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THEOLOGICAL OBSERVER

EXISTENTIALISM: PHILOSOPHY OR THEOLOGY?

Under this heading Dr. R. S. Ford, assistant professor of religious education at Garrett Biblical Institute, Evanston, Ill., in *Religion in Life* (summer 1959), endeavors to decide the question by a very careful analysis of the basic presuppositions of existentialism. He disagrees with Sartre, Marcel, and Jaspers, who insist upon its character as a philosophy, judging that it contains certain concepts as these are found in the writings of John Calvin and are exhibited in those of Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr, and others. In concluding his investigation the author writes, in part: "... the obvious dependency of existential thinkers upon the theological concerns of the Reformation expressed through Søren Kierkegaard, coupled with their failure to 'play the game' philosophically, would suggest that this movement has yet to establish itself as a philosophy. Rather, it is a reformulation, sometimes in a non-theistic framework, of some of the basic presuppositions underlying Reformation theology. It is old faith in new disguise." The last statement, we believe, is only partially true and so perhaps not true at all. The writer himself suggests the wide cleavage between Reformation theology and existentialist thought when he asks: "Could it be that the existentialist thinkers have not embraced *enough* [italics in original] of Reformation thought?" What the question intimates is very true, for existentialist thinkers—and here we have in mind the so-called existentialist theologians—usually fail to embrace the full Gospel message of the Reformation theology. Or if they do embrace the Reformation Gospel they depart from their existentialist pattern. Such existentialist fundamentals as "the abyss of Nothingness," "the condition of deep despair," "the awareness of the irrelevancy and meaninglessness of the world," and others, which the writer finds expressed also in Calvin's theology, though perhaps in non-existentialist terminology, attach only to such as have experienced merely the condemning force of the divine Law and so are in mental and spiritual despair. But in the true Reformation theology, especially in that of Luther, the function of the Law is only ancillary; its glory is the Gospel of Christ's full and free salvation by faith, which through the conversion of the despairing sinner removes the "horrifying encounter with Nothingness," the "estrangement and alienation from God," and all the other pagan moods into which godless existentialism hurls the husks-eating prodigal existentialist who

refuses to recognize the grace of God in Christ Jesus, which solves, once for all, all existentialist problems. This explains why Barth, in trying to set forth a "church theology," cut the philosophical navel cord which at first bound him to the dreary Dane. No, indeed, existentialism is not the "old faith in new disguise," but since it leaves out the Gospel, it is no faith at all, at least not the faith of the Reformation theology set forth by both Luther and Calvin.

JOHN THEODORE MUELLER

SOME MODERN PROTESTANT ATTITUDES TOWARDS HERMENEUTICS

Under this heading the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (April 1959) presents a very acceptable overview of modern Protestant critical hermeneutics. In passing, we may remark by way of explanation that the term "hermeneutics" is here used not in the sense of those scholars who regard the narratives of Scripture as actually or historically true and so merely seek to determine by proper principles what the divine words really say, but in that of critics who regard such events as the virgin birth of Christ, His resurrection, ascension, and others as historically untrue, yet having for those who taught them by word or pen a very meaningful significance. We shall quote but a few thoughts to indicate what this sort of critical hermeneutics means in actual practical application. To the historical critic it is impossible to know the Jesus of history. The gospels are not biographies but merely confessions of faith. They contain many legends, e.g., the miracle stories. "We can only know Jesus clad in the garb of myth." For Reimarus, who projected historical criticism, Jesus was a Jewish political messiah; for Bultmann, one of its principal present-day advocates, He was merely a Jewish prophet. For Reimarus Christianity was a deception; for Bultmann it is an act of pure practical reason but not a historical datum (*kein historisches Faktum*). For Bultmann the history of Jesus is part of the history of Judaism, not of Christianity. He can have no significance for Christianity, since Christianity began with the resurrection. Among the European advocates of the canons of historical criticism were Strauss, Hermann, Harnack, and Schweitzer; in America, too, we find the movement is rapidly spreading and gaining champions in many theological schools in our country. There are, of course, such as distinguish between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, with the understanding that the Christian Church must adhere to the latter. But others find this distinction to be pernicious, though deeply rooted in recent Protestant theology. Ultimately, however, such historical criticism means historical skepticism and the repudiation of the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

JOHN THEODORE MUELLER

BRIEF ITEMS FROM THE NATIONAL LUTHERAN COUNCIL

Columbus, Ohio.—Milwaukee has been chosen as the site for the constituting convention of the Luther League of The American Lutheran Church, the new church body that will be formed next year by a three-way merger. The Luther League will meet Aug. 16—21, 1960, with 3,500 official delegates representing nearly 125,000 Lutheran youth in the United States and Canada from the three uniting groups—the American, Evangelical, and United Evangelical Lutheran churches.

According to the Lutheran Youth Convention Committee, the purpose of the youth meeting will be to constitute the Luther League as the youth auxiliary of the new church and to determine the league's program for the first triennium, 1961—63.

Columbus, Ohio.—Dr. Edward C. Fendt, a member of the faculty at Capital University here for 35 years, has been elected president of its Evangelical Lutheran Theological Seminary.

Dr. Fendt was named to the post on June 1 by the Board of Regents of Capital University. He has been dean of the seminary for the past 13 years.

Separate administrations for the seminary and college operated here by the American Lutheran Church were made necessary by the organizational structure for the new church body that will be constituted next year by the union of the ALC, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church. In The American Lutheran Church the theological seminaries will be under the direction and control of a board of theological education and the colleges will be under the direction of a board of college education.

Sweden.—Bishop Bo Giertz of Gothenburg, leader of the "Confessional Front" within the Lutheran Church of Sweden, and Dr. Margit Sahlin, head of St. Catherine's Foundation, both commented on Swedish church problems during recent visits to Norway.

Addressing a meeting of the Brotherhood of Clergymen Faithful to the Confession, in Oslo, Bishop Giertz, who also is vice-president of the Lutheran World Federation, said that the controversy in Sweden over the ordination of women pastors is not the most important of current issues. More important, he stressed, are the questions of the Bible being the true word of God and of faithfulness to the Holy Scriptures.

Bishop Giertz said he regarded the present disagreement as only a preliminary to a division between "a confessional church and a sec-

ularized majority which, although nominally belonging to the Swedish National Church, finds something objectionable even in fundamental Christian truths."

"I should be very much surprised if in the near future we are not faced with a far more serious struggle than up to now," he said. He indicated two opposing viewpoints; one which believes that the Scriptures are given us by God and one which believes that the Bible does contain the Word of God, but not that it is the Word of God.

Washington, D. C.—A sociologist of the American Lutheran Church asserted in Capitol Hill testimony that warped and distorted views of sex may be an American "Achilles' heel."

Dr. Carl F. Reuss of Columbus, Ohio, warned that immature attitudes of many Americans toward sex can be used by the Communist conspiracy to undermine the foundations of national life. He said that the "abnormal glorifying, commercializing, and even idolizing of physical sex, apart from its deeper and truer psychological, emotional, and spiritual meaning and without wholesome channels of expression, may be an American Achilles' heel toward which a clever antagonist can direct his darts of destruction."

Dr. Reuss is executive secretary of the ALC's Board for Christian Social Action. He appeared before the Subcommittee on Postal Operations of the House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, which is holding hearings on obscene literature.

At its convention in San Antonio, Tex., last fall the ALC assigned the task of studying and guiding action on the problem of pornographic printed materials to its Christian Social Action Board.

Dr. Reuss pointed out to the Congressional Committee that this action came as a result of a "groundswell of concern" over the problem of pornographic printed materials and their effect not only upon "our own youth" but also upon the youth of the community. He said that his board had approved a statement on "The Church Looks at Immorality in Print and on Screen." This will be used for stimulating thinking, promoting discussion, and guiding action among members of the church.

"As Lutherans," he emphasized, "we prefer to work for individual regeneration through God's power from within rather than seeking to compel morality by legislation from outside. We do need laws as a support to sound, defensible positions of fundamental morality, decency, and well-being but not as a means of imposing our religious views upon others."

"In the light of this," he went on, "our first line of attack is to upgrade personal understanding, attitudes, and preferences." He pointed out that the person is the key to corrective approaches and said that for this reason the church emphasizes wholesome sex education, realistic self-understanding and acceptance, good companionship, duty to others as well as rights, and education for higher values.

San Francisco.—The 10,000-member National Evangelical Lutheran Church has been invited to join the 2,315,000-member Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The invitation was extended by the latter's 44th general convention here. The two bodies have been closely allied in doctrine and practice for 35 years.

Organized in 1898, the NELC is composed of Lutherans of Finnish descent and is headed by Dr. J. E. Nopola of Esko, Minn. It has 57 congregations and 33 pastors, many of whom are graduates of the Missouri Synod's Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield, Ill.

The Finnish Relations Committee of the Synod was instructed to arrange a meeting between representatives of the NELC and the Synod's Committee on Doctrinal Unity to discuss union of the two church bodies.

Minneapolis, Minn.—The first issue of *Response*, new periodical of the Lutheran Society for Worship, Music, and the Arts, was issued here on Pentecost. The magazine, which will appear twice yearly, is an attempt on the part of the society "to evince in print its desire to help Christian worshipers of the Triune God and to alert Lutherans in particular to the rich integrating heritage bequeathed to them in their worship, music, and the arts."

Editor Walter E. Buszin, a member of the faculty of Concordia Seminary at St. Louis, Mo., points out in his foreword to the new magazine that there does not exist in America today "a non-Roman Catholic periodical on Christian worship and its arts which strives to be more than newsy in character." He feels this may be due to the fact that Protestants are not united in worship life and practice, and he also points out that large segments of Protestantism "have ignored and rejected some of the magnificent possessions which God has given to the Church in order to integrate and unify His people."

According to the editor, the choice of the name *Response* indicates that worship is regarded as a response to God. The magazine will thus have a theocentric approach.

The next issue of the magazine will appear at the beginning of Advent, with plans envisioned to make it a quarterly in the near future.

The first issue includes articles relating to theology and the arts, music and book reviews, photographs with texts on modern church architecture, editorial comments, and news notes concerning the Lutheran Society for Worship, Music, and the Arts.

In addition, the issue pays tribute to Dr. Luther D. Reed, dean emeritus of Lutheran Theological Seminary at Mount Airy, Pa., who served as chairman of the Joint Commissions which prepared the new *Service Book and Hymnal* of the Lutheran Church in America. Dr. Reed, who has been a leader among Lutheran liturgical groups in America for many years, is honored in the magazine "because he represents in his life and his work the goal toward which this journal aspires—the enrichment of the worship life of the church through effective use of music and the arts."

New York.—Membership gains totaling more than 100,000 have been reported by the Lutheran churches in Latin America during the past two years, according to new statistics compiled here. Their combined baptized membership now stands at a new high of 856,285, as compared with 749,164 in 1957, the Lutheran World Federation Committee on Latin America found in a mail survey of its area of work. On the basis of the new figures Dr. Stewart W. Herman, director of the committee, said, "Lutherans in Latin America, including the unchurched, may be conservatively estimated at 900,000."

The survey revealed that 509 pastors are now serving groups of Lutherans in 21 American countries south of the United States. Such groups include 22 "diaspora" congregations of non-Latin Americans, mostly Europeans, that are served on a multilingual basis with special help from the LWF committee. Of these, six each are located in Colombia and Venezuela, three in Mexico, two in Ecuador, and one each in El Salvador, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Peru. In all these countries there are organized "diaspora" groups of Lutherans from Germany and the Nordic countries—Scandinavia and Finland.

The largest two Lutheran bodies in Latin America are in Brazil. They are the 600,000-member Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confession in Brazil, an LWF affiliate, and the 102,289-member Evangelical Lutheran Church in Brazil, a District body of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish groups, plus a mission of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of North America, bring Brazil's total of baptized Lutherans up to 703,944.

Next to Brazil in Lutheran strength is Argentina, with a reported membership total of 94,140. Contributing to this total are, in order

of size, the German Evangelical La Plata Synod, the Argentine Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELA), the United Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELU), and Nordic groups. The 3,786-member IELU is an LWF member and an affiliated church of the United Lutheran Church in America, which has synods also in the Caribbean Islands and British Guiana. The 18,204-member IELA is a District body of the Missouri Synod, which does missionary work in 11 Latin American countries.

Besides the ELC, the ULCA, and the Missouri Synod, other North American Lutheran church bodies with missions in Latin America are the American and Augustana Lutheran churches, in Mexico and Uruguay, respectively. The United Evangelical Lutheran Church co-operates with the ELC in its missions in Brazil and Colombia. In addition, the World Mission Prayer League, a North American faith mission staffed by Lutherans, has work in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Mexico.