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The Russian Eastern Church and Protestantism

By HERBERT HALJASBOLD

EDITORIAL PREFACE

The author presents several highlights from a collection of essays under the title *Die Ostkirche und die Russische Christenheit*, edited by Dr. Ernst Benz, Marburg, and published in 1949 by Furche-Verlag, now Katzmann-Verlag, of Tuebingen. In addition to Dr. Benz the following scholars made contributions to the volume: Dr. Hildegard Schaefer, Frankfurt a. M., Dr. Ludolf Mueller, Marburg, Dr. Rudolf Schneider, Kiel. Source material which gives a clear picture concerning the relations between the Russian Church and Protestantism during the last four centuries is, strange to say, quite limited. With the lowering of the Iron Curtain the Western World's interest in all things Russian has been keenly aroused. Protestantism in general and the Lutheran Church in particular are anxious to know the fate of uncounted Christians in the Baltic provinces during recent decades. The reported ruthless persecution of the Christian Church by the Soviet rulers on the one hand, and on the other the story of the underground movement to perpetuate the Christian faith in spite of bitter opposition, has kindled the hope in many Western Christians to penetrate the Iron Curtain with the everlasting Gospel. From this viewpoint the present article should prove stimulating. The Editorial Committee wishes to thank Dr. Ewald Katzmann, manager of Katzmann-Verlag, for permission to bring large sections from this publication in English translation. In the spelling of all Russian names we followed the author's copy.—F. E. M.

THE contacts between the Lutheran and the Eastern Church reach back to Luther. Benz points out that the Symbolical Books in several instances support their demand for a reformation of doctrine and cultus by an appeal to the authorities of the Greek Church during the first five centuries. He shows that during the dispute at Leipzig, Luther appealed to the Greek Church to corroborate his thesis that the supremacy of the Papacy was not recognized in the Old Church, but was developed after the age of Constantine and in opposition to the Eastern Church. Luther likewise refers to the Eastern Church in support of the doctrine of

Holy Communion and his claim for the marriage of priests. Among frequent visitors at Melanchthon's house were not only Greek poets and scholars of the Orthodox faith, such as Antonius, Eparch of Corcyra, but also theologians of the Eastern Church, as, for instance, Demetrius, a Serbian, who lent Melanchthon a helping hand in translating into Greek the *Confessio Augustana* and who delivered this translation to the Patriarch of Constantinople. The Reformers' interest in the Eastern Church is evidenced by the fact that David Chytraeus, a pupil of Luther, wrote a book on the Eastern Church; that Hans von Ungnad and Trubar translated the books of the Reformation into Croatian and Slovenian; that Martin Crusius and his theological discussions met with a certain amount of agreement at Constantinople.¹

At the time when the course of history in Western Europe was dominated by the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, and when the Reformation in the East had spread as far as Finland, Estonia, and Latvia—to the very gates of Russia—Russia was ruled by Wassilij III (1503—1533) and by the "Holy and God-crowned Czar and Autocrat of all Russia," Iwan IV, called the Terrible (1533—1584). In August, 1569, the King of Poland, Zygmunt II, sent a mission to Moscow, including Jan Rokyta, a preacher of the Bohemian Brethren. Benz reports in detail the memorable debate between the Czar and Jan Rokyta, the coarseness of the Czar (he addressed the brethren: *vos porci*, ye swine!), the ten questions put by the Czar, the oral and written answers of Rokyta, and the final, refuting reply of the Czar (pp. 116—118). Dr. Mueller in his essay describes a conversation between the Czar and Pastor Bockhorn, in the course of which the Czar expressed his appreciation of Luther's Bible knowledge, but also his distaste at the violence accompanying the Reformation. The Czar treated Pastor Thomas, who had preached in the evangelical way at Polotzk, most unkindly, even consenting to have him thrown under the ice of the Dwina River. (Pp. 24—26.)²

¹ According to Ph. Schaff the overtures by the Tuebingen theologians, Jacob Andreae and Martin Crucius, to Jeremiah II of Constantinople between 1573 and 1575 were entirely in vain. *Creeds of Christendom*, I, 50f. (F. E. M.)

² In a recent letter Dr. Benz informed the Reverend Robert Plagens of Manila that as early as 1628 a Russian translation of Luther's Small Catechism was published in Sweden, and that a reprint appeared in 1701 at Narva (Swedish-Estonia).

Benz points to another point of contact between the East and the West. He states:

A direct relationship between the Reformation and the Russian Church was established . . . by means of Protestant Mysticism and Spiritualism. . . . Not only were Valentin Weigel's writings translated into Russian surprisingly early, but also the Mysticism of Jacob Boehme reached Russia shortly after his death. . . . Q. Kuhlmann of Breslau (who hoped to establish a Jesus-Monarchy in Moscow) was frustrated in Moscow; not primarily on account of the opposition of the Russians, but of his own German co-religionists. (Benz, pp. 120—122.)

About 1700 German artisans, technicians, military men, and physicians were brought to Russia, and a Lutheran congregation in charge of Pastor Meinecke was established in the "German suburb" (Nemetzkaya Sloboda) to minister in addition to the Germans also to Swedes, Danes, and Dutchmen.

Benz describes the subsequent theological impact of the West on the Russian Church as follows:

The battles fought out on European soil between theologians of the Pope and of the Reformation, now continued on Russian soil in an analogous and passionate manner within the Orthodox Church and between the two leading theologians during the time of Peter the Great, the (Greek Orthodox) Stefan Yaworski and Feofan Prokopowitsh, greatly influenced by Protestant theology. Some mistakenly maintain that Peter abolished the Patriarchate of Moscow (established 1589) and established the Holy Synod in order to conform to the pattern of the Protestant church organization. This would indicate a considerable sphere of influence by Western Protestantism on the Russian Church. . . . If there is some formal similarity between Peter's new church organization and the constitution of the Evangelical *Landeskirchen*, this does not necessarily indicate a sign of agreement between the Russian Church and the West, but rather an extension of Czarist autocracy in church matters. (Benz, pp. 122—123.)

Under Peter the Great's regime the curtain which for centuries had shrouded Russia was withdrawn. Benz describes this as follows:

Having personally met Peter the Great, the philosopher G. W. Leibniz drastically changed his views on Russia. . . . His research in the field of the Slavic history and languages prompted Leibniz to develop a new approach to history. Russia is no longer the

unknown and threatening neighbor beyond the border of Europe, but the Middle Empire between Western and Eastern Europe, which in Leibniz' view was China. Only recently the Jesuits had brought the first information concerning the highly developed culture of China. Leibniz thought that the Churches of the Reformation and the Roman Church could be reconciled through the medium of the Eastern Church, and for a time he even planned an Ecumenic World Council on a diplomatic plane.

With Leibniz a group of other men entered Russian affairs who shared his attitude concerning Russia. Most of them belonged to the Pietistic camp. The most remarkable among them was W. H. Ludolf, Secretary of Prince George of Denmark and Prince Consort of Queen Anne of England (1702—1714). In Amsterdam he became acquainted with the envoy of Peter the Great, also some Russian priests. Among the Russian Christians he found a great and fervent readiness to accept the piety and theology of German Protestant Mysticism. He turned to . . . August Hermann Francke and induced him to teach Russian and Church Slavic at his Oriental Seminary at Halle. He wrote a Russian grammar for the use of young theologians, instructed some of Francke's students in Russian, arranged that returning Russian state emissaries traveled via Halle, initiated correspondence between Francke and Russian priests, stimulated the establishment of a Slavistic library at Halle.

Francke agreed to all these suggestions gladly. He initiated the translation into Russian of numerous devotional books of mystical and pietistic content, especially Johann Arndt's *Vier Buecher vom wahren Christentum*. . . . The influence of Francke in Russia appears in many ways. Almost all of the pastors of Evangelical Lutheran congregations made up of foreigners in Russia were Francke's pupils. He gave loving care, both spiritual and material, to the Swedish prisoners of the Nordic War deported to Siberia. . . . He greatly influenced Russian education by supplying the vacancies in the grammar schools in Moscow and St. Petersburg with teachers trained by him. Thus he introduced into Russia the religious experiences and regulations of the Francke schools. Though Protestant Orthodoxy was very unfavorable to Pietism, Francke's influence continued and increased at many places, and under the protection of the Czarist edicts of toleration it brought about a real unity of spiritual relationships, which, in time, was intensified by the immigration of the Herrnhut Brethren, who not only founded a strong congregation at Sarepta, Volga, but, at the

same time, spread over the entire country as educators and preachers. (Benz, pp. 124—128.)

According to Dr. Mueller the difference between the Russian Orthodox and the Protestant spirit was discussed seriously for the first time during the Age of Rationalism at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He holds that Russian Orthodoxy was too feeble to gain the victory over Rationalism; but that the West supplied the necessary forces, notably Mysticism (introduced by the Nowikow-circle, which published in Russian translations almost all the mystical writings of antiquity and modern times), such movements as Quakerism, Bible Societies, Revivalism, and finally, romantic and idealistic philosophy.

Benz describes this era:

When the fate of Germany and Russia became interlocked in the common fight against Napoleon, and when Alexander I himself showed sympathy toward the German Revivalist movement, spiritualistic mysticism began to exert a great influence. This mystic movement may be characterized by a universal doomsday-unrest; in reality a reaction against the events of the French Revolution and the progress of Western Enlightenment, Atheism, and Materialism. Jung-Stilling, probably more than anyone, has given the most articulate expression of it, notably in *Heimweh* (1794) and *Siegesgeschichte der christlichen Religion* (1799). . . . The ideas of Jung-Stilling made a deep impression on Czar Alexander I. He firmly believed that Russian Christianity, not yet infected by the decadent age of Enlightenment, alone could save the West from the Antichrist. . . . The Czar's enthusiasm ultimately led to the formation of the Holy Alliance [of Prussia, Austria, and Russia in 1815]. This was the first and the last time that the idea of mutual understanding and unity in Christian faith was made the ground plan of a political European system which included Russia. (Pp. 128—131.)

The books of Jung-Stilling were translated into Russian, printed in Russian governmental print shops, and circulated widely in Russia. Two German revivalists, Gossner and Lindl, developed a large sphere of activity in Russia. Lindl, a Swabian, worked among the German congregations of Bessarabia, which had taken literally the millennial promises of Jung-Stilling, had emigrated to Russia [to establish a sort of "new Jerusalem"], and left behind them the degenerate Western Church. . . . Beginning in

1820, Gossner was active in the revivalist movement at St. Petersburg, and endeavored to intensify and vivify piety among the Germans, Swedes, Englishmen, Russians, and even Mongolians of St. Petersburg. His influence was felt in areas of Russian politics, in the Russian Bible Society established by Alexander I, and in Russian church and school policy. . . . Gossner also disseminated in Russia mystical literature and devotional books of the German Revivalist movement. (Benz, pp. 131—132.)

One extremely important fact, however, is passed over in silence by all contributors to the volume from which we have drawn so heavily. In the peace treaty of Nystad (1721) the Russian Empire acquired the former Swedish provinces Ingermanland, Waadtland, and the so-called Baltic provinces Estonia, Livonia, and Courland, later divided into Estonia and Latvia. Through annexation of these Lutheran provinces and their Lutheran nationals, notably German Balts, Estonians, Livonians, Latvians, Swedes, and Eastern Finns (Weses, Withs, Ingras, and Careles), Lutheranism actually became one of the state religions of Russia. This fact became of importance in a number of ways. In several large cities the German Lutheran congregations quite unexpectedly gained large numbers of Russians. Lutheran farming settlements were established not only by German immigrants but also, and to a large extent, by Estonians and Latvians, who felt constrained to emigrate because of the unsatisfactory agrarian policies at home. The Swedes, forcibly deported by Catherine the Great from the Baltic island Dagö-Hiiu to Southern Russia, developed there rich settlements, of which Gamla-svenskby is probably the best known. These Swedish settlements were later increased by immigrants from Sweden and Finland. The Empire of Russia and the Grand Duchy of Finland, the latter strongly Lutheran, were united in 1809. Thus Russian Lutheranism, represented by several nationalities and preaching the Word of God in many languages, extended to the very limits of this empire, beginning at the gates of St. Petersburg and reaching to the faraway coasts of Eastern Siberia. The ecclesiastical organization of Lutheranism in Russia was highly centralized and was administered by the several Baltic consistories, the consistory of St. Petersburg, and that of Moscow. The clergy for this large territory was provided by the Evangelical Lutheran Department of Theology (until 1917 a German institution) of the Imperial (Russian) University

of Tartu-Dorpat. In spite of its close proximity the Grand Duchy of Finland had an independent Lutheran church organization with an archbishop and several bishops.

But what is the story of the Christian Church, of Protestantism, of Lutheranism, in these territories since 1917? ³ Is Lutheranism facing complete extermination in these territories, or still worse, is it becoming unwittingly the tool of Soviet power? Is the enslaved church of Russia to be used as a weapon to conquer Europe? Dr. Mueller reminds the readers that the representatives of the recent Russian philosophy of religion standing altogether under the influence of Wl. Solowyow, such as Berdyayew, Karsawin, Florowskij, Florenskij, and Bulgakow, are living in exile since 1921, either in Catholic or in Protestant countries. This has on the one hand brought them under the influence of Catholicism and Protestantism, but on the other hand made them conscious of seeking a defense against these influences. (P. 47.) What is Lutheranism to do?

Dr. Benz cautions some recent German writers against the danger of misinterpreting a few seemingly nice gestures of the Soviets as signs of a favorable attitude. The Soviets' real attitude toward the Christian religion can be gauged by the address to Comrade Stalin on the 30th anniversary of the October revolution allegedly signed by 26 million Komsomol—members. In this letter Stalin is not called "Sun of the Sovietland," "Sun of the Whole Country," or "Sun of the Entire World" (p. 19), but in plain English, "*Sun of the Universe*" (Solntze Wselyonnoj). Is there any hope for spiritual life under such conditions? Unbiased theologians and church historians ought to study how it happened that the beaming "Sun of the Universe" has parched not only the Christian life but also the human life of a huge Empire. Then there is another question: The Soviet secret and state police are on the point of rooting out Lutheranism in Estonia and Latvia, the two Lutheran countries overcome by Russia, in Lithuania, in Poland, etc. Are we not dealing with the same menace lying in wait for Eastern Germany and the historical Lutherland itself with all the historical treasures dear to the heart of every Lutheran?

Manila, Philippines

³ Cp. Arthur Vööbus, *Communism's Challenge to Christianity*, reviewed in the February, 1951, issue of this journal.