that Goeze alone realized that Lessing required an answer with a different approach. D. Schumann and H. Ress, for example, politely replied with the usual arguments from miracles and the fulfillment of prophecy. In 1780 Lessing admitted that Spinoza with his pantheism was his real point of reference, and it is on this point that Georg Hamann so decisively faulted Lessing and vindicated Goeze:

In what concerns Lessing . . . frankly, my excellent friend, what do you make of the man's honesty and sincerity in the whole business of *The Fragments*? However dull-witted, was not the Hamburger Goeze fundamentally right? When one's head is full of pantheistic ideas, is it actually possible to say a Christian "Our Father"?¹⁹

III. Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788)

The lay intellectual, J. G. Hamann, was not merely "the most profound Christian thinker of the eighteenth century,"²⁰ but also an influence on whole schools of thought both inside and outside the church. So rich and many-sided was his thinking that he was a major influence even on opposing schools of thought. He was a close friend of Kant and influenced Goethe, Herder, Hegel, Schleiermacher, C. Harms, Loehe, and Kahler, while Kierkegaard calls him his only master and used him to criticize Schleiermacher.²¹ It was while reading the works of Hamann that Kierkegaard experienced his conversion. More has been written in German since 1945 on

Hamann than on any other Christian layman, while works on him are being written as well in Danish, French, Dutch, Italian, and Spanish. His own works are available from a Roman Catholic publishing house. It is recognized that he was the most thorough Lutheran intellectual of the eighteenth century, and he has been called the real philosopher of Protestantism for his noteworthy contributions to biblical study, ethics, linguistics, aesthetics, and the philosophy of history. Some have claimed that he overcame distinctions which had plagued philosophy since Descartes and that he effected a Copernican revolution in the theory of language. In Hamann's thought contrasting emphases were held together: existentialism and ontology, faith and feeling, reason and history, the Bible and culture. He addressed himself to a wider range of questions than did Kierkegaard and in a more churchly way. Hamann found it possible to be both a modern intellectual and an uncompromising Christian, and he enabled people to find religious certainty in an age when everything had been called into question.

Leibrecht points out that certain problems tackled by Hamann have greater relevance today than during the nineteenth century and urges us, contrary to Pelikan, to go back beyond Kant to escape the impasse which Kant's philosophy has tried to impose on theology. Here Hamann's thinking helps us, for in an utterly theocentric way he saw God at work in the whole of existence, and in his assault on the Enlightenment he revived again the insights of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, and those of Augustine, Luther, and Pascal. Hamann's importance and originality is only being recognized now:

> Not yet has a history of Hamann's influence been attempted. The sense in which Hamann was possibly the first modern student of Luther merits considerable exploration in Lutherresearch. Likewise, it is not clear that Kant-research to date has been aware of the dimensions of his Kant-critique. The book on Hamann and Kierkegaard which must be written has yet to be written. Studies of Hamann's influence on Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schleiermacher, and Nietzsche are still quite hazy, and the hints of Hamann in Dilthey, Martin Kaehler, Benedetto Croce, and Ferdinand Ebner are equally

intriguing.22

Born in 1730 in the busy port of Koenigsberg, into the family of a Pietist surgeon, Georg Hamann entered the university of the city in 1746 and began studying theology. Because, however, he held the ministry in such high regard and felt that he was not good enough for it, especially by reason of an impediment of speech, Hamann turned to law and then to literature. Acquiring the command of many languages, he began tutoring. His employers sent him to London where he experienced the "hell of self-knowledge," as he called it-a kind of conversion. This conversion was to become an important event in the cultural life of eighteenth-century Germany. As he describes it, Hamann was converted not by any illuminating new insight, nor by any act of his own will, but by God claiming him as he began to read the Bible. When he returned to Germany, Kant was appalled at Hamann's new state and tried to reconvert him back to rationalism, but to no avail. Hamann himself thought the attempt ludicrous: "I almost have to laugh at the choice of a philosopher as the means of bringing about a change in me."²³ He wrote his first major apology, Socratic Memorabilia (1759), indeed. as a response to Kant's attempt; it was directed against the Enlightenment. Hamann remained in his post as a minor official of the government for most of his adult life; from there he launched a succession of verbal and literary offensives against the Enlightenment. His earlier writings concentrate on language and religion, while his later ones deal with problems of philosophy and theology. Toward the end of his life Hamann went to Muenster to teach the Roman Catholic princess Gallitzin; and, after having said a "Lutheran Pater Noster," as he put it, he died there. One of his favorite passages of Scripture was engraved on his tombstone: "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles."

A. Hamann: The Humanity of God's Word

Since, as Emil Brunner points out, Hamann was that solitary thinker of the eighteenth century who dared to make the Bible the starting-point of his thinking, the analysis here will begin with his understanding of the word of God.²⁴ In this word Hamann sees a simultaneous reference to the divine and the human in the sense of *communicatio*; God always reveals Himself to people and speaks to them only in human words. Hamann undertakes, indeed, to magnify the offense of the paradoxical way in which God works in His word in the face of the philosophical sophistication of its opponents:

How God the Holy Spirit lowered Himself, when He became a historian of the smallest, most despised, and insignificant events on earth, in order to reveal the decisions, the mysteries and the ways of the godhead to man in man's language, man's own affairs, man's own ways.²⁵

The anthropomorphism of the Bible is thus for all, not just for the simple. For neither the letter nor the spirit can be disregarded; we interpret a book in accord with both the sense of the words and the spirit of its author. The word, then, is no intermediary, having an independent existence or acting autonomously, but is God's own means of expression. The fact that He speaks here makes Him the personal God, and we become human when we listen to His word. God's condescension to speak in human words is necessary to His communication. The written word of God cannot be reduced to some pure core, because here human language has become the language of heaven: "He imitated us so that He might encourage us to imitate Him." The highest of truths, then, can only be expressed in the lowest of means. For there is no naked or direct truth; truth comes to us only in a relation enclosed in words. The spoken word of God (preaching) is His way of relating to us. Scripture is the union of the Holy Spirit with things that are concrete: spirit and letter come together in the oral word. For the One became all, the Word became flesh, and the Spirit became letter. Genuine spirit is that which is enfleshed. Hamann speaks of the Bible as being like the worn-out clothes which the Ethiopian used to help Jeremiah out of the cistern. He is consistent, then, when he opposes biblical critics such as Michaelis who think they can make the word majestic by freeing it from its lowliness through a method of research. In his view they are not taking it seriously as a human word. By no means, however, does the Bible have a purely human origin. There "all that is human is divine" and "all theology begins from heaven." Fidelity to the letter is necessary to guard against mystical flights of fancy. It is likewise a distortion of the word of God to read modern philosophical views back into it: "It would be as ludicrous to ask Moses to explain nature with the aid of Aristotelian, Cartesian, or Newtonian concepts as to expect God to have revealed Himself in the general philosophical language which has been the philosopher's stone for so many learned minds."²⁶

It is the perennial tendency of the mind to shrink from the word of God. Probably one of the sharpest barbs which Hamann levels against Kant is to call him a mystic, because of his dislike of natural language. While Kant does violence to the human side of the word, Lessing does the same to the divine. Hamann's debates as to the nature of language never proceed from mere academic interests, but are rather connected with his defence of the divine-human word. He believes passionately that the "word is the only light, not only by which one can come to God, but also by which we can come to know ourselves." The visible is the only gateway to the invisible, and those who refuse to content themselves with hoc est corpus meum and the mysteries sub utraque specie are sarcastically assailed for thinking there is any other way to the unseen. Hamann is in such language attacking the philosophy of Lessing. There is no other way of taking the word of God seriously than in the human words in which God speaks to us. It was for this reason that Hamann became such a zealous student of the Bible, reading it through several times a year in the original languages and using all other aids to biblical interpretation that were then available: "Flesh and blood know no other Savior than one small man, no other Spirit than the letter. A man can take nothing, for it is given to him,"²⁷

B. Hamann and the Primacy of History

By starting with Christian revelation Hamann showed the philosophers of the Enlightenment the significance of history. It is his emphasis on the centrality of history in Christianity that distinguishes him from his contemporaries. His most famous statement on the subject was addressed to Moses Mendelssohn, the rationalistic Jew:

> The characteristic distinction between Judaism and Christianity has to do, therefore, neither with "immediate" nor "mediate" revelation in the sense in which this [terminology] is taken by Jews and naturalistic philosophers, nor does it

have to do with "eternal truths" and "doctrines" nor "ceremonial" and moral law, but simply with "temporal historical truths which come to pass at one time and never recur"—facts which "by a connection of causes and effects at one point of time and space on earth become true, and therefore only at this point of time and space can be thought to be true, and must be attested by authority."²⁸

Unlike Lessing, Hamann refused to drive a wedge between facts and their meaning, history and reason; he flatly rejected the distinction between temporal and eternal truths as invalid: "These temporal and eternal verities concerning the king of the Jews, the angel of their convenant, the first-born and head of His church, are the alpha and omega, the foundation and pinions of our faith."²⁹

To his rationalist friends, Hamann repeated often, in as many different ways as he could, the fact that the Bible is the history of the gracious acts of God, and not a collection of timeless moral truths. All the terminology of metaphysics and the rational systems of men come up against the historical facts of the cross and incarnation, which show us the necessity of "plowing with another heifer than reason" if history is not to remain a riddle. Hamann is fully aware of the problems of historical knowledge, but he still prefers the truths of history to any other and asks who is so omniscient as to know that historical truth is inappropriate to the deity. The attempts of Lessing to remove God from history are nothing but gnostic hatred of the flesh. Philosophy without history is a matter of fancies and verbiage, while history itself is the best philosophy. It is a philosophy that has its feet firmly grounded in reality, based on data and dependable facts: "Philosophy ought not to carry on empty shadow-boxing with ideas and speculations against data and facts, with theoretical deceptions against historical truths, with plausible probabilities against witnesses and documents."30

Truth, then, is tied to time and is not present all at once. Nor can it be poured entirely into the present alone, lest we distort it into an idea. Truth is not divided into dead acts of the past, present ideas, and future guesses; it is, rather, one reality which has happened in the past, can manifest itself in the present, and will be known only in its fullness in the future. Thus, Hamann's answer to the problem of universality—which Liebniz and Lessing "miscarried," as he puts it—is that the universal is the historical! In a radical reversal of the supposed problem Hamann goes on to claim that this universal is mediated by the word of God, not by reason nor by any other principle which might be derived from this universal. The historical is the universal because man is historical. The historical incarnation of Christ means then that Christianity as an existential message or set of moral principles is impossible, nor can we be independent of the historically and can neither be unearthed, nor inherited, nor acquired. This brief ancient and eternal confession of faith says everything which I am *a priori* in a position to say."³¹ Hamann's theology as a whole is, in effect, an interpretation of the incarnation and what it means to every facet of theology.

The universal, then, cannot be reached by purifying the truth of the particular, because the particular is at the same time an eternally valid truth. Such truth, however, is as inaccessible to the scholar as to the speculator, since it is mediated by faith. Truth is certainty about a fact that is present prior to my faith, but which I did not recognize before. Such faith in the truth has nothing to fear; while, as Hamann says to Kant, we should be the most miserable of all men if our faith were based on the shifting fashions of critical erudition. Already in his first response to Kant, Socratic Memorabilia, Hamann claims that it is, in actuality, unbelief and superstition that are based on shallow physics and shallow history. As nature has been given to us to open our eyes, so history has been given to us to open our ears and in faith to hear God speaking to us, in and through His works in it. Thus, Hamann emphatically opts for a theocentric view of reality, seeing no problem in a non-autonomous man. non-autonomous history, and non-autonomous nature. For, as he sees it, all of reality depends on God for its existence.

C. Hamann's Assault on the Enlightenment

Hamann completely reverses the most famous principle of Descartes, "cogito ergo sum," so as to say "He is, therefore I am and think" and "I believe and speak, therefore I am." In place, likewise, of another Cartesian principle, "It is necessary to doubt all things," Hamann asserts exactly the opposite: "Our own existence and that of all things must be believed and cannot be ascertained in any other way." It is precisely because existence is reality and no product of the imagination that it must be believed. Hamann's assertion of the centrality of faith is his way of saying that God is all in all. Existence is ultimately the problem of the inescapability of God. Faith is my existence as a whole in relation to God and His gracious condescension in Christ, which is the focal point of all history and all existence. The above axioms of Hamann were addressed to Kant. in whom Hamann saw another instance of the old Cartesian theme in which the knowing subject is more certain of himself than his own experience or, in theological terms, in which man alone with himself is more sure of his own nature than of the acts of God in historical experience. Hamann calls the skepticism introduced by Descartes superstition. To Hamann, indeed, skepticism and superstition are the same thing, since he sees an unexamined faith (superstition) underlying all skepticism. Since it rests on unproven premises, all philosophical argument is argument in a circle. Skepticism, therefore, is really a confession of dogma rather than a neutral method.

Hamann attacks the philosophy of the Enlightenment in the most scornful terms possible. He calls it "the new despotism," "Babylonian philosophy," "the confusion of Babel," "rational contraband," and "the false god," with the spirit of the age as its idol, deified by superstition (popular philosophy). He maintains that, in order for Christianity to speak to it, it is necessary to substitute "reason" where Paul has "the law." For just as the law was not given to us to make us wise or to save us, but rather to show us our wretched condition, so also with the reason which God has given us. Hamann deliberately uses such offensive language against the Enlightenment in order to awaken its followers out of their incipient paganism. He sees his attack as part of the offense of the gospel, which ought to call into question all our presuppositions if it is the gospel of the incarnation and crucifixion of God. For in the incarnation God seizes the weapons of His opponents to use them against them for their own salvation. The Christian too, therefore, uses every possible means to spread the gospel:

All means of assistance are holy to the Christian and to be

used for the spreading of the gospel. Above all is a knowledge of the moral character and taste of the times necessary. The poets (playwriters and novelists) are a help here and are the best assayers, who disclose to us the manner of thinking of men and of a people and their inclinations, and they test the truest and firmest. The testimonies of human art, science, and history serve as seals, human seals of revelation; and as a Christian one has as little cause to neglect or abandon these as Paul to leave behind his coat in Troas. Paul does a poet the honor of calling him a prophet of his people.³²

Here we see Hamann, the modern thinker, using all his talents in the service of the gospel. Yet he assures Jacobi that his real desire is to restore the misunderstood theology of Lutheranism and to refute the contemporary idealization of Lutheranism by means of a historical realism. He claims: "the themes of your work, Jacobi, idealism and realism, are opposed to mine of Lutheranism and Christianity. . . . Christianity and Lutheranism are the true realities, organs of God and man."³³ Again, he sums up his work in a letter to Schenk: "Golgotha and the lordship of Christ are the true contents of my work, containing evangelical Lutheranism in embryo."³⁴ Hamann can, then, face the Enlightenment with the full force of the whole Christian message and have no fear of ever having anything to lose by doing so, since he entertains no doubt that in Christ he possesses everything.

Hamann attacks the tolerance of the Enlightenment as based on religious indifference; he instead bases tolerance on the firmest of convictions. By no means does conviction lead to religious imperialism when faith is seen as humility and truth as an eschatological reality. In all his evangelistic endeavors Hamann is concerned to preserve the character of faith as a gift—by emphasizing a humble attitude towards human actions and a concentration on the actions of God. He sees the eighteenth-century concept of tolerance as based not on the dignity of each person, but rather on a rational system in which indifference becomes a "trojan horse" for an assault on the heart. He sees clearly that the real enemies are Kant and Lessing, who, in their subtlety, are thought to go beyond the Enlightenment and are, therefore, all the more dangerous with their call to the "maturity of autonomy." Hamann sees behind this call to autonomy a false eschatology, a "cosmopolitan chiliasm"; he observes that in this life we always need a divine guide to rid us of false guides:

My transformation of Kant is that the Enlightenment consists in a departure of an immature man out of a supremely self-incurred guardianship. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and this wisdom makes us too timid and lazy to compose fictions.³⁵

Autonomous reason—that is, reason independent of revelation—can lay down no canons of necessity; and, since Kant's tools determine his results, his conclusions are inconclusive. Hamann sees Kant's judgments in *The Critique of Pure Reason* as the disclosure of a gnostic hatred of matter or a mystical love of form in which the worldliness of the object is rejected for the "certainties" of the subject.

D. Faith and Knowledge in Hamann's Apologetic

Hamann felt it necessary to construct an epistemology radically different from that of the Enlightenment. W. M. Alexander has shown how epistemology is one of Hamann's basic concerns, no matter what subject he is treating, because he sees that a new epistemology involves a different view of truth, history, reason, and reality-and a different set of categories. How we come to know God depends on which God we want to know, for the God of rationalism is not the God of historical revelation. He is known either by historical experience through Holy Scripture or not at all. He is to be found in His condescension in the incarnation, which is not an ontological question for theology, but one of reconciliation, a problem of the knowledge and service of God. The source of all Christian knowledge is faith in the historical word of God, rather than self-found knowledge. An attitude of reverence to God is Hamann's philosophical starting-point, and the gospel is the goal of all wisdom: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and His love in the gospel its end and *punctum*."³⁶ An epistemological unity is necessary, since a theology cannot be built on multiple

epistemologies; we cannot recognize several ways to one God. Grace is sovereign in this world only when no alien epistemology is erected against it: "from heaven our philosophy must begin!" Truth resides in a concrete historical person, not the most valuable idea. Hamann attacks with all his might the philosophical assumption that truth is embedded primarily in an idea. In a letter to Jacobi on October 5, 1786, Hamann complains that people speak of reason as if it were a real being and of our dear Lord as if He were nothing but a concept.

A non-symbolic epistemology can be only an eschatological reality, which does not, however, mean that we, like Kant, deny knowledge in order to make room for faith. All knowledge is qualified by space and time and so is unattainable apart from our senses. At the same time, Hamann asserts, the certainty of knowledge is dependent not on the mere receiving function of our senses, but rather on the certainty of the object. He attacks the way in which the knowing-subject has been considered in isolation from reality since the time of Descartes, and in the process he calls into question misconceptions of both the subject and the object. It is as foolish for the Christian to borrow philosophy from some other source as to ignore the problems which it raises. The philosophy of the Enlightenment has not succeeded in straining out strange gods. They are embedded in language, reason, categories, and syntheses which are as menacing as open animosities. Experience based on the Scriptures is something with which we can never dispense; for Hamann, indeed, unlike Lessing, one cannot overemphasize the importance of the Bible. The epistemological question is one which concerns a personal relationship to God; people can only know Him in so far as they are committed to Him. Atheism is falsely named, for it is actually a superstition or false faith in fancy dress.

Hamann saw his starting-point in his apologetics as the First Letter to the Corinthians; indeed, his whole apologetics might be seen as a commentary on its first four chapters, countering the wisdom of the world with the foolishness of a humble God on a cross. Hamann highlighted the fact that, since Christianity is essentially historical and particular, it is essentially offensive. He recognized the rise of a post-Christian age and saw that he was preaching no longer to "Jews" but rather to "Greeks." Since the "Christian" has become indistinguishable from the non-Christian, reaching unbelievers means exposing the difference between contemporary idolatry and true faith. Hamann's view of philosophy and reason as the modern equivalent of St. Paul's "law" enabled him to adopt a positive attitude to the most critical philosophy and still, at the same time, to question its foundations and stop it from becoming a prologomena to theology. This creative evangelical thinker, Johann Georg Hamann, opposed any dualism which sought to banish God from any area of life; he sought, indeed, to retranslate Luther's theological legacy faithfully into the language of a radically different world of thought. Hamann's theology shows that the voice of true Lutheranism continued to sound in the latter half of the eighteenth century in Germany and to offer inspiration to many generations to come.

The Endnotes

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- 3. Martin Greschat, Zwischen Tradition und Neuen Anfang (Witten: Luther Verlag, 1971), 38.
- 4. E. W. Zeeden, *The Legacy of Luther* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1954), 109.
- 5. Greschat, 153.
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- 9. Loescher, Vollständiger Timotheus Verinus (Wittenberg: S. Hannauern, 1721), 170.
- 10. Loescher, 767.
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- 29. Nadler, III, 311.
- J. G. Hamann, in a letter to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, February 4, 1786.
- 31. J. G. Hamann, in a letter to Jacobi, January 16, 1785.
- 32. Nadler, I, 241.
- 33. Gildemeister, V, 413.
- 34. Gildemeister, V, 368.
- 35. W. M. Alexander, 79.
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