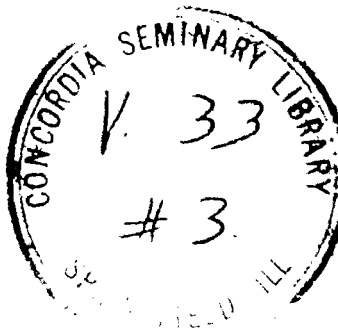


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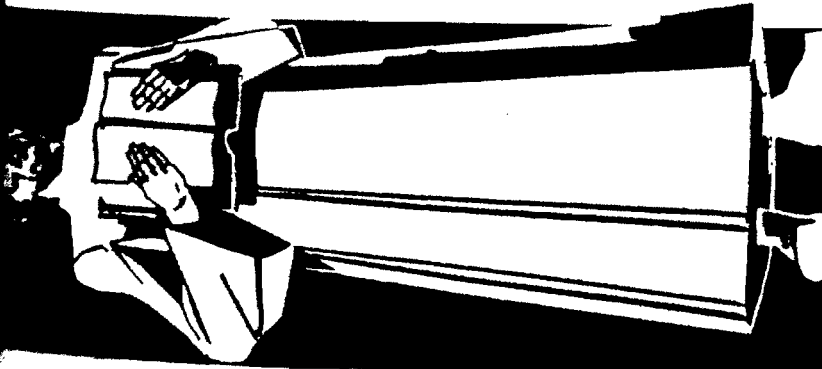
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# the springfielder



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# Reflections On A European Trip

DAVID P. SCAER

ALL REPORTS ON trips suffer from the same inherent malady that slide showings do. They can be too long, excessively boring, and what is exciting for the reporter can just be some excessive regurgitation of what the listener heard the last time that someone made a trip to Europe and showed his slides. The mentality of European travelers is the same as first-time-around fathers who look upon their offspring as virtually unique in the course of human history. This reporter confesses to all these sins before hand and also to a multitude of unknown ones. More than anything else, he realizes that maybe his report betrays his own attitude rather than what he actually heard and saw. For this reason, he calls it "Reflections on a European Trip." This, however, is the curse of our human existence which casts a pall on us all, including the reader.

To put it quite bluntly, the Protestant churches of Europe, especially the Lutheran oriented churches, have reached a nadir which has not been equalled since the empty church pew days of eighteenth and nineteenth century Enlightenment. The only encouraging word that famous Luther scholar, Professor Peter Brunner of Heidelberg, could give is that things are still not as bad now as they were then. But only sheer faith and unwarranted optimism could ever imagine a situation where things could get any worse by any standard of measurement. If the purpose of the church is to be a bright light in a darkening world, it seems obvious that whatever light exists there is now well hidden under a bushel. The Protestant churches of Europe, including the Lutheran oriented territorial churches,<sup>1</sup> are financially prospering in the sense that there is no dearth of funds to keep church buildings open, ministers paid, and ecclesiastical administrations running. However, the impact on individual lives seems to be nil. This will be explained in somewhat more detail below.

For the first time in recent memory there is a wholesale attack by the secular press on the institution of *Kirchensteuer*, church tax. Unlike the American church system, the European churches are not supported by wholly voluntary offerings. Under the older feudal system which lasted down into the first part of this century, the church was a state church, *Staatskirche*, and received its income directly from government taxes. The *Landeskirche*, the successor to the state church, does not receive government funds directly. Under the newer system the government acts as the collecting agency for the churches. An additional 10% of the amount of income tax paid by each person is collected from virtually everyone. According to recent American promotional materials for stewardship this is far short of the Biblical tithe. Nevertheless, 10% of all income tax collected in one area for church purposes amounts to fantastic sums of money.

In Germany a payroll deduction is made by the government and after deducting a processing fee, it is passed on to church administrators. In Austria the money is mailed in by the individual. This system is hardly more voluntary, since failure to pay can result in an immediate court order of expulsion from the church. The sometimes controversial *Der Spiegel* ran a series of articles early in 1969 attacking the system of church tax. Under especially heavy attack is the construction of new church edifices in Germany when already existing churches are obviously and pathetically empty. This attack is on financial and not theological grounds.

Membership in the Protestant churches in Germany is only voluntary in the sense that people have the freedom to resign from the church. This is only done infrequently. Baptism and confirmation, which are still almost universally observed in Protestant and Catholic churches, obligate the population to the church tax. Failure to pay the church tax can exclude the person from the various services of the church, the most important of which seems to be a funeral. Resignation from a congregation is not made to the pastor or church council but to the civil authorities and is a quasi-legal affair.

The officials of the *Landeskirche* greatly prize the church tax revenues. Just recently Axel Springer, famous German newspaper publisher of the tabloid *Das Bild* and other periodicals resigned from the *Landeskirche* in Berlin to join the Marienkappelle of Old Lutheran Church in Berlin. His pastor, Dr. Jobst Schöne,<sup>2</sup> along with officials of the free Lutheran churches, had scheduled a meeting with officials of the *Landeskirche* who were not ready to part with the generous tax they were receiving from a very wealthy man. Somehow the impression is left that there was more concern in the *Landeskirche* for the man's income than for his spiritual life.

Though the church tax controversy might be an isolated incident, the entire issue is symptomatic of the great theological problem of what exactly is a church or a church body. The repercussions of this question, if answered seriously and honestly, could reach as far as the legitimacy of the entire ecumenical movement. Let me explain this further. In the periodical *Zeit* there appeared an article where the writer referred to himself as belonging to those who were not Christians but who were friendly to the church as tax-paying Christians.<sup>3</sup> This group holds to a form of religion that was widely spread in Germany during the eighteenth century Enlightenment, but would find the theology of the Apostles and Nicene Creeds totally unacceptable, with perhaps the exception of the articles on God the Father and creation. The question is this: Do the institutionalized and state related or supported churches of Europe, especially in those countries with a Lutheran culture, resemble in any way the New Testament concept of church? The European church system virtually eliminates the element of personal decision as a prerequisite for church membership or association. It is common knowledge among German pastors that they are living in a system inherited from Constantine. But neither the pastors nor some of the most vocal

opponents of the church system are willing to extricate themselves from the system.

Twice in a few days this writer heard the opinion expressed by two persons, not clergymen, that the church is a monument of the past cultural life of Europe and that peace between the United States and the Soviet Union would eliminate the necessity for the church.<sup>5</sup> This concept is easily recognized as a dusty artifact from the golden age of eighteenth century Rationalism. There are very few Lutherans in our country who would hold to such crass Rationalistic ideas.

All of this has significance for the worldwide ecumenical movement. The ecumenical movement is the free association of churches throughout the world in offering a common witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Regardless of the brevity of this slogan, the big problem is not in offering a common witness to Jesus Christ. Who would be against this? The real problem is determining what is a church: When it is said that there are so and so many churches in the World Council of Churches or the Lutheran World Federation or whatever the group, the fault lies in the fact that unequals are being totalled up. To speak about 40 or 60 million Lutherans in the world is so misleading as to be downright false. In America the strong element is at least some degree of conviction, while in Europe the strong element is culture.

In the United States a congregation or a church body is a free association of Christians assembled to accomplish certain purposes. Now there are exceptions to this to be sure where an individual congregation regards itself as *the* community church, almost in a European sense. In Europe a congregation is virtually coterminous with a village or borough of a city and a church body is marked by geographical or political boundaries rather than by confessions.

The word "church" in the American and European sense is one word with two different meanings. On this account it is slightly misleading to speak about so and so many church bodies in the world because what constitutes a church in each sense is so different that there is little resemblance between groups bearing similar names. In logic this is called the error of equivocation where one word has two meanings. All this leads to the conclusion that perhaps the first order of theological business should be to answer to the question of what is a church before we begin deciphering any creeds or confessions.

A phrase like the "World Council of Churches" almost presupposes that all members know what the word "churches" means. The Missouri Synod has recently gone through some agonizing discussions and after prolonged birth pangs gave birth to fellowship with The American Lutheran Church. Emphasized in every discussion was that fellowship involved every level of the church, especially the congregational. Church agreements in the European sense are made between church officials with little or no congregational involvement or support, simply because church and congregation mean something else to them than it does to us. What kind of fellowship is really

possible between Germans, who call themselves "tax-paying Christians," and Americans, who have voluntarily associated themselves with congregations and agreed to attend and support them? Insofar as the concept "church" plays a significant role in all of the creeds, it does not seem that this point can be easily passed over.

Perhaps a few words can be said about church attendance. Here an American reviewer can become a little Pharisaical and thank God that we are not like other men. One pastor we visited in the city of Hamburg with a congregation of 10,000 averaged 20 in attendance for Sunday worship.<sup>6</sup> When I bemoaned the Protestant plight to an assistant to the progressive Archbishop and Cardinal from Belgium, he assured me that the situation in the Roman Catholic churches was not much better. One could go on with stories of congregations of one and ten and so forth in attendance in large metropolitan areas totally and nominally Lutheran. The basic problem is when the European church leaders speak, exactly for whom are they speaking? In more cases than not they are speaking only for themselves and maybe the clergy, but this is not even near universally true. There is no attempt at confessional or theological harmony within the churches. *Time* magazine carries enough stories about the plight of the Anglican Church in Great Britain without reploughing that tortured field. All attempts at theological modernization seems to speed the process of petrification or fossilization.

What is the confessional situation in Germany? The students with whom this reporter spoke see no significant difference between the three recognized churches in their country, Lutheran, Reformed and Union. Students brought up in one church, for example Lutheran, see no difficulty in serving in a church with a different legally recognized confession. All were amazed that the public confessional commitment of any church body should in any way deter transferring to it. The same fluid relationship exists for the laity. A member of the Lutheran *Landeskirche* automatically becomes a tax paying member of a Union or Reformed *Landeskirche* if that is the recognized church into the area where he moves. Doctrinal discussions between the various territorial churches of Germany or all of Europe seem a little outdated and useless as long as geographical and political boundaries and not personal commitment are the marks of church membership. Decisions made by church administrations do not really affect the life of pastor or people.

All of Protestant Europe suffers from the same problems and these generalizations, even with all their inherent limitations, can fairly well explain the situation. There are two exceptions that are worth mentioning, East Germany and Norway. In West Germany church membership is close to 100% and in some cities attendance barely reaches .05%. An estimated 50% of the East German population are still members of the territorial *Landeskirche* which is officially Union but with definite Lutheran leanings. From a European standpoint this is deplorable that anyone would not want to be associated with the church. However, the quality of church

life might actually be strengthened by the subtle Communist pressures. The 50% who belong to the church in East Germany really want to be associated with it in spite of the consequences. Children confirmed in the church are not allowed admission to the universities, though in some cases exceptions have been made. Membership in Communist youth clubs has taken the place of membership in church groups. Religious education, formerly given in school, has simply been replaced by indoctrination in Marxism. In this definitely unfavorable situation the church continues to hang on with some vigor. One of the major incongruities is that in spite of the Communist domination of East Germany for almost a quarter of a century, the church tax is collected by the state from members in a way very similar to West Germany and the theological faculties are directly supported by state taxes. Even in East Germany there is no church membership without church tax. This persecution of religion and its official support can best be explained in recognizing that organized religion is a more important element in German culture than it is in ours and its total and immediate eradication could bring calamity and revolt. In this situation subtle pressures and gradual substitution are considered the best methods in introducing a completely Marxist-oriented ideology. Though the war has been over almost twenty-five years, the large Lutheran edifices in East Berlin remain in shambles. Both a sad and fantastic sight are the trees growing from the second and third stories of the partially ruined churches no longer used for worship centers. A similar sight can be seen in England where churches have been submerged by the foliage simply because of a lack of use. Most telling in East Berlin is the statue of the Christ with its arms outstretched, beckoning the weary and heavy laden to come to Him. The statue, which stands above the portico of the ruins of *Marienkirche*, built in the style of St. Peter's in Rome, has its hands missing. In the same plaza is a life size picture of Karl Marx, Germany's new savior. Strange to say Marxism is now one of the leading theological schools of thought among theological students, especially in West Berlin. There has been talk of suspending theological education there.

The other country with a slightly different church situation is Norway. Here the Lutheran Church is officially recognized and supported in a way common to all European churches. While in the other European countries theological education is state supported and autonomous, here most of the theological education works independently of the state and is responsible to a free church movement. In the rest of Europe, as a rule, theological faculties are tax supported, but in Norway the largest faculty is supported by free will contributions gathered in independent collections from participating congregations within the established church. At the present time there are about 400 students at the free faculty and 100 at the state supported university faculty. The free faculty takes a more conservative and traditional approach, while the university faculty reflects more the continental approach in theology. Students from

both faculties serve in the established church. Bishops and other church officers are still appointed by the government.

The free faculty has outgrown its present facilities and is moving to a new location near the campus of the University of Oslo. The state might be asked to provide some of the building costs. The established church of Norway allows for latitude as is typical of the European state related churches, but the free faculty and those who support it are committed to the Lutheran Confessions in a way which is more American in style than European. The dean of the faculty, Dr. Leif Aalen, mentioned to me that only Lutheran students are allowed to participate in the opening communion service.

A few observations on theology cannot be excluded. It is hard to pinpoint any one leading theological school of thought which enjoys massive support. In New Testament studies the demythologizing method of Rudolf Bultmann still predominates.<sup>7</sup> At the University of Heidelberg the Christological lectures of Dr. Hartwig Thyen seemed to be better received than the traditional Lutheran approach of Professor Edmund Schlink, a name well known in American Lutheran circles. Many students have neither affirmative nor negative convictions on a matter so central as the resurrection of Jesus. This observer was left with the definite impression that students still are swayed more by Bultmann's approach than the traditional Lutheran one in such matters. It is slightly depressing when students have no firm convictions on the resurrection. Far better would be a downright no to the resurrection of Jesus than an attitude which is always sifting the evidence. Existentialism which was the divine nature of Bultmann's demythologizing method seems to be doomed. At least this is the opinion of Professor Ernst Kinder of Muenster.

The theological Marxism which is prominent all over in German theological faculties has substituted a collective approach to society and theology which does not allow for the extreme individualism of existentialism. The existential gospel that truth is what is truth for the individual seems to be hopelessly out of place in a Marxist system of thought which endeavors to capture the thinking of an entire populace. Some students are now planning to serve as pastors without the benefit of ordination. Refusal to be ordained comes not from faulty application of the Petrine doctrine of the universal priesthood of all believers, but from the Marxist concept of society which does not allow for the ascendancy of any group, including the clergy. One could quip that this is the Marxist doctrine of the universal priesthood.

Rather than pinpointing a prominent theological school, it is easier to discover a different theological attitude among the students. Theological students are displaying an activism which seems to be dreadfully out of place both with traditional Lutheran theology with its role for the pastor and German culture as it is associated with the university. Students are standing up and interrupting lectures. It must be remembered that at German universities discussions are allowed only in the seminars, not in lectures. In some major theological schools

the students actually have one out of three votes in choosing new professors. The system of election of new professors allows one vote for the professors, another for instructors of the lower levels<sup>8</sup> and another for the students. In some cases the students are asking for two out of four votes. In the United States there is more student participation in seminary and university affairs, but in Germany the students are receiving not merely a consultative role, but an actual control.

Other changes are afoot among students that would eliminate final theological examinations. Under the German system the student is not examined until he has finished his theological education. Instead the student would be judged by other students on the basis of papers prepared and delivered in seminars. There is also some talk about removing the requirement of the "Habilitationsschrift" before a man can become a full professor. Ordinarily after a student has prepared his doctoral dissertation and defended it successfully, he writes another thesis called the "Habilitationsschrift" which qualifies him for eligibility to be called as professor. The students' complaint is that their professors become so specialized in one field so that they lose a general grasp of the subject. A similar complaint is not infrequently heard in our own country.

Women pastors and theological students are commonplace throughout Europe now and there is little discussion about the role of women. The Lutheran Church of Bavaria has not yet ordained women as pastors, but their reluctance cannot be explained by theological scruples, but rather by deference to the Roman Catholic majority in that area.

An issue more prominent in the church press is the question of the baptism of infants. Women pastors in Westfalia are leaders in a movement to allow liberty in this matter. Some pastors have actually been removed from office because they would not baptize their own children. The matter of the baptism of infants in Germany with its territorial churches cannot really be judged from an American perspective. Infant baptism for the total population is necessary for the functioning of the territorial church. It assures lifelong membership in the church and provides the tax base for financial support of the church. The abolition of infant baptism in any great numbers could very well diminish the effectiveness of the territorial church as a religious institution in Germany.

A more traditional movement in theology, international in scope, is the *Kirchliche Sammlung um Bibel und Bekenntnis*. Theologians from Scandinavia and Germany, attached to this group, are interested in historic Christianity according to a more traditional understanding of the Bible and of the Lutheran Confessions. Prominent names in the group include Bishop Bo Giertz of Sweden, Professor Regin Prenter of Denmark, Professor Karl-Heinrich Rengstorf of Münster, Professor Walther Künneth of Erlangen and Professor Sverre Aalen of Oslo. To date their influence seems to be minimal on the whole of European theology. Others like Professors Edmund Schlink and Peter Brunner, both of Heidelberg, are sympathetic with



the aims of the movement but still have not participated actively. The credentials of the participants in the movement are of such high caliber as to assure a voice for a more traditional theology.

Discontent with the German theological situation does not come primarily from churchly groups, such as confessionally oriented, *Kirchliche Sammlung*, but from unchurchly sources. Much of this content is embodied by Joachim Kahl in his book *Das Elend des Christentums*.<sup>9</sup> The copy that this writer has was published in March, 1969 when a total of 55,000 copies were in print. Between November, 1968 and March, 1969 it had already gone through four printings. It would be safe to say that by now the 100,000 mark might have been reached. Not yet thirty years of age, Kahl has received his doctor's degree in theology from the University of Marburg and has subsequently left the church to become one of its most severe critics. The first 85% of the book is a scathing critique of Christian history from Jesus to the present time. Much of the material here is not new. The explosion comes in the final part of the book with its burning contempt for contemporary New Testament studies. Walther Künneth is chastised for accepting the resurrection of Jesus on the basis of eye witness reports and Rudolf Bultmann's program of demythologizing and existentialism is called folly, irrational and dogmatic. Kahl points out that Bultmann's theology suffers from a self-contradiction when it allows the New Testament theology to be demythologized, but excludes his understanding of New Testament *kerygma* from the same process.

At the beginning, this writer said that he would try to put forth his impressions, most of which were pessimistic. Whether something is judged to be good or bad depends almost totally on the one making the judgment. This writer tried to speak to as many people as possible on all levels of church life. His ideas are not new or even original. Most of them came from the people with whom he personally visited and which he later found to be true for himself. The reader will himself have to pass a final judgment. But one thing is certain, that when we speak of Lutheran church bodies in America and Europe, we are speaking about two different species who might have a common ancestor but are totally different now. All critiques suffer in that they are only appraisals of a situation, they provide no solution or remedy. So does this one. But as The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod takes a more positive role in ecumenical concerns, perhaps this report might in some way alert the reader to the situation in front of his church.

### FOOTNOTES

1. The phrase "territorial church" is used to cover all that is implied in the German words "Volkskirche," "Staatskirche" and "Landeskirche." The "Staatskirche" can be translated into English by "state church." This church is politically controlled and financially supported by the government. Such is the situation in Scandinavia. The situation in Great Britain is a little different since the church is under the control of the crown through the ruling political party in parliament, but it does not receive taxes. There the church is called "established" and does not have the

popular wide support that is enjoyed by those churches on the continent. In Germany the churches are officially called "Landeskirche." The word may best be translated "territorial church" and may be used of the Catholic and the most prominent Protestant denomination in a given area. This can be Lutheran, Reformed, or a combination of the both, called Union. The term "Volkskirche" defies a one word translation; however, "Staatskirche" and "Landeskirche" are both "Volkskirche" in the sense they represent the majority of the population and receive government recognition or support. As there are no near counterparts in America today, not only the terminology but also what they mean by "church" are hard to explain. A recent discussion of the problem may be found in Gustaf Wingren, *An Exodus Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 1968.

2. Pastor Jobst Schöne is a 1960 graduate of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis and received his doctor's degree in theology from the University of Muenster in the spring of 1969. He has written on the use of private confession and a Reformation period controversy dealing with the time of the real presence in Holy Communion. A recent article of his appeared in the Festschrift for Dr. Fuerbrunger, *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. XL., Nos. 5, 6, pp. 501-511.
3. *Was Glauben die Deutschen*, (Munchen: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1968), p. 144. The article was entitled in German, "Wir kirchenfreundlichen Nichtchristen" and began with the words "Wir Steuerchristen glauben an eine Schopfung . . ."
4. The word "Caesaropapism" adequately describes the European situation. Since virtually all belong to the church, it is possible for those who have no commitment to Christianity in any way to control the church without any fear of eventual removal. This danger of government control with Christian commitment is most acute in the Scandanavian state churches where bishops are appointed by the government. The conflict between church and state came to a head over the question of the ordination of women. The principle of the equality of the sexes now inherent in Western democracy was applied by the government to the church situation with the not unexpected result that women were given the right to be ordained. The issue was not decided on the basis of Scriptures, Confession or tradition but on the basis of modern democratic principles. For the sake of tranquility the state does not generally appoint bishops known to oppose ordaining women as pastors.
5. "Denkmahl der Vergangenheit"
6. It was the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Ev. Lutheran Church in Hamburg. According to statistics, American church attendance runs at about 44%.
7. Professor Willi Marxsen, a disciple of Rudolf Bultmann, who was greeted with almost messianic acclaim about eight years ago when he came to the University of Muenster, has lost his following. His views are now available in English by Fortress Press which has published many of his shorter works.
8. The German faculties are arranged a little different from the American. Full professors hold "chairs" and are the chief lecturers. Beneath this level there are those who hold the title of professor or instructor. Some of these just do research and are under no obligation to lecture. Others conduct seminars and lecture on subjects of a more limited nature. Together they are called the "Mittelbau." Generally they cannot be called as full professors where they serve as instructor. This group which is subsidiary to the professors has joined in with the students in asking for more effective control of the faculties.
9. Joachim Kahl, *Das Elend des Christentums* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowolt Taschenbuch, 1969).