

Luther on Property and Poverty

Seminar leader: Carter Lindberg

Reporter: Carter Lindberg

Session I

The seminar proceeded from an historical and theological examination of Luther's basic writings on property and social welfare to an examination of his influence upon his contemporaries and upon sixteenth-century social welfare legislation and practice. *Carter Lindberg* reviewed Luther's late medieval context by discussing the medieval theology of almsgiving within the framework of its piety of achievement (Jacques Chiffolleau: *La comptabilité de l'au-delà: les hommes, la mort et la religion dans la région d'Avignon à la fin du moyen âge*, vers 1320 – vers 1480/ Vorwort von Jacques le Goff. Rome; P 1980); the antipathy toward begging, particularly in urban areas, exemplified by the »*Liber vagatorum*« and Luther's preface to it, »*Von der falschen Bettler Büberei*«; and late medieval and Humanist efforts to respond to the social and economic crises of the time.

Igor Kišš' paper, »*Luthers Bemühungen um eine sozial gerechtere Welt*«, was distributed and discussed. The paper argued against the influential interpretations by Ernst Troeltsch, Richard Henry Tawney, and Max Weber that Luther was locked into a medieval, economic, and patriarchal conservatism. Seminar participants agreed that Luther was intensely concerned for the social renewal of the world, but did not agree that Luther was a »utopian«. Luther's concern for a more socially just world was anchored in his understanding of God as the merciful creator and redeemer. This merciful God forgives sin, heals the sick, helps the needy, and preserves widows and orphans through the works of others who serve as his »masks«. Luther's sharp critiques of the Roman church,

princes, officials, merchants, and early modern capitalism were rooted in his conviction that since Christ is Lord, Christian ethics cannot be separated from any human endeavor, including economics. Thus Luther rejected »capitalism« not because he did not understand historical development or was captive to the Middle Ages in economic questions, but because he perceived it leading to the accumulation of all wealth in the hands of a few and the impoverishment of all others. Kišš' paper pointed out that Luther's conception of a just society rested upon a participatory understanding of community rooted in his theology of the Lord's Supper, and a vision of provision for the poor and needy rooted in his ethics of faith active in love.

Session II

The second session concentrated upon Luther's major tracts concerning economic issues. *Masami Ishii* introduced the »*Sermon von dem Wucher*« (1519), and emphasized the importance of understanding the text's cultural context by analogy to the intentions and effects of the medieval Japanese reformation of Buddhism upon the Japanese poor and oppressed. *Simon Maimela* introduced »*On trade and usury*« (Von Kaufshandlung und Wucher (engl.)), and highlighted Luther's analyses of corrupt business practices and focused the discussion upon the importance of social analysis for theology. *Martin Schwartz Lausten* suggested that Melancthon in CA 16 was clearer than Luther on the tensions between Christian life and worldly office. *Peter Bøckman* introduced »*An die Pfarrerhenn, wider den Wucher zu predigen*« in light of

Luther's distinction between the two realms. Luther's radical attack upon »usury« in this treatise, and his consideration of »capitalism« as a status confessionis found few emulations beyond the pastors of Rudolstadt in 1564-1565 and Regensburg in 1587 who were expelled from their parishes for excommunicating usurious parishioners. The significant elements in Luther's economic writings include his insightful analysis of the social harm perpetrated by chaotic currency systems, supply and price manipulations, and by his calls for government control of prices and supervision of credit under the principles of reason and equity.

Session III

Luther's contributions to the theory and legislation of social welfare were the focus of the seminar's third session. Luther's concern for structural social change to enable prophylactic as well as remedial care for the poor was presented by *Lindberg's* introduction of »The blessed sacrament of the holy and true body of Christ and the brotherhoods« (Ein Sermon von dem hochwürdigen Sakrament des heiligen wahren Leichnams Christi und von den Bruderschaften (engl.)), sections of »To the Christian nobility« (An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation ... (engl.)), and various »Fürstenspiegel«. Luther's contributions to social welfare legislation were presented in relation to contemporaries such as Andreas Bodenstein from Karlstadt and Juan Luis Vives, and the legislative models of the Wittenberg »Beutellordnung« and the Leisnig Order for a »Common chest«. Leisnig's role as a model for other towns and for other reformers was also discussed.

The significance of Luther's influence upon colleagues was highlighted by *Kurt Hendel's* paper, »The care of the poor in Bugenhagen's church orders«. Referring to Bugenhagen as the »organizational genius« of the Lutheran move-

ment, Hendel emphasized that Luther's doctrine of justification and the social-ethical principle of faith active in love shaped Bugenhagen's conviction that poor relief is not an adiaphoron but a necessity flowing from faith. Hendel concentrated on Bugenhagens's 1528 Braunschweig Order, itself influenced by Luther and the Leisnig Order, as a model for Bugenhagen's future work. Bugenhagen, who officially represented Luther and the Lutheran movement, »formulated a system of poor relief which reflected evangelical theological principles and which sought to address a significant challenge within sixteenth-century society in a practical and achievable way«.

Session IV

The fourth and final session of the seminar continued the discussion of Luther's influence upon poor relief developments in early modern Europe. *Martin Schwarz Lausten* provided insight into Danish developments with his paper, »Armenfürsorge in der dänischen Reformation«. After introductory remarks about the contribution of the Carmelite Provincial, Paulus Helie (Helgesen), Lausten focused upon Petrus Palladius, the first Lutheran bishop of Seeland who had studied for six years in Wittenberg and whose episcopal ordination was by Bugenhagen. The fourth chapter of Palladius' famous »Visitation book« provides definition of the poor, motivation for poor relief, discussion of the existing problems, and directions for the practical structuring of social assistance. Palladius clearly presents care for the poor as a Christian social responsibility by a forceful use of Luther's law-gospel dialectic. At the same time there is a moralistic tone to Palladius' sermons which Lausten attributes to the influence of Melancthon. Palladius did not hesitate to appeal to egoism as well as reason in his advocacy for the poor. For example, the poor are a

mirror of what could befall anyone. Luther's understanding of vocation underlies Palladius' assertion that service to God occurs not in pilgrimage elsewhere but in caring for the needy in one's own environment. One of Palladius' distinctive contributions was to create a »Poor peoples' day« which like the First Sunday after Trinity used the text of the rich man and Lazarus (L 16: 19-31).

The question of the effectiveness of Luther's contributions to social welfare was discussed by *William Wright* in his paper, »Trends in poverty and the Lutheran poor relief systems in Hesse, 1530s-1610s«. Utilizing archival materials, Wright moved beyond his recent book, »Capitalism, the state and the Lutheran reformation« (1988), to present information on the aid-recipients and the reasons for their support in two Hessian towns, Frankenberg (Eder) and Marburg (Lahn) which have extant common chest registers for a significant time period. The common chests of Hessian towns were influenced by the Leisnig model but did not incorporate Bugenhagens's separation of poor relief from ecclesial and educational support. This plus inflation, scarcity, increasing numbers of female heads of households, and the unexpected increase of strangers, foreigners, and religious refugees strained the capacity of the common chests to provide supplemental incomes in times of crisis. The final presentation by *Jeanine Olson* surveyed Reformation poor relief developments in Zurich and Geneva with particular attention to the »Bourse française« in Geneva under Calvin. Due to the Genevan attraction of Protestant refugees, its social assistance was »nation-specific« as various funds were created for particular refugee groups.

Conclusions

In the chorus of late medieval concern and anxiety about new financial practices, Luther's voice contributes some new notes which he hoped could change the entire composition. Luther's theological-ethical convictions, impelled him to call for government intervention and regulation of national and international business on the basis of reason and equity. And his theological perspectives on vocation, work, and ecclesiology raised the issue of »usury« from that of a problem of casuistry to that of an ecclesial status confessionis. At the same time, the case of Luther's response to Jakob Strauss in Erfurt illustrates Luther's rejection of the corpus Christianum idea that society can be patterned on or regulated by either the Gospel or Mosaic law.

With regard to social assistance to the poor, Luther's theology of justification by grace apart from works of the law cleared away the medieval ideological impediment to the late medieval urban striving for rational communal, and lay welfare policy and praxis. That impediment was the theological claim that poverty is the favored status for the Christian life, and that almsgiving is the favored avenue for atonement for sins. Justification by grace alone undercut the conviction that poverty and suffering made one acceptable to God, and exposed poverty as a social problem rather than a theological virtue. There was consensus in the seminar that Luther's intention that local and regional governments abolish all begging and establish social welfare programs was approximated in the legislation of numerous cities following the example of Leisnig and the leadership of Luther and his followers.