

ELEMENTS in WESLEY'S MESSAGE that ATTRACT and EMPOWER the POOR

A contribution from an East German perspective
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First I would like to emphasize that as an East German I am no longer a representative of Eastern Europe in the genuine sense. When I go to Poland or Czechoslovakia, I feel like a West European. When I transverse the boundaries of the "European Community", because I now have West German marks, I am treated entirely differently than I was earlier as an East German citizen.

In the same way, that part of Germany that earlier was called the "German Democratic Republic" finds itself in a special situation. It seems to me that the problems that affect West German society strongly come to the fore here. Germany is an example of the gradation, West to East, observable on a larger scale in all of Europe. There is a federal development program that is called, "Expansion East." It is pursued with major financial resources, as only a rich country like West Germany can afford to do it. And the thought is that in the future, in a similar way, further eastern European countries will be promoted and integrated with their domestic economies into the Common Market. Often it is discussed which of the countries will be able to make this leap into the Common Market. At this point, in no case is this a sure thing.

During the time of transition in 1989, I talked with various West Europeans who came to us. Their strong impression was of the sense of community and solidarity of the people who fought for democratization. Today the picture presented is that of a society of winners and losers. On the one side are those who have found a secure job and earn two to three times what they earned before; on the other are those who have lost their jobs (30% in my home town) and those who are anxious about political repression; today many are afraid to speak out for fear of losing their jobs.

I am no expert in the area of the Wesleyan doctrine of grace, but here are a few "naive" thoughts:

Max Weber called attention to the fact that the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination provided one of the ideological bases for today's capitalism. According to his thesis, success in social, and especially the economic life, is a visible sign of the election of God. The movements of the market, that often appear to be the result of accident, and that impact the fate of so many people, can be interpreted as the fateful work of God as the one who guides history. "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away." Quite the opposite are the starting points of the prevenient grace to be found in Wesley. Here the course of the life of a person is not a question of determinism from without or

a value provided by being one of the "elect". Rather, each person has his or her worth as a creature of God, and for each Christ has died.

According to my way of thinking, exactly here lies the nearness to the idea of human rights, to which each can appeal. This means, however, not just those rights that are proclaimed in the West - basic civil rights such as free speech, the press, free enterprise, freedom to move, or freedom to travel. Such rights can only be taken advantage of when they are accompanied by other basic rights, which I would call economic basic rights.

A working group of the East German Central Roundtable dialogue on the local and national level regarding the transition to democracy proposed in 1990 a new constitution that would include, for example, the right to work and to housing. In the legal system that became effective with the amalgamation of the German Democratic Republic into the Federal Republic, however, these basic rights were not included. In spite of all of the criticisms of the countries of the former east block, it should not be forgotten that they were able to a great extent, to realize these economic basic rights.

In the meantime, this economic question has become the problem that influences all others. The West German society lives with a giant investment in reduplicating and extending economic and financial systems. The cost of living is so high that personal life is permeated by the exceptionally high level of personal expansion in the sense of the accumulation and use of material things. Persons who cannot maintain this niveau lose their social standing and become outsiders in the society. Often they become criminalised. In my opinion, this is the ground for the growing antipathy toward foreigners in Germany. Not foreigners as such are rejected, but the poor foreigner who comes to us and threatens this unstable system of expansion.

The paradoxical situation in East Germany consists in the fact that, over and above the many unemployed, are the many who have work but who are under extraordinary pressure to produce. For there is actually plenty of work to do. In fact, overtime and work on Sundays are common. No one dares to protest against this because of the anxiety about keeping their job. Because Methodists are often conscientious and hard working, I often find in my congregation that they are the last to lose their jobs. But they hardly have time to do their church work. The gap between them and the poor and unemployed is thereby widened. Therefore I do not know what to do with Wesley's motto, "Gain all you can; save all you can; give all you can."

Given this background, justifying faith appears in a new light for me. Could it not be an expression for the freedom from the pressure to produce which the society lays on us? Fulbert Steffenski summarizes the Pauline doctrine of justification with the phrase: "You do not need to justify yourselves." And Karl Rahner once said, "The most important gospel for people today is, that one does not need to be one's own god."

How can one say this to persons who stand before the alternative either to maintain the high level of production and consumption or be pushed to the side of the society as an outsider. This is the very practical problem for pastoral proclamation that I have.

In this situation I have learned much from liberation theology, according to which, after the analysis of the situation, comes the second step of hermeneutical mediation through the confrontation of the situation with the biblical message. Preventive and justifying grace means concretely, that the worth of the person does not consist in socially demanded - or Christianly or Methodistically imposed - "works". This is good news to the poor, to the unemployed and to those foreigners who cannot be employed.

The next step, the practical pastoral mediation, consists finally in the fact that:

1. The Christian community is the place where the social differences can be raised, where the unemployed and the overemployed can meet as those who experience their worth before God as equal, and who can
2. Encourage each other in the engagement with, and battle against, a society that turns people into winners and losers in economic competition.

This applies especially in the context of the ideology of growth of the Northern hemisphere. Already at the beginning of the 70's the study, "Global 2000", warned that because of the worldwide ecological problems, a limitation on growth had to be placed on the agenda. The current strategy of the European Community, however, goes in the opposite direction, namely toward a limitless growth through economic expansion to bring everyone up to the level of the West. The results of such an expansion (however successful it actually is) are predictable. If every person on earth has an auto, or uses as much paper as a German uses, within months the atmosphere of the earth would be destroyed.

The only possible way forward, therefore, is a sharing, in which the material standard of living of the wealthy countries of Europe will be lowered. How difficult this will be to accomplish was demonstrated during a visit of my congregation to its partner congregation in West Germany. There was much discussion of the raising of standard of living in the East to the level of the standard of living in the West. People were surprised when one person suggested **instead** the lowering of the West's standard to that of the East. And remember that, measured by the rest of eastern Europe East Germany's standard is relatively high.

Finally, a word concerning the question of ideologies: Marxist-Leninist ideology, and its expression in Stalinism, was an ideology in the sense of a closed explanation of the world. In the Soviet Union, and also in the German Democratic Republic, it took on strong religious characteristics. The Ikon-like pictures of leaders hung in every public room and were carried in all state-

ordered demonstrations. In my city was a large monument with the words, "The doctrine of Marx is almighty because it is true."

Where the pictures and mottos previously hung today appear advertisements for McDonald's, Coca-Cola and cigarettes. The communists promised much but delivered little. Advertising promises still more. Its glad tidings of salvation also have strong religious overtones. The Brazilian liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff, speaks in a recent issue of Concilium of a "Religion of Wares". The central dogma of the religion of wares is: "Money can do everything; it sets heaven and earth in motion." And the market is the unseen hand that directs our destiny better than our conscious planning; and in any case it makes the more important decisions.

The dogma of money finds its expression in a myth that is widespread in films, TV series, and the mass media in general: the story of small, honest, and hard-working poor person who becomes a success, makes money, and is happy. This myth is turned into theology by learned economists. They build out of that which the myth holds in popular form a systematic structure. Advertising takes over the function of evangelization and the proclamation of the good news of salvation. The "happiness" and "success" of humanity is dependent upon the right material wares. There are wares that are true sacraments. Whoever is able to obtain them (such as Marboros or Coca-Cola) tanks up energy and life.

There is also a correct catechism and didactic that leads to conviction. Pretty and sweet young women show to millions of children the wonderful world of wares which money can buy and to which one can gain access only through money.

There is also Sunday worship: TV programs which bring millions of viewers to be entertained by comedies with their ridiculous situations or the tension of quiz shows with "All or Nothing at All", which put wares and money almost within your grasp.

The great annual festival of this religion is Christmas. All the characteristics of a religious celebration are there evident. It is the great festival of wares in decorated stores and the Christmas market, where, as is the case in every good religious feast, there is an abundance to eat and drink.

This religion also has its temples: banks whose grandeur and architecture impress mere mortals. This extends to the holy silence upon entering this house of God and standing in the queue before the window from which all blessings flow . . .

This religion also has its own ethics according to which self-interest is the general norm of all behaviour. In this way the baker, who sells us bread, gets his money to meet our needs. The limits of egoistic self-interest are set by contracts, which are sacrosanct and must be abided by unconditionally." (No.3,1992,p.195f.)

A theology of liberation for Europe must begin with the exposure of such religion as idolatry. It is comparable to fertility religions that the prophets of the Old Testament so vigorously fought. In the words of K.H. Miskotte: May the grace of God so find a place among us that there may be a "happy slaughter" of the idols of prosperity.