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# THEOLOGICAL OBSERVER

## THE SCOPE OF NATURAL REVELATION IN ROM. 1 AND ACTS 16

Under this heading Prof. H. P. Owen, in *New Testament Studies* (January 1959), presents a well-written article in which he seeks to ascertain the scope of natural revelation, establish a contrast with the outlook of Hellenistic Judaism, and elucidate the uniqueness of God's historical revelation that began with Abraham and was consummated in Christ. After exploring the Scripture passages he suggests some conclusions, of which we quote a few:

While the idolater is always suppressing the truth, he is also always capable of acknowledging it. In spite of impiety and vice he remains *capax deitatis*; and because he never ceases to have this capacity he never ceases to be "without excuse." The tragedy of his predicament is that he fails either to achieve the knowledge of which he is capable or to retain such knowledge once he has achieved it. Paul would, therefore, seem to imply that the knowledge gained by natural revelation . . . constitutes a "point of contact" for the Gospel. The Gospel not only enlarges the knowledge of God by disclosing him as the Creator, the personal God of ἀγάπη, the Father of Jesus Christ; it also makes this knowledge secure against "suppression" by dispelling the ἀσέβεια and ἀδικία from which the suppression proceeds.

In Rom. 1 and Acts 17 Paul evidently considers idolatry in its crude, popular form. But what would be his attitude toward the philosophers? While the writer expresses some doubt as to whether the Apostle meant to include also the intellectual elite, he suggests:

Nevertheless, it is clear that, whether Paul had the philosophers in mind or not, they too, according to his principles, fell into idolatry of a subtler kind in so far as they were led to venerate the υἰομοιος as divine. Both the idolater and the philosopher "suppressed" their awareness of God's θεϊότης by identifying it with a finite representation, in the one case with an image accessible to sense, and in the other with a world-order accessible to reason.

Of special importance is the writer's remark that the knowledge gained by natural revelation constitutes a "point of contact" for the Gospel.

JOHN THEODORE MUELLER

## CAUTION ON SYNCRETISM

Under this heading E. G. Homrighausen, in *Theology Today* (April 1959), repeats with some explanatory remarks a "caution on

syncretism" which the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church, prompted by its Department of Evangelism, has recently published. In his introduction Dr. Homrighausen writes *inter alia*: "The Church has always been tempted to make the Gospel palatable to itself by reducing its demands. And, in order to become successful and acceptable to the world, it has also tended to adapt the truths of the Christian faith to philosophical schools and popular religions. . . . Now that religion has become popular in the United States and there is a tendency to take the best in the world's religions and fuse them into one homogeneous religion (syncretism), it is high time that something be said about this situation." He then quotes the resolution of the General Assembly as follows:

Our Church, by its confessional standards, is committed to the belief that Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God, and man's only Saviour. In the cultural context of modern America, with its emphasis on "religion" in general and the consequent blurring of fundamental difference of belief, it is essential that a clear witness be given to this claim. *It is not our claim, but His* [italics in the original]. We do not maintain that our Church is the sole possessor of Truth, but we must deliver the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ as the Incarnate word, who died and rose again for all men, and summons the whole world to come to Him.

The resolution cautions that "such a witness must be made without arrogance, or disdain for the religious convictions and practices of non-Christian faiths." Nevertheless it affirms that "we cannot compromise on the central affirmation of the apostolic Gospel—Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord, and there is none other."

JOHN THEODORE MUELLER

BRIEF ITEMS FROM THE NEWS BUREAU  
OF THE NATIONAL LUTHERAN COUNCIL

*Paris.*—The Commission of Ecumenical Studies of the Protestant Federation of France has published a "white book" of documents concerning the possible unity of the Lutheran and Reformed churches of France. In his introduction to the book, M. Roger Mehl, president of the commission, explained that it is a collection of articles from various church magazines and books on the subject of unity. It is compiled and presented "to give the faithful of our churches the opportunity to form their own judgment."

"The ecumenical problem is not the exclusive lot of some specialists," M. Mehl said. "It ought to be the concern of all Christian people."

According to M. Mehl, Lutheran and Reformed churches in France have widely practiced intercommunion. Their co-operative efforts with the World Council of Churches over the last decade and in the Protestant Federation of France for the past 50 years "have created a particularly favorable climate for a penetrating dialogue and warrant a hope for unity to come."

The Commission of Ecumenical Studies was formed in 1955 by the Protestant Federation of France. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of France and the Church of the Augsburg Confession of Alsace and Lorraine, both members of the Lutheran World Federation, are represented on the Commission as well as the Reformed Church of France and the Reformed Church of Alsace and Lorraine. In 1956 a consulting commission of Lutheran and Reformed theologians was instituted by the World Council of Churches. This group has studied, and will continue to study during the coming years, all the problems which pose difficulties between the two confessions.

The book includes reports of the Theological Commission of the Protestant Federation of France, the Ecumenical Commission of the Church of the Augsburg Confession of Alsace and Lorraine, the discussions on the Lord's Supper in the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKID), the joint declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Reformed Church of the Low Countries on intercommunion, and the statement of the National Assembly of pastors at Brieves concerning the ordination of pastors.

"Between Lutheran and Reformed churches doctrinal differences remain," said M. Mehl, who is professor of ethics in the Protestant theological faculty at the University of Strasburg. "But we think that the problem to examine is the following: Are these differences those of theological schools, or do they justify effectively an ecclesiastical rupture?"

In addition to the text, the "white book" contains a bibliography of articles and documents concerning Lutheran and Reformed relationships.

*Washington, D. C.* — "The human and civil rights of people of all races should be protected by law," a Lutheran official asserted before a Congressional committee here. Dr. Robert E. Van Deusen of Washington, D. C., said that this was the consensus of sentiment among Lutherans as appraised by church leaders and expressed by formal action in conventions.

In a statement prepared for the Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights he emphasized that no church can claim unanimity among

its members on any public issue, but formal actions taken by church groups do express official positions on principles involved in many public issues.

Dr. Van Deusen, who is the Washington secretary of the National Lutheran Council's Division of Public Relations, told the committee that there are two trends in the Lutheran Churches of America which have a bearing on the relations between the races. "One," he said, "is a growing spirit of self-criticism by which the practice of segregation in the churches is opposed as being contrary to Christian principles and the practice of racial integration is strongly encouraged."

He described the other as a deepening conviction that Christian citizens should support the agencies of government in the enactment of legislation, the enforcement of existing laws, and the interpretation of law through judicial decisions, which guarantee to all races the equal rights of citizenship.

Numerous bills on civil rights are now before the Senate, and the subcommittee's hearings were conducted to obtain various points of view regarding the bills under consideration.

In his testimony for the National Lutheran Council Dr. Van Deusen pointed out that he would not comment on specific bills before the Senate, since Lutheran church groups have taken no action on the individual bills. He did say that the proposals which some of the bills contain are in general agreement with the principles stated in the NLC's "Christian Affirmation on Human Relations" and in similar statements of participating church bodies of the Council which he submitted to the committee for consideration.

Dr. Van Deusen commented that study of these documents reveals that they are addressed to the church rather than to the state and that they deal primarily with the church's responsibility to put its own Christian principles into practice. Even so, he added, they have a bearing on the application of these principles to society as a whole.

As part of his concluding testimony Dr. Van Deusen stressed a portion of the NLC's statement which reads: "We believe that Christians ought to exercise their social responsibility by acting in their own communities to remove whatever injustices exist and to insure for all persons, without discrimination, just and equal opportunities, especially in housing, employment, education, and access to social welfare services."

*Geneva.*—Although in many ways crippled and restricted in its influence and church activities, Lutheranism in Latvia and Estonia—the state religion when those countries were independent—is still

alive under the rule of the USSR. Authoritative reports appearing in various sectors of the West European press reveal that the Lutheran Churches in those Baltic states have by no means been destroyed or forced to go underground but that they are still carrying on openly, even though in a limited fashion.

Their old archbishops are now in western Europe, leading the Latvian and Estonian churches in exile; but back in their homelands, with official sanction, their titles have been assumed by others who are leading the remaining Lutherans in an effort to please both God and the Communist government.

The income from taxes which the state churches enjoyed is now gone, but the Lutheran parishioners have met the loss by more generous offerings and gifts. They no longer have any theological faculties, but they are still training small groups of young men for the Gospel ministry, gathering them sporadically in accordance with the less formal means at their disposal. Similarly, Sunday schools, catechetical classes, and other forms of religious instruction have been done away with; but every year there are a few candidates for confirmation—children who have learned the elements of the Christian faith by parental teaching or improvised catechetical interludes in the regular worship services.

Such services are allowed without hindrance on Sundays and holidays in "registered" places of worship. This fact, Baltic churchmen tell Westerners, shows the way that "the religious freedom guaranteed by Soviet law" is respected by the authorities. At the same time church people are expected to show their sympathy with the Communist approach to world affairs by singing hymns, praying and working for the East European peace movement. Both Latvian Archbishop Gustavs Turs of Riga and Estonian Archbishop Jaan Kiivit of Tallinn are active leaders in that movement.

This picture of present Lutheran church life in the absorbed Baltic states was the one that western journalists said they received from the two archbishops and from pastors, in direct talks.

The Paris Lutheran monthly *Fraternite Evangelique* based its report on descriptions given by Archbishop Kiivit, a pastor from Estonia, and one from Latvia, during a recent visit to Lutheran churches in the French capital. Meanwhile the leading West German newspaper *Die Welt* published a dispatch from its Moscow correspondent who visited Riga, interviewed Archbishop Turs, and obtained an essentially similar account of the present church situation in that area.

The archbishops said that of the two largest religious groups in

Estonia the Lutherans now claim 700,000 "active" members and the Orthodox 150,000, while in Latvia the Lutherans count 600,000, Roman Catholics 200,000, and the Orthodox 150,000. Archbishop Kiivit was quoted as saying that when the Communists took over Estonia after the war, 60,000 of his countrymen, including 40 per cent of the Lutheran pastors, fled to the West. He gave the present Estonian population as about one million.

The Estonian Church in exile, headed by Archbishop Johan Köpp, who resides in Hägersten, Sweden, claims 66,000 members. The Latvian Church in exile, directed by 89-year-old Archbishop Teodors Grünbergs from Esslingen, Germany, claims 120,000 in scattered parts of the world.

Archbishop Kiivit said three fourths of the churches in Estonia were destroyed or damaged by the end of the war. The Lutheran Church there, he reported, now has 122 pastors who with the assistance of deacons and lay preachers serve 148 parishes, in which there are 172 places of worship.

In Latvia 280 Lutheran parishes are now served by 120 pastors with lay assistants, the church spokesmen said. Even German services of preaching and Holy Communion are now permitted and a Latvian pastor holds them once a month in Riga, according to a Baltic newsletter report quoted by the German Evangelical Press Service (EPD).

The postwar ban on the use of the German language in public gatherings, EPD said, was lifted at Easter 1958, when several West German Evangelical churchmen visited Latvia and gave a number of addresses there.

The *Die Welt* correspondent said "peace services" are regularly held in the Latvian churches and that the latest edition of the Lutheran hymnal includes a number of "peace hymns."

Both archbishops were quoted as having spoken in encouraging terms of their members' efforts to compensate for the loss of tax support. Archbishop Kiivit said the Estonian Church's income is slightly higher than it was 20 years ago, while Archbishop Turs commented: "The [Latvian] Church is not suffering privation. Offerings and voluntary contributions bring rich blessing."