

Reviews

Die diakonische Theologie im Gesellschaftssystem Ungarns
(The "Theology of Diaconia" in the Hungarian Sociopolitical System) by Vilmos Vajta. Frankfurt/Main: Verlag Otto Lembeck, 1987. Paperback, 188 pp.

When Bishop Wulfila, the fourth century missionary of the Goths, translated New Testament texts into Gothic, he had to face a particular problem: the Gothic language lacked direct equivalents for several key New Testament terms, such as "cross" for example. The Gothic farmers and warriors simply had no idea about the function of the cross within the Roman cultural context. Therefore Wulfila decided to translate "cross" by "*galgan*", Gothic for gallows, the favourite Gothic instrument for executing the death penalty. Five hundred years later, for the purpose of Christian education among the Saxons, an unknown author wrote the epic poem *Heliand*, in which Jesus Christ is depicted as a Germanic duke, and his disciples as his retinue bound to him by their duty of loyalty.

Both these cases show that the proclamation of the Gospel requires "contextualisation": symbols and concepts which are familiar within the cultural context of the addressees must be used to make the Gospel accessible for them. In this understanding "contextualisation" means an enhancement of the "penetrating power" of the Gospel. A misuse of contextualisation occurs, however, when the Gospel is adjusted to the cultural context to such a degree that the witness of the church becomes unclear or even unbiblical. This tends to be the case, for example, if a church practices racial segregation at the Lord's table — particularly within a racist societal context. The Lutheran World Federation (Dar-es-Salaam, 1977) and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Ottawa, 1982) rightly characterised as heretical some of their South African member churches which follow this practice.

In the early 1980s the Hungarian Lutheran bishop Dr Zoltan Káldy

was running for the presidency of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). This fact drew the attention of world Christianity to the state of Protestant theology in Hungary today. In 1983 a West German church magazine published an article arguing that the Hungarian "Theology of Diaconia" (TD) preaches the Marxist-Leninist context in which it operates rather than the biblical message in a contextualised form. The author of this article, Professor Vilmos Vajta, is a Lutheran scholar born in Hungary. For many years he served as a director of the Theological Department of the LWF in Geneva and later as director of the LWF's Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg.

Notwithstanding Vajta's credentials, however, efforts were made in Lutheran church circles to keep his critical contributions on the Hungarian Lutheran Church and its theology out of official LWF publications. In 1984 Bishop Káldy was elected President of the LWF at its Assembly in Budapest. Vajta had asked for a consultation between representatives and critics of the Hungarian Theology of Diaconia — that is, for a "fair trial". This was refused by the leadership of the Lutheran Church in Hungary. In 1985 an international consultation on the situation of different churches in socialist societies brought together some hundred participants in Stuttgart. Representatives of the Lutheran Church in Hungary had been invited as well as critics of the Theology of Diaconia, including Vajta. The Hungarian representatives did not take up the invitation. In the same year, the Heidelberg Institute for Diaconal Research launched a study called "European Research Exchange on Diaconal Theologies". Vilmos Vajta was a member of the advisory committee. He participated in the first consultation. The second consultation was held in Hungary. On the request of the hosting Lutheran Church Vajta was not invited to it.

All these efforts to avoid discussion of TD indicate that those making the efforts are afraid that it would be judged negatively. This seems likely, if Vajta's sophisticated analysis is correct. It is systematically developed in his latest book. According to Vajta, Theology of Diaconia is not only a Lutheran problem, for it closely follows the doctrinal guidelines of the older "Theology of the Serving Church" formulated by the Reformed Bishop Albert Bereczky right after the end of the Second World War, when Soviet troops had conquered Hungary. Bereczky's theology has been criticised by internationally recognised Reformed theologians like Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, but their criticisms have never been given publicity by the Hungarian Reformed Church (pp. 14-15).

Vajta argues that TD puts faith and good works in the wrong relationship. To the Apostle Paul (see, for example, Romans 6), faith

alone can save believers; diaconia is an immediate result of faith. TD, however, endows "good works" with salvatory significance. According to Marxism-Leninism revolutionary "works" and labour under socialist conditions of production have a salvific relevance. TD has adjusted to this concept to such a degree that it no longer acknowledges any difference between the works of God and the works of human beings. According to Vajta this is "the oldest, in fact the very first, heresy of all in the history of the church" (pp.49-50). We should be clear that in TD terminology the word "diaconia" does not mean Christian service to one's neighbour in need but rather the church's service to human society at both national and international level. This service is to be carried out (nationally and ecumenically) in close cooperation with the Communist Party. The end result is that the Party determines what kind of good works are appropriate. "There is the danger that the context becomes the text (of the church's witness) and that the Gospel of freedom is perverted into a legalistic claim of the context" (p.56).

The extent to which TD has adjusted to its ideological context can be seen if one follows Vajta's critical analysis of the use of the concepts of "community", "progress", "church and state" and "peace" by the Lutheran Church in Hungary, as they have been shaped particularly in the official dialogue between church and state representatives since 1982.

While the New Testament understanding of "koinonia" (community) allows the community to integrate all the individual gifts of the members as well as the gifts of their individual personalities (1 Corinthians 12), the Marxist-Leninist concept of collectivism demands strict subordination of the individual personality to collective purposes. Nevertheless egotism is flourishing in collectivist societies. The New Testament concept of community could be a remedy here if it were lived and confessed as a criticism of the ruling concept of collectivism; but on this subject TD remains silent. On the international scene, however, its representative theologians recommend revolutionary violence in order to replace "class societies" by collectivist societies (p. 134). While according to the New Testament mankind is fundamentally perverted (by Original Sin), Marxism-Leninism follows the enlightenment conviction that mankind is in principle able to solve all vital problems in a progress towards perfection. Nevertheless, TD adopts Historical Materialism as the exclusive methodology capable of interpreting problems of economic, societal and political development. According to Vajta, historical experience does not in fact show that human history always proceeds towards more positive and humane solutions. Not every kind of progress which takes place can be called "progressive". TD, however,

declines to confront the Marxist doctrine of the (secular) roots of alienation and to criticise it from the standpoint of the biblical teaching on Original Sin (pp. 140-48).

The "hierocratic" structure of the Lutheran Church in Hungary today looks like a copy of the structure of the official institutions of the Hungarian state, which are based upon the (in fact extremely authoritarian) principle of "democratic centralism". Real participation by the congregations and the "lower clergy" in decision-making, a characteristic of the churches of the Reformation (and the early church), is no longer possible in the Lutheran Church in Hungary. Vajta uses (amongst other critical tools) the Barmen Confession of 1934, which was formulated by the "Confessing Church" — including Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others — against the pro-Nazi syncretism of the "Reichskirche". This provides him with a set of theological criteria to assess the Lutheran Church in Hungary today. The Barmen Confession rejected the "Leader principle" of Nazi institutions as a model for the church's own decision-making structure (pp. 158-61).

Since the Second World War the Hungarian churches have constantly pushed the theme of "world peace" on to the agendas of ecumenical conferences. Vajta describes in a very persuasive way how ecumenical representatives of the Hungarian churches (as well as those from other Warsaw Pact states) have functioned as "agents of influence" within international church conferences. Increasingly they have succeeded in establishing a permanent bias in ecumenical declarations on "world peace": the western governments (especially that of the USA) are "warmongers", the communist states are essentially peaceloving. As always, Vajta is not satisfied with simply analysing the political role of the Lutheran Church in Hungary in this field, but goes on to work out the theological implications of this role and to criticise it from a theological perspective (pp. 164-82).

According to Vajta the Lutheran Church in Hungary is not a confessing church. In public dialogue with Hungarian state representatives it keeps silent about key truths of biblical witness and teaches the old heresy of human self-salvation by "good works". Its TD is the confession not of a serving church but of a sycophant church. If Vajta's analysis is correct (and I believe it probably is) the question arises as to whether ecumenical bodies ought not to deal with TD as with other heretical theologies, for example the theology of apartheid. If there were no other reason why Vajta's sound political analysis and sophisticated theological judgement should be published in English, this very important question alone would provide one.

*Towards a Contextual Ecclesiology: The Catholic Church
in the People's Republic of China (1979-1983):
its Life and Theological Implications*

by Kim-Kwong Chan. Kowloon, Hong Kong: Phototech Systems Ltd., 1987. (Distributed by the Chinese Church Research Centre, Box 312, Shatin New Territories, Hong Kong) 465 pp., bibliography, 7 appendices, HK\$100.

This is probably the most important work which has been published on the Catholic Church in China since the end of the Cultural Revolution. The author is a Protestant and collected most of the material while he was registered for a PhD at St Paul University in Ottawa, but his heavy emphasis on Chinese documentation (albeit in the public sphere) enables him to read between the lines. For example, he shows that the terms *aiguo hui* and *aiguo jiawhui* are not synonymous in meaning even when they appear to refer to the Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA) and that the specialist functions of the CPCA, the NAC (National Administrative Commission of the Catholic Church) and the CBC (Chinese Bishops' College) all have as their main aim to retain the Chinese Catholic Church as an independent self-governing church within the world-wide (Roman) Catholic communion. The official local church congregations do not regard themselves as schismatic by virtue of sometimes being administered by bishops who have been elected within China without the approval of Rome. In some areas the Pope is regularly prayed for as head of the ecclesiastical but not the political church.

The main contention of the book is that because the Catholic Church in China is determined to continue to perform the (Tridentine) liturgy it is prepared to give public and open support to the state without any religious compromise. The author gives as one example of non-compromise the marriage of clergy. During the Cultural Revolution (and perhaps afterwards) a number of priests and perhaps bishops married (sometimes without sexual relations): Catholic laity and probably the majority of priests are strongly opposed to any marriage of clergy, and when in a number of areas married priests started to preside at public celebrations of the liturgy, the congregations refused to attend. While some married priests still occupy political or administrative posts, the congregations refuse to accept them as being able to perform valid masses.

The author thus takes a view opposed to that of Father Ladany, for example, who argues that the valid Chinese church is the one recognised by the Pope. In contrast Chan argues that there is a valid operating Christian Catholic Church in China which cannot be

identified in a simple way with official church attitudes and that both the Pope and the three official organs of the Chinese Catholic Church are now trying to avoid separating from each other in a religious sense whatever political posture each may adopt. In other words, politics is something separate from a church's spirituality. The church transcends its organisation.

The only weakness in this book arises from lack of direct contact with Chinese Catholics at the grassroots level in China. Simply to say that the Mass is in Latin does not really describe adequately the special sort of singing-chanting of the congregation which accompanies the physical movements of the priest at the altar and which achieves an atmosphere of devotion totally dissimilar from the atmosphere at a service of the Three-Self Movement. It is said that next year there is some likelihood that the language the priest uses at Mass will also change to Chinese. If this comes about it will probably result in a more radical change in the nature of the Catholic Church in China than anything which has happened up to the present.

I have not adequately reviewed this book as every single one of its 465 careful pages has some interesting pieces of information about the actual practices of the Catholic Church in China; and the fact that the author is a Protestant means that he has been able to reach an independent understanding of the position of this church today.

WILLIAM H. NEWELL

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