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Review Article: The Early History of the Evangelical Alliance and its Advocacy of Religious Freedom

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Gerhard Lindemann, *Die Geschichte der Evangelischen Allianz im Zeitalter des Liberalismus (1846-1879)*, Theologie: Forschung und Wissenschaft Bd. 24 (English title translation: The History of the Evangelical Alliance in the Age of Liberalism (1846-1879). Theology: Research and Scholarship Vol. 24). Lit Verlag: Münster, 2011. 1064 pp. € 129.90

Since my dissertation on Theodor Christlieb in 1985¹ and the work of Hans Hauzenberger the following year, the Methodist researcher Karl-Heinz Vogt has contributed new material on Christlieb himself and on the topic of the Alliance and religious freedom. However, for the past 25 years what has been missing has been a significant advance in research into the history of the Alliance in Germany and, indeed, on its worldwide history from the time prior to World War II up until today. Also, there has not been anything substantial on the early history of the World Evangelical Alliance for a long period of time. Researchers have

likewise not shown much enthusiasm for the history of religious freedom in the nineteenth century in general. But now we have this excellent and mammoth piece of work on the Evangelical Alliance!

Lindemann's work is a large-format book with 947 pages of pure text, a large print area and small print. This 2004 professorial dissertation does justice to the reputation Germans have for writing the fattest of all books! Sometimes it is overly detailed, with everything meticulously documented from files and contemporary newspapers, but it makes the book the most rigorous (and best) depiction of the history prior to the commencement of the Evangelical Alliance as well as the early history of the organisation.

Today, the World Evangelical Alliance represents 600 million Christians worldwide, of which only a fraction

¹ Thomas Schirrmacher, *Theodor Christlieb und seine Missionstheologie* (Verlag und Schriftmission der Evangelischen Gesellschaft für Deutschland, 1985).

is German-speaking. It is disappointing that for this reason this treasure will remain hidden to the largest segment of these people. This is due to the fact that an English translation of this amount of text, while arguably urgently necessary, is unfortunately very unlikely.

Evangelical Alliance Origins and Ecumenism

Using whatever resources are available, this opus covers the actual history such as meetings, campaigns, and international expansion, which are chronicled for the reader; the role played by key personalities, and finally, the main areas of the Alliance's work (especially freedom of religion and freedom of conscience, weeks of prayer, missions, and publications). Whoever would like to pursue an individual topic—for instance the history of the international World Evangelical Alliance New Year Week of Prayer—can do this very well via the finely laid out outline and index. Whoever also wants to pursue the history of the Alliance up to 1879 in a variety of countries such as Great Britain, England, Germany, the Scandinavian countries, Canada, Australia, South Africa, Turkey, Iran, India, or Japan, will make a find.

This is the first time one finds documentation for many topics (e.g., the early Evangelical Alliance's advocacy of the protection of animals). I even found something new on Christlieb which complements my dissertation (Christlieb and Reconciliation with France in New York (747-752)—Christlieb's campaign against the opium trade (856-858) and the history of the West German Evangelical Alliance

(921-922)).

Lindemann sees the Alliance as being from the outset the first organized form of ecumenism and as the sole true ecumenical organization which emerged from the revivals in the nineteenth century (15). He shows that the Alliance itself frequently used the word 'ecumenical' in its early documents (938, and often). He believes that the Alliance 'produced a climate which facilitated the founding of organizations which were the precursor of the World Council of Churches (WCC)' (945). He criticizes the fact that historical depictions of modern ecumenism often begin very late and pass over the Alliance as well as a number of its earlier leading representatives as forerunners of the unity of Christians (21).

Lindemann sees the Alliance as a part of the transnational movement of revival after Pietism (25), which should not be judged in sweeping terms as 'anti-Enlightenment' or 'anti-modern' (25). Rather, with respect to questions of religious freedom or the fight against slavery, (28-29) it was in fact ahead of its time. Fed by revival in completely different languages and cultural circles, it, like Pietism, was marked 'by a wide-ranging network of international contacts and ties' (33).

However, I am bold enough to question his claim that one can trace the founding of ecumenical structures independent of the Alliance solely to the 'increasing "fundamentalization" of the 1880 Alliance' (945) in the form of the rejection of biblical criticism and a turning towards the Holiness movement. This is what Lindemann rather incidentally mentions at the very end. I suspect that a similar exhaustive work for the period after 1880 would

likewise allow another 'Alliance' to emerge which, like the Alliance which Lindemann depicts up to 1879, would not derive from the 'fundamentalization' cliché. Still, Lindemann is correct when he continues: 'Nevertheless, the body of thought of the Alliance lives on in ecumenism' (946).

The concluding words on the Evangelical Alliance of today which imply several phases in its development (an early good one, a worse one later as well as the present day organisation), do not fit too well with the characteristic style of the book. However, after 945 exceedingly fair pages presenting the Alliance from various sources, one should take this restrained criticism to heart, particularly since the recommendations taken from it have in part already been put into practice.

On the whole, Lindemann writes from a friendly yet critical distance. Thus, for instance, he criticizes the close proximity of many Evangelicals to the ruling nobility at the time of the 1848/49 Revolution (152-158), whereby the Evangelicals did not differentiate themselves from the churches of their time.

He frequently presents positive aspects. Thus already at the time of the founding of the Evangelical Alliance, there was unity in the condemnation of slavery—the fight against slavery belonged unalterably to the history of 'Evangelicals'. However, the degree to which groups and individuals who tolerated slavery were allowed to become members was, on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, a point of dispute (65-72, 110-129, 159). Initially, in 1846, they were all excluded, later admitted in part, and then along with the abolition of slavery in the USA, irrevocably

banned (693). Never before have these complicated details been documented in detail.

There is also a lot of new material provided on the development of the statement of faith. He writes,

The understanding was one of an association of individuals. Also, in this connection, there was value placed on a personal decision of faith by each individual and an emphasis on the right of each individual's reading of the Bible. There was a sharp division between Catholicism (as well as high church groups in Protestantism) with its beliefs about the sacraments and the institutional church as objectively predefined entities, and the Evangelicals who gave priority to the decision of the individual. What counted for the Alliance in its 'statement of faith' adopted in London was a view of the divinely inspired Scriptures as sacrosanct, with the right of examination, however, granted to each individual. (205)

Tensions

The development of the first statement of faith is stirring (87-98). In my opinion it could have been more clearly pointed out that the first two sentences have produced a central tension up to the present day:

1. The divine inspiration, authority, and sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures. (87)
2. The right and duty of private judgment in the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. (98)

On the one hand, this is an unalterable position, but on the other hand,

it reflects an extreme pluralism, obligating each believer to interpret the foundation for himself. There are issues here which are worth discussing further.

First, Evangelicals are marked by two opposite poles, and one does not do them justice if only one pole is observed. First there is the *centrality of the Holy Scriptures*. Then there is *individual salvation* that arises from Luther's question: 'How do I find a gracious God?' It is a matter of each person having a personal relationship with God and then, as a corrective to the centrality of the Scriptures, the entitlement, even the obligation, of every Christian to study the Scriptures himself and to interpret them. The result is that such an individual stands on a level with every Evangelical theologian, no matter how learned, even if it is his pastor. Thus the Evangelical world unites dogmatic constriction, thanks to the position of the Bible, with an enormous democratic breadth, because every theologian is allowed to have a say.

The second tension is between missions and religious freedom. From the enormous emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, there arose a strong stress on the 'duty to witness' as well as a strong emphasis on religious freedom. The concept of voluntariness marks not only free churches, but also intra-church pietism, for whom faith is not something that is only external, or inherited, but rather something which is personally experienced. But for all that, no one can be forced into it. Indeed, coercion destroys the possibility of accomplishing a truly independent, personal repentance before God. Thus rather a smaller church with convinced members than

a large one with many members who belong only due to societal, family, or other pressures.

Redefinition of the Relationship of the Evangelical Alliance to the Catholic Church

Lindemann examines the anti-Catholic tendencies and activities in Great Britain in which the Alliance in part has its roots (45-50). Admittedly he also conclusively establishes what was my greatest 'aha' experience when reading the book. It was hardly the dogmatic differences which occupied centre stage. Rather, the Alliance, with its advocacy of freedom of religion and freedom of conscience, represented the complete opposite of the Ultramontanist Catholic Church, which decidedly rejected religious freedom.

In part the Alliance had a radical, and perhaps restrained, emphasis on the separation of church and state but also a strong emphasis on the primacy of voluntary personal conversion—something which excluded any sort of coercion in missions or religious coercion from the side of the state. The Catholic Church saw the state as a servant of the church, at least in questions of religion and ethics. Local Catholics were seen to be bound more strongly than ever not only to the spiritual leadership, but also to the political leadership, of the pope.

These were all positions which the Catholic Church first officially gave up in the Second Vatican Council but already after both world wars increasingly had to relinquish. In the culture war in Germany at the time of Bismarck,

it was less a matter of the content of faith and more to do with the question of power and political influence of the church(es). In contrast, according to Lindemann, for the Alliance, there was the consideration that Ultramontanism was 'a conspiracy against the spiritual development and spiritual freedom of humanity' (49, 321-337).

From the year of the founding of the Alliance onwards, there was consistent advocacy for persecuted Catholics in Protestant countries and a lack of support of anti-Catholic governments for their actions (205). (At the founding in 1846 there was no provision for the non-admission of Catholics) (131). The Alliance challenged Sweden with a delegation in 1858 after the highest royal court expelled six women from the country who had converted to Catholicism, by calling for religious freedom for these Catholics; this was greeted throughout Europe with a storm of outrage outside of the Alliance (295-300). The Alliance was then significantly involved in the Swedish Parliament's 1860 abolition of penalties for leaving the Lutheran state church.

Lindemann writes:

Through its concentration on dogmatic and spiritual elements, the Alliance differentiated itself from other anti-Catholic groups. Furthermore, engagement for the Waldensian church made it clear that the Association did not let itself be led by blind hatred of Catholics. Rather, it was able also to speak out against diplomatic and military support of governments which did not respect the principle of religious freedom, even when it found itself in conflict with Catholicism. In this connection Sir Culling Eardley made it clear

that political freedom without religious freedom is unthinkable and also not worthy of being supported. According to the understanding of the London Alliance Committee, it was a matter of the 'most holy of human rights' (205-206).

He adds,

As early as the start-up phase of the Evangelical Alliance, it proved itself to be in no way a purely anti-Catholic movement. Priority was given to the interest in unity among Christians, while current events and developments were viewed more as triggering factors for the step to a Protestant affiliation. The evangelization of the world and the desire to contribute to peace among peoples through cooperation across borders, the latter above all from the American perspective, were considered to be fundamental objectives (205).

New Chapters in the History of Religious Freedom

Lindemann shows the effort against persecution for religious reasons and in defence of religious freedom to be the main topic for the Alliance; this issue had never before been presented so thoroughly (in part. 141-151, 205-321, 592-645, 773-811, 858, 868-913). Especially interesting are the insights into the Alliance's efforts for religious freedom, which Lindemann gained from the files of the 'British Foreign and Commonwealth Office'.

Since the Alliance took advantage of the fact that foreign policy became the topic of the press and of the emerging parliament (207), efforts relating to those persecuted for religious rea-

sons were in central focus from 1849 to 1858 (207).

Let us choose as an example the actions taken for the controversial Italian Signor Giacinto Achilli (1803-1893), who converted from Catholicism to Protestantism, and who for that reason was incarcerated for life by the Roman Inquisition. In a diplomatic tug of war, which lasted almost one year and included the participation of British and French foreign ministers, the media, their newspapers, and numerous delegations, a trick by the French secured his freedom so that he could leave Rome and be handed over to England (208-223).

Matters such as these are repeatedly presented by Lindemann in minute detail. If these matters were known about at all, they had up to this point never been traced out in their individual steps. They document just how well organized, networked with governments and media, and ahead of its time this aspect of the Evangelical Alliance was.

Lindemann writes:

In their efforts for those disadvantaged due to reasons of belief, the Alliance clearly profited from increasing pluralism, above all the pluralism of British society and of the development of a broader media audience which allowed the exertion of influence by 'pressure groups' on the foreign policy decision process. It was soon noticed that in certain cases joint action beyond national borders appeared to promise more success, such as in the initial example of the Italian Giacinto Achilli where it was able to lead to joint governmental action. At the same time, reference to

English public opinion was able to either deter states from the repression of people of other religions, end such repression, or, at least, to reduce it. It is not only through using new methods in this undertaking that the Evangelical Alliance had its part in the modernization process of Protestantism in the nineteenth century. (943)

For instance, the British Alliance used a position paper sent to the Prussian king opposing persecution of Baptists to achieve the return to Berlin of the Baptist leader Johann Gerhard Oncken who had earlier been driven out of that city (235-237). With letters from the British queen and the Prussian king, the Tuscan Grand Duke Leopold II was assailed in an audience on account of the incarceration of a married couple by the name of Madiari. 'The deputation met with a strong response all across Europe' (254). Even the tough minded Lutheran Ernst-Wilhelm Hengstenberg, who was truly no friend of the Alliance, praised the action, since it refuted the Catholic charge that the Protestants were hopelessly split.

At this point they had spoken with a single voice (254). The affair spread as far as the USA, and other Italian princes likewise became active, as was the French emperor, until after a year the married couple was finally released in 1853. This makes it especially clear how closely tied the thought of ecumenism among Protestants and religious freedom was: working together makes you stronger.

The extent of denominational generosity is also shown by the fact that there was a campaign before the Sultan not only for converts of Islam to Protestantism but also for the Greek

Orthodox Church (300). The cause of Nestorians was supported in Iran (610-613).

After the execution of a convert in 1853, the Alliance, in cooperation with the Turkish Alliance, activated its contacts in a considerable number of European governments until finally in 1856 Sultan Abdülmecid I—admittedly in connection with the complicated politics between the Ottoman Empire and western powers—issued an edict granting greater freedoms to Protestants and abolishing the death penalty for conversion (300-319). In 1874-1875 a further large campaign was led by a delegation of the Alliance to the Turkish foreign minister, and by diplomats even all the way up to the sultan. However, their impact has been disputed (879-902).

Lindemann writes that the Czar's suspension of cases against pastors in the Baltic states was 'the responsibility of [the result of] the push forward by the Alliance in London' (800). The deliberate confusion surrounding an attempt at a meeting with the Czar, who finally sent his foreign minister ahead, is resolved by Lindemann (779-800).

The audiences which the Alliance had before the Prussian king, for instance in 1855 in Cologne or in 1857 within the framework of the Alliance's Berlin Conference before Friedrich Wilhelm IV (286f.), always revolved around freedom of religion in Germany. The same applies for conversations the secretary of the Alliance held with the German Emperor Kaiser Wilhelm I and the Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in 1875 (919). A deputation of the Alliance before Emperor Franz Joseph I at the Hofburg (Austrian royal residence) and subsequent conversations with the

prime minister and the minister for education and the arts in 1879 led to noticeable relief for Protestants, and in 1880 even to their legal recognition as churches as well as almost incidentally to relief for free churches in Vienna (913).

The same applies to the visit by the entire group of participants from the New York Conference with the American President Ulysses S. Grant and his cabinet in 1873 (755-756), only that the American government no longer required convincing about freedom of religion.

It should be noted that all this happened at a time when traditional churches were still very far from giving up their status as state churches, not to mention allowing religious freedom for all and still less demanding it. When religious freedom was called for at that time, it was mainly from Jews, religious minorities, and atheists, not, however, from very religious representatives of the prevailing religion. The contribution the Evangelical Alliance made to religious freedom in Germany has up to this time not been acknowledged anywhere.

Foundations

The 1853 Homburg Conference for Religious Freedom was a landmark in the history of the Alliance and for tolerance in Germany and Europe (263-267). The central result was the rejection of any use of ecclesiastical force against separatists and the rejection of the use of any state power by churches against others as a milestone in the development of the rights of religious freedom (266). Furthermore, this deliberately counted not only for Christians

but for all religions. It naturally led to internal controversies and to sharp criticism from the side of Protestant state churches (267-272), but it did so without moving the Alliance away from its basic principle.

In 1861 a French pastor advanced a new thesis which gained more and more acceptance in the Alliance, namely that 'religious freedom guarantees state order and its inherent peace' (592). Oppression of individual religious freedom, on the other hand, feeds revolution and strife and divests the state of its God-given foundation! Interestingly enough, international academic investigation confirms precisely this: Religious freedom promotes a peaceful society, the oppression of religious freedom promotes unrest and violence, and practically all terrorist movements in the world which have a religious hue come from countries from

the latter group.²

Lindemann writes:

With its commitment to religious freedom, the Alliance, the Anglo-American wing of which did not content itself with mere tolerance but saw public confession of faith as a fundamental right, has also in the establishment of freedoms in countries concerned rendered a notable service and made no insignificant contribution to the development of a civil society in Europe. (943)

Lindemann deserves our thanks for telling the story of the directions set by the early leaders of the Evangelical Alliance, especially in regard to religious liberty.

² Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, with my commentary on this work available at <http://www.thomasschirrmacher.info/archives/1792>].