

The Church in a Capitalist Society

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The following is intended to lead from an outside view to an inside insight into the church in capitalism. It is observations of a Christian of the former German Democratic Republic and the current Federal Republic of Germany.

1. Observations of the "West" from the "East"(the GDR)

1.1. The Capitalist Society from Beyond the Border

Citizens of the GDR knew about the Federal Republic of Germany exclusively by means of TV. Only elderly people had some experiences out of earlier times and from visits. The FRG seemed to be the "Golden West". The propaganda of the GDR presented the West as a capitalist society filled with contradictions.

After the sixties a generation grew up that got only impressions of the West, and these were by stories, TV, and highly welcomed parcels sent by friends or relatives. The dreams were filled with blue jeans, coffee, bananas, and beautiful cars of western relatives, when those were allowed to visit. East German people did not really get to know about everyday problems, such as increasing prices, high rents, unemployment, and homelessness. The image of the West remained excellent.

1.2. The Evangelical Church from Beyond the Border

1.2.1. The Church and its History - from Stuttgart to Darmstadt

After World War II the Church formulated the "Stuttgarter Schuldbekentnis". This confession of guilt opened the door to the ecumenical movement. Nevertheless, some were deeply disappointed to see the conservative Church (EKD) leaders turning back toward the twenties. These persons met in 1947 in Darmstadt as "Bruderrat der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland" und decided on a "Wort des Bruderrates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland zum politischen Weg unseres Volkes". They used a very clear language and confessed guilt in terms of the developments which led the church on the wrong way. "Not Christianity and occidental culture, but repentance and turning towards the neighbors ... that's what our people and we Christians ourselves urgently need". But the bishops of the Evangelische Kirche went the way of Christianity and occidental culture. The EKD remained "Volkskirche". New ideas survived only in brotherhoods, groups of the Student Christian Movement, some more progressive groups, and parts of the "Kirchentag".

1.2.2. Church as "Volkskirche"

When they thought about "Volkskirche", many of the Christians in the East had no positive feelings. They remembered the contract with the state in the West when the Church took over responsibility for the "Militaerseelsorge" (military chaplaincy). They got the feeling that the church had been ensnared by the administration of the state and had almost lost the chance of critical distance. Having leading members of political parties in church councils ("Kirchenleitungen"), the question of their first loyalty was seldom raised. Many of them supported the Lutheran "doctrine of the two kingdoms" that allows double loyalty and supports the conviction that the church has to keep out of political issues.

1.2.3. Church as Employer

There were more critical aspects. We got the impression that the Church generally, as the second largest employer in the FRG, became part of the rich. The trade unions automatically took their stand on the other side. From abroad that seemed entirely absurd. It looked like a prolongation of the 19th century tradition in which the Church as part of the monarchy took its stand against the labor movement.

1.2.4. Church and the "Third World"

The Church seemed to be unable to confess its own part in the guilt related to poverty in the Third World. Only a few people seemed to understand that the poor are not poor by themselves but that they have been made poor by northern companies, institutions, and states. Insights from a new reading of the Bible which took place in Liberation Theology were seldom accepted. The official church coming out of the Reformation in 1517 didn't want any kind of current reformation. They had forgotten that the Church is supposed to be an "ecclesia semper reformanda".

1.3. The Church We Have Experienced since 1990

In 1990 Christians and Churches voluntarily joined the present Church in a united Germany. We were given no chance to share our experiences of the GDR time. We got new experiences: some became millionaires, others homeless, the majority in between. Some of the STASI-coworkers became coworkers of the Secret Service of the FRG, others were made lepers. Some became winners, others losers. The majority got a better life than they ever had before. The church we now experienced was similar to what we observed before from beyond. The fellowship of sisters and brothers in Christ, that had been working very well over decades, was soon suffocated in spring 1990 by the "Loccumer Erklarung" which made us part of the EKD.

2. The Church in the Covenant with God and Entirely Committed to God's New World

2.1. What the Church is Not

- The Church isn't a political party. But that does not mean it isn't partial and has no political options.
- The Church isn't a normal social organization. But that doesn't mean it isn't comparably organized.
- The Church isn't an association to cultivate traditions. But that doesn't mean it doesn't care for its own traditions.
- The Church isn't an association to promote fine arts. But that doesn't mean it doesn't give them a home.
- The Church isn't a trade union. But that doesn't mean that the laborer's rights are not well taken care of.
- The Church isn't an employers' association. But that doesn't mean it doesn't employ many people.
- The Church isn't a welfare organization. But that doesn't mean it doesn't help many people.

But what then is the Church - called by JAHWE as part of his people and listening to Jesus Christ - about?

2.2. Orientation by Jesus

It has been said: Jesus proclaimed the "Kingdom of God" but the Church came into being. This remark implies a question about whether the church is close to what Jesus proclaimed. Jesus proclaimed the "Kingdom of God". More exactly, he proclaimed: "The Kingdom of God is at hand", it is "in the midst of you". All that Jesus said is part of this proclamation. He proclaims the world as it is strongly wanted by God, and therefore it is possible to repent and to change. Jesus teaches his friends to pray: "Your kingdom come", and "Your will be done on earth...".

Everything in Christianity has to be focused on this goal or it has nothing to do with Jesus. In parables and deeds Jesus has taught and shown what it means to live toward God's World. And he challenged his disciples to follow, to imitate him.

Three Examples:

1) Mt 14: 13 ff.: Thousands are listening to Jesus. At supper time Jesus' friends give reasonable advice: "Send them away to make sure they all get something to eat". But what would happen if they all would run or walk toward the next small village? Youngsters strong and quick enough would get the opportunity to buy. The next group could be adults strong and healthy. But the elderly, the sick, the disabled, and mothers with small kids wouldn't get any food. Nothing would be left anymore to be bought: bad luck. But that's it.

Therefore Jesus says to those who were supposed to understand the rules of God's World: "You give them something to eat". "That's impossible, we haven't got enough for all; just for ourselves. Send them away." You know, everyone has to take care of him-/herself. That's how it works in our world. Jesus doesn't agree. He takes bread and fish, gives thanks to God, and shares it with the hungry. And by sharing, Jesus' friends get an exciting experience and learn about God's World: Things are possible if we follow seriously the rules of God's New World.

2) Mt. 20:1ff.: Jesus tells a parable of an employer giving all workers the same amount of money at the end of the day, although they started working at different hours. He doesn't pay on the basis of the output of their work but on the basis of what they really need for their daily life. The all-day-long workers don't need more than the part-time workers.

Jesus gives an example for overcoming the deep gap between the rich and the poor, the employed and the unemployed.

3) Joh. 8,3ff.: "Punishment must happen". Jesus doesn't justify adultery, but he shows how to handle human lapse and guilt. The world according to God's will has got different rules than even the Church has got.

Jesus proclaims the nearness of this New World of God. Nearness means achievability, possibility. Why not live that way if it is possible?

2.3. Opposing Arguments

Do you really believe that we ever will be able to achieve God's World?

Answer:

1. If I say yes you will accuse me of a loss of reality. If I say no, you will accuse me of a lack of faith. You yourself are only interested in keeping the status quo alive. Therefore you shift the World of God into another world.

2. There is no alternative between yes and no. The promise of the near New World of God is to be understood as a promise running along with us, running in front of us, drawing us in the correct direction according to the will of God which is God's help to anthropogenesis.

3. Proclaiming Jesus as the savior of the world, inviting people to follow Jesus - this is unbearable as long as we practice the opposite of what we proclaim. To follow Jesus is widely a matter of discipline not of possibility and practicability.

The Church has been suffering a crisis of credibility. The Church itself declares by its own structures and decisions: "We don't believe what we proclaim". This way the Church has nothing more important to say. And what it is doing, others are able to do just as well. Perhaps even better.

3. The Church within Capitalism

There is no different task for the Church within capitalism than within socialism. There are just different accents. Its yes and no to society has to focus on the humanity of political, financial, economic, scientific, environmental developments and has to serve all people and society in its entirety by "mutual commitment (covenant) for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation".

3.1. What the Church Is (Examples)

- The Church is supposed to give an example for a juster pay regulation than now exists.
- The Church is supposed to look for allies in its struggle in favor of the creation.
- The Church is supposed to give an example for a sisterly and brotherly way to deal with its own coworkers, in particular with people traditionally disadvantaged and discriminated against because of race, color, gender, physical disability, and sexual orientation.
- The Church is supposed to give an example for a value-oriented and spiritual way of life which is the opposite of a modern hedonistic and nihilistic lifestyle.
- The Church is supposed to give examples for an existence in favor of all kinds of helpless persons.
- The Church is supposed to give examples for peace-keeping and peace-making.
- The Church is supposed to clearly oppose practices in politics, economy, and society based on recklessness and greed. Memorandums which will hurt nobody are of no use.
- The Church is supposed to take a stand openly in the name of JAHWE without looking for weak compromises, and not losing the call of God to be and to live as the people of God among many others who are nevertheless God's beloved children.

3.2. The Structure of the Church (which is its preaching, too, according to Barmen III)

A Church like this will exist in base communities, not in parishes. Such groups will be joined by families and singles, elderly and youth. Some, e.g. elderly and children, will have their own groups, open for new members. Most groups will be serving groups, choosing their special tasks and projects as they are peace-, environmental-, Third-World-, women-, gay-, human-rights-, and diaconical groups, etc. These groups will pray and celebrate worship services, enjoy Bible studies and festivities, and will keep on learning and teaching. A Church existing in such groups will surely do a great deal of networking and cooperating. Synods will no more be assemblies mainly for legislation, but for networking and open discussion.

Does the Church of Jesus Christ really need to have its own big administration? Isn't it enough to have space for the Bishop (or Conference Minister) and some coworkers? The Church in Germany needs to experience a new reformation and - I'm sure - this will happen during this century. I hope it won't be too long until Christians from the grass roots start reforming. And I'm pretty sure that they will partially learn then from the United Church of Christ. But I'm also quite sure that nothing will happen if we ourselves won't pray and start and go forward and listen carefully to the Spirit of JAHWE. Vamos caminando!

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