

## **Lutheran Spirituality in Central Eastern Europe**

**“Fear not Little Flock”: The Vocation of Minority Churches Today**

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### **Definition of the term “Central and Eastern Europe”**

The term “Central and Eastern Europe” may be defined in various ways. It should be borne in mind that the concept “Central and Eastern Europe” owes its genesis predominantly to the times of the Cold War and refers to the Warsaw pact countries. In geographical and cultural terms, many of the countries of this region belong to Central, Southern or Northern Europe. The handbook *Lutheran Churches of the World*, published in 1946 in the USA still orders the churches of what today is known as Eastern Europe, in a somewhat different way: the Lutheran churches of Estonia and Latvia are found under the chapter “Northern Europe”; the churches of Czechoslovakia (Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia as well as East Silesia and Slovakia) under the chapter “Central Europe” and the churches of Poland, Lithuania, Russia, Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia” under the chapter “Eastern Europe.”<sup>1</sup> The decades that these countries spent behind the Iron Curtain seem to have had a lasting impact. In light of the Cold War they are often simply referred to as “Eastern Europe,” a region that, in terms of culture, history and religion, is often perceived to be much more homogeneous than it actually is.

This presentation applies the term “Central Eastern Europe” to countries and churches that belong to the Central Eastern European region of the Lutheran World Federation, embracing altogether fourteen Lutheran churches in twelve countries, from the Czech Republic in the West to Russia in the East, as well as from Estonia in the North to Croatia in the South. According to the LWF statistics, there are altogether around 1.5 mio Lutherans in this region. Most of the Lutheran churches of the region are minority churches, meaning that they live and act in predominantly Catholic or Orthodox countries. There are nevertheless two exceptions to this rule, namely the Lutheran churches in Estonia and Latvia where Lutheranism has traditionally been the largest confession.

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<sup>1</sup> See “Table of Contents” in, A. Th. Jørgensen, F. Fleisch, A.R.Wentz (eds) , *The Lutheran Churches of the World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1946).

In order to answer the question as to whether there is something like a distinctive Central Eastern European Lutheran spirituality and, if so, whether it owes its genesis only to the times of the Cold War or reaches beyond it, one should start with a glance at history. This will help us to understand what has shaped the identity and theological basis of the Lutheran minority churches in this part of Europe. In this presentation, spirituality is thus understood in rather broad terms, embracing the main tendencies in theological thinking and actual (popular) piety.

### **A glance at history**

Against the wider background of Lutheranism, any attempt to describe the spirituality of Lutheran Churches in Central Eastern Europe and the aspects that have shaped it can be sketchy at best. The formative experiences have been extremely varied, the social and cultural backgrounds very different and the aspects that need to be taken into account so contradictory that it is very difficult to draw a unified picture. There are, nevertheless, certain aspects that have played an important role in the process of shaping the spirituality of most Lutheran churches in Central Eastern Europe. In the following I shall point to a few of these and offer them as issues for discussion.

### ***Reformation and Counter-Reformation in Central and Eastern Europe***

Already in the sixteenth century, the Lutheran Reformation reached many parts of Eastern Europe due to the close contacts between these parts of Europe and Germany. There were German-speaking minorities in many parts of Eastern Europe (especially in the Central-Eastern and North-Eastern Europe) and a number of students from this region, also of non-German origin, were studying theology in Germany. Some of them, who had heard Luther or one of his fellow reformers, became reformers in their own countries. These included Leonhard Stöckel<sup>2</sup> (1510–1560) who came from a German-speaking family in Bardejov/ Bartfeld in Slovakia (then known as Upper Hungary); Stanisław Murzynowski<sup>3</sup> (1527/8–1553) who was born into a Polish noble

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<sup>2</sup> Leonhard Stöckel stemmed from a German-speaking family and studied in Wittenberg in 1530–1534. There he had close contact to both Luther and Philip Melancthon. After his return to Bardejov in 1539, he took up the position of school rector and rearranged the didactical principles of the school in accordance with Melancthon's pedagogical ideas. He is also considered to be the author of *Confessio Pentapolitana* (*Pentapolitana* refers to the five royal cities in Upper Hungary: Bardejov/Bartfeld, Košice/Kaschau, Levoča/Leutschau, Prešov/Eperies and Sabinov/Zeben), the first confessional writing of Lutheran Christians in Hungary. For more on Leonhard Stöckel, See Miloš Klátik, "Leonhard Stöckel. Persönlichkeitsprofil 1510- Juni 1560," in *Lutherische Kirche in der Welt. Jahrbuch des Martin-Luther-Bundes* (2013), 243–60.

<sup>3</sup> Polish reformer, studied in Wittenberg. Murzynowski was the first one to translate the New Testament into Polish (published in 1553). He also worked on developing and standardizing Polish orthography. Most of his work done in this field has had an impact until modern times.

family in Suszyce in the Kingdom of Poland; a Hungarian Reformer Mátyás Dévai Biró<sup>4</sup> (d. 1547) from Deva in Transylvania, and others. The ideas of Reformation were thus spread quite rapidly by students, merchants and theologians as well as lay preachers into the Central-Eastern and North-Eastern regions of Europe. As early as 1523 and 1525 Luther himself sent two letters to Christians in the Northern Baltics, then known as Livonia.<sup>5</sup>

In view of the Lutheran command to preach the gospel to everybody in their own mother tongue the Slovenes, Croats, but also Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians developed their own written languages. Accordingly, in some Eastern European countries either Martin Luther's "Small Catechism" or Catechisms compiled according to this example, were the first books to be printed in local languages. For instance, the first book that was published in Estonian was the Wanradt-Koell Catechism dating from 1535<sup>6</sup>; the first book published in Lithuanian in 1547 was "The Simple Words of Catechism," based on the Polish version of Martin Luther's "Small Catechism,"<sup>7</sup> etc. Several of Luther's works were translated into some languages spoken in Eastern Europe already during his life-time. According to Rudolf Říčan, Czech was the language into which Luther's works were translated most frequently during his lifetime.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Also known as "Hungarian Luther"; in 1529 he took up his studies in Wittenberg in order to study under Martin Luther. Later, especially in the 1540s, he inclined rather towards the Reformed positions (for instance, he became a zealous advocate of the Reformed position regarding the understanding of Lord's Supper).

<sup>5</sup> "To the Chosen, Dear Friends of God, All Christians in Riga, Reval [Tallinn] and Dorpat [Tartu] in Livonia (1523)," in J. F.K. Knaake et al. (ed.), *Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [hereafter cited as *WA*] 12, 143–50; "The Letter to Christians in Livonia (1525)," in *WA* 18, 412–30. The latter letter was compiled at the request of a lay preacher, Melchior Hoffmann from Tartu/Dorpat. Hoffmann came originally from Germany and was active as a preacher in Tartu in 1524–1526. He became very popular among the lower classes of the city population which consisted mainly of non-Germans, i.e., mainly ethnic Estonians. At the request of the city council to present an official document proving the orthodoxy of his teaching, Hoffmann travelled to Wittenberg in 1525 to meet with Johannes Bugenhagen and Martin Luther.

<sup>6</sup> This Catechism, printed in parallel in both Lower Saxon and the Northern Estonian dialect, was compiled by the two pastors from Tallinn/Reval after who it is named. The book was printed in Wittenberg but, soon after its arrival in Tallinn, was prohibited by the city council, probably due to its deviations from Luther's Catechism.

<sup>7</sup> The Lithuanian Catechism was printed in Königsberg/Kaliningrad which was then part of the Dukedom of Prussia. Duke Albrecht of Prussia had commissioned the translation and publication of Lutheran texts in Old Prussian and Lithuanian in order to spread Protestant ideas in Prussia. The first translation of the "Small Catechism" into Polish was published in Prussia already at the turn of the year 1530/1531.

<sup>8</sup> R. Říčan, "Tschechische Übersetzungen von Luthers Schriften bis zum Schmalkaldischen Krieg," in *Vierhundert Fünfzig Jahre Lutherische Reformation 1517-*

Although, by the sixteenth century, Protestant ideas had become very popular in most parts of the Central and Eastern European region, in areas under the reign of the Habsburgs and the Kingdom of Poland, the Counter-Reformation stopped the advance of the Reformation. The Counter-Reformation was carried out extensively (especially in the seventeenth century) and led to decrease of Lutheran as well as of other Protestant congregations.

For instance in Poland, where *Pax dissidentum* of 1573 had established equal rights for the Roman Catholic, the Lutheran, the Reformed and the “Union of Brethren” (whereas these rights had been generally recognized there even before that time), the Counter-Reformation started under the reign of Sigismund II Vasa (1587—1632). It was only at the end of the eighteenth century when the freedom of confessions was integrated into the constitution and King Stanisław August Poniatowski allowed the Lutherans to build the Lutheran Holy Trinity Church in Warsaw. Hungary, which by the end of the sixteenth century was predominantly Protestant by the end of the sixteenth century (with majority of Protestants supporting the Reformed ideas by the beginning of the seventeenth century), was to a large extent re-Catholicized by the intensive Counter-Reformation actions that started in the early seventeenth century and led to more or less the present proportions between confessions. Under the Habsburg rule, the Edict of Toleration was issued only in 1781 by Joseph II, permitting the formation of either Reformed or Lutheran congregations. Even though they were allowed to practice their faith, they did not have yet equal rights with Roman Catholics. This was only achieved in 1861.

The oppression experienced through the Counter-Reformation and restrictive legislation enforced by Roman Catholic rulers explain the anti-Catholic sentiment that can be found among many Lutherans in these parts of Central Eastern Europe that used to be under the Habsburg rule. This is expressed in many different ways, including an opposition to liturgical reforms that are suspected of being to be “too Catholic.” At the same time, the relations to the Reformed were historically rather friendly in this part of the region. In some parts of the region, as was the case in Hungary, the Reformed had come to prevail over the Lutherans in numbers by the end of the sixteenth century. Yet, due to the outward oppression by the Catholic rulers, a kind of “grass-root ecumenism” developed frequently among Lutherans and the Reformed during the following centuries.<sup>9</sup> This might also have contributed to the predominantly “low church” approach among the Lutherans in the region.

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1967. *Festschrift für Franz Lau zum 60. Geburtstag* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 282–301, here 282.

<sup>9</sup> Mihaly Buscay brings an interesting example of this grass-root ecumenism in his book *History of Protestantism in Hungary*. Under the difficult conditions of the Counter-Reformation it was often easier for a Lutheran pastor to reach a Reformed family than for a Reformed pastor and vice versa. This led to officially prohibiting the practice of intercommunion (where a Lutheran pastor offers a Reformed communicant Holy Communion in the form of regular bread and a Reformed pastor to a Lutheran one

The situation was different in the autonomous principality of Transylvania which had come under Ottoman rule in the sixteenth century. In 1557, the Diet of Torda/Turda (present-day Romania) adopted the principle of politically guaranteed religious equality, making the way to Transylvania's reputation as "the land of the four"<sup>10</sup> accepted religions." The Counter-Reformation could not gain a foothold there and the predominantly German-speaking (Saxon) Lutheran congregations in the region therefore did not have to face the strong opposition between the Protestants and the Catholics.

The Transylvanian Saxons were thus able to build up their Lutheran church structures without being restricted in further adaptation of Lutheran ideas. In Transylvania, a close relationship was also maintained to the Reformed neighbors.

The Northern Baltics were the only part of the Central Eastern European region where for centuries Lutheranism became a dominant confession. The northern part of Estonia, which came under the Swedish rule in 1565, had been Lutheran since the very beginnings of the Reformation and did not experience a Counter-Reformation. Southern Estonia and northern Latvia, which had fallen under Polish rule after the Livonian War (1583), had experienced a brief period of Counter-Reformation. As these parts of the Baltics were incorporated into the Swedish Kingdom in 1625, Lutheranism was reintroduced there. After the incorporation into the Russian empire in the eighteenth century, the Baltic provinces retained their special status in terms of confession.

In the Baltics, where the Lutheran church had been well established since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, one cannot therefore speak about a strong, historical anti-Catholic sentiment. There was also practically no presence of the Calvinist Reformation in the northern Baltics<sup>11</sup>. The Reformed influence only reached parts of what nowadays is Lithuania by settlers from Reformed areas.

### *The impact of Pietism and the Herrnhut movement*

Although in many regions of Central and Eastern Europe the Reformation was initially taken up not only by the German-speaking minority but also by large groups of local ethnic majorities, Lutheranism in this region remained for centuries closely connected to German theological thinking. Many pastors were educated in Germany or came originally from Germany. They brought with them all major theological impulses from Germany (from Lutheran orthodoxy to Enlightenment, Rationalism, Liberalism

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in the form of a host). Mihaly Buscay, *Geschichte des Protestantismus in Ungarn* (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk Stuttgart, 1959), 135.

<sup>10</sup> Next to Catholics, Lutherans and the Reformed, also the Anti-Trinitarians were included. Wilhelm Dantine, "Lutheran Minority Churches of Eastern Europe," in V. Vajta (ed.), *The Lutheran Church. Past and Present* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), 64–76; 69.

<sup>11</sup> With the exception of a tiny Reformed community in Kurzeme, Latvia, which had hardly any theological influence on surrounding Lutheran congregations.

etc.). These ideas certainly reached pastors and theologians although it is debatable how the deep their impact was at the grass-roots level.

Pietism had a strong and lasting impact on the spirituality of Central Eastern Europe. Also here the development was somewhat different in the various sub-regions. While still under Swedish rule, the churches of Estonia and Latvia felt the force of Lutheran orthodoxy as maintained by the Swedish bishops. Pietism had greater freedom than under Sweden rule when Estonia and Latvia came under Russian rule in the eighteenth century.<sup>12</sup> In 1736, a former student of Francke,<sup>13</sup> Jacob Benjamin Fischer, was the general superintendent of Latvia. Literature and schoolteachers from Halle contributed to the development of religious life in the Baltic provinces as ties with Sweden were broken. Whereas in Poland, Bohemia and Hungary the Habsburgs were engaged in eradicating Lutheranism during the period of the spread of Pietism, on the edge of their domains, fronting Ottoman territories, Slovaks and Magyars respectively ethnic Hungarians kept in touch with centers of the Protestant world, receiving thus also theological impulses from there. For instance, John Burius was ministering around Bratislava/Pressburg; the eminent historian and geographer Mattias Bel and the Slovak superintendent Daniel Krman made an edition of the Bohemian Brethren-sponsored Kralice Bible that was used until the twentieth century available for the Slovak Lutherans. Magyar nobleman Georg Bárány, who had studied in Halle and was ordained in 1711, served among Germans, Magyars and Slovaks. His educational interests brought the rite of confirmation and Halle pedagogy to Hungarian churches. The Pietism of Spener and Francke was challenged by the more emotional Herrnhut movement with Count Nikolaus Ludwig Zinzendorf (1700-1760) at its head. Zinzendorff, unlike Francke, did not stress the necessity of penitence but emphasized the personal love of Jesus which for him was the supreme teaching of the Scripture. The piety spread by Zinzendorff's Brethren in the Baltics was to have a lasting impact on Estonian and Latvian Lutheran churches. The movement was received very positively among ethnic Estonians and Latvians, but caused fear of turmoil and changes in the established social order among the gentry and official Lutheran church representatives, who were mostly of German origin. The great success of Herrnhut movement can be attributed to several factors. The Herrnhut brethren lived side by side with local peasants. They managed—probably for the first time since the forced Christianization of the northern Baltics by Teutonic order—to bring the gospel close to the people. So far, the preaching, according to Lutheran principles, had taken place in Estonian resp. Latvian. However, the pastors, who were mostly of German origin, were not fluent in the local languages and were regarded as part of the “church of the landlords,” and not “of people.” In fact, the Herrnhut movement has often been regarded as the “real evangelization” of Estonia and Latvia. Although some families of the Brethren movement joined the newly established free churches in the nineteenth century, most of

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<sup>12</sup> The Herrnhut movement was prohibited from 1743 to 1764 in the Livonian province, which was inline with the official position of the Lutheran church.

<sup>13</sup> August Hermann Francke (1663—1727) was one of the important fathers of Halle Pietism.

them stayed in the Lutheran church and greatly influenced the development of the later national (Estonian and Latvian) Free Lutheran Folk Churches.

One implication of basic pietistic theological thinking was a shift toward a more individualistic piety.<sup>14</sup> One could say that the church was perceived as the sum of individually restored people gathering to share their spiritual insights and feelings. Pietism also had a rather negative concept of the human being in their natural setting. One of the foci in pietistic literature is the quality of the new life in Christ, which is generally described in moralistic terms. There is the recognizable wish in Pietism to improve the world, to create conditions for a new humanity, to wrestle with the evil powers of the world in order to save the secular sphere of life from the dominion of evil. This is the main motivation for the practical institutions of Pietism serving educational, social and economic purposes.

During the times of the Cold War, when the church was forced into a niche existence, the families that had been deeply rooted in the pietistic/Herrnhut traditions, were more likely to stay in the church. Now, however, the individualistic part of Pietist piety prevails that emphasizes the personal relation of the believer to Jesus. This may be seen as a distortion of Lutheran objectivism which is fundamental to the concept of salvation as it is spelled out in the confessional writings of the Lutheran church. Even though the original Lutheran concept of piety had also kept a strongly personal dimension, the main foundation for the pious life was sought in the reality of God's acts outside of the human being. This is the *Christ-for-us* dimension. In Pietism this dimension tended to give a way to a *Christ-in-us* concept which in turn is the foundation of piety in the heart of a Christian. The implication of this is that social ideas and missionary impulses ceased to be of importance. The Communist system forbade them. In the free republics of today, they are no longer important to many a family of pietistic tradition. Even though they may be welcome, to live one's life in a diaconical or missionary way seems, for many Christians, to be a strange option. Diaconia and mission need to be carried out by professionals.

At this point the importance of the foundation of the Bible societies is worth mentioning. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries national Bible societies were founded in most countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Their aim was to provide each family with its own copy of the Bible. Not only pietistic but also enlightened pastors and lay people took part in this enterprise. The central role of biblical texts in Lutheran spirituality fostered the creation of modern written languages in the region<sup>15</sup> — as already mentioned—and a school system that included both boys and girls.

Like the Russian Empire in the 1820s, in the 1850s the Austro-Hungarian Empire also forbade the work of the Bible societies. Once again it was the fear of an educated

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<sup>14</sup> See also Andreas Aarflot, "Patterns of Lutheran Piety," in Vajta, op. cit. (note 19), 155–58.

<sup>15</sup> The predominantly Lutheran provinces Estonia and Livonia (present-day Southern Estonia and Northern Latvia) had the highest grade of alphabetization in the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century.

society that was not morally under the state church's control that led to these restraints. The time until the First World War saw a variety of church-state relationships from restrictive to liberal ones in the two big empires in the region—Russia and Austro-Hungary. They usually were powered by the attempts to create a unity among the many peoples in the realms, and this unity was understood mostly as a confessional one.

### *Struggle for enculturated Lutheran church spirituality between the two world wars*

With the breakdown of the major three empires that ruled most of Eastern Europe—the Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian—, and the independence of many Eastern European nations following World War I, it became important for the newborn or reborn nations to revise their own history and the church's role in it. Again, the realities varied greatly in the different contexts. There where the Lutheran church had played only a marginal role, the attempt was made to be on good terms with the newborn state and to emphasize the role in education and the cultural history of the nation. Different problems needed to be tackled: on the one hand everything German was no longer *en vogue*. This often included theology and liturgical practice. There where Germans had been numerous or had held the positions of influence and power, the breakup was more intense than in places where the Lutheran church had been less under the influence of Germany or German thinking. But even there the slogans of the Counter-Reformation, namely that Lutheranism was a “German” thing, prevailed and sometimes even set the framework for the state-church relations in view of the position of the Lutheran church in newly founded state. In Estonia and Latvia the “church of the landlords” had to be transformed into a “people's church *resp.* free folk church.” This was done by trying to find non-German Lutheran traditions. They were found in Sweden—the Swedish Archbishop Nathan Söderblom consecrated the first bishop of Estonian Free People's Church, Jakob Kukk, in 1921. As a result, apostolic succession and contacts to the Anglican world became issues of importance in the theological discourse among some Baltic theologians. The concept of “High Church,” with all its sacramental and hierarchical implications was introduced into the Baltics. It existed for twenty years next to some theologically liberal ideas and the Lutheran confessional tradition of the majority (the latter strongly influenced by Baltic German theological tradition, e.g., Theodosius Harnack and others). Regarding the contacts to the Anglicans and the search for an “own” Lutheran character, the situation was somewhat similar in Slovakia, where the Lutheran church tried to profile itself as a church of the Slovak people (the apostolic succession was extended to the Slovak church also by Nathan Söderblom in the 1930s). In some of the Central and Eastern European states attempts were made to introduce an “enculturated theology” that tried to unite the traditional confessions in the country by “enculturating” them (the Estonian theologian Uku Masing can be mentioned as an example. Masing strongly criticized the “Indo-European thinking” characterized by wish to divide the world dualistically as alien to Finno-Ugric thinking which he related much more to the search for harmony. The prevailing of Indo-European thinking in the Christian world had in his view strongly influenced theological thinking as well). The search for “enculturated” theology ended after World War II although some of the ideas survived under the surface.



## Surviving and preserving the “Good Old Times”

After the devastation of World War II, the churches in Central Eastern Europe had to face more or less hostile states that followed Marxist ideology. After a phase of physical destruction and forced exiles the Communist states started a propaganda war against the churches. This affected especially the Lutheran church which was often still identified with Germany and Germans. The loss of people, material goods and social connectivity brought most churches in Central Eastern Europe into a dual diaspora: diaspora vis-à-vis the majority church and diaspora as Christians in an atheist state. Churches were forced into ghettos with the state deciding to what extent church life would be permissible. For most Lutheran churches in the former territories of Russia and the Austro-Hungarian empire this was a somewhat familiar situation. Before independence it had been the imperial government that decided what minority churches could do and what not.

The ghettoization of the Central Eastern European Lutheran churches led to the preservation of the old traditions of the times before World War II. The present was perceived as a time that could not really bring anything good. The idea of preservation and living in a niche became very strong in many parts of the region. As church life was often reduced to liturgical life, worship and liturgy gained special importance in the life of the church and until today churchgoers tend to be more sensitive regarding changes in the liturgical order than they are sometimes in Lutheran churches in other parts of Europe. For many church members, worship remains the center of their church life and the place from where they derive their spiritual energy.

It must not be forgotten that, throughout these difficult times there were pastors and theologians in many parts of the region who were able to keep up with the theological developments in the West<sup>16</sup> and to develop at times truly original theology.<sup>17</sup> In many countries of the regions there were quite some “free spirits” among the pastors as they had found a refuge in the church which offered them an alternative to the Communist regime. The influence of those intellectually interested theologians unfortunately remained rather limited and focused mainly on their (also primarily intellectually interested) disciples.

Social work was a domain only for the state, which, by Marxist definition, had solved all social problems. But in the 1980s the church suddenly got a new role. It had to play its part in the “Eastern block” propaganda by showing concern for those oppressed in capitalist countries and as activists against Western armament. These two

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<sup>16</sup> It is still impressive to see in the library of the EELC (Estonian Ev.-Luth. Church) Institute of Theology in Tallinn the hand-printed copies of translations of some major contemporary, mainly German theology textbooks made by professors of this Institute in the 1970s and 1980s.

<sup>17</sup> One of such examples is Prof. Uku Masing from Estonia, see Urmas Nõmmik, “Uku Masing und das Alte Testament” in T. Kulmar and R. Schmitt (eds), *Das Menschenbild in den Konzeptionen der Religionen* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2012), 187–198

issues were used by state authorities to give the church a role and the ecumenical work in this field was supported by the state. Because it was state defined, it was looked upon with great suspicion and mistrust by the church communities. Slogans such as “fight for peace and justice” were thus regarded with certain skepticism in many churches of the region and hardly any reception process took place in the churches at the grassroots. There was a deeply rooted fear of ideologies and that they might start to prevail over the truly Christian message. That was probably also the reason why liberation theology never really took root in Central Eastern Europe— its connotations were to left-wing.

This heritage is felt until nowadays. Whereas nowadays many people in Central Eastern Europe expect church to take a stronger position in terms of (economic) justice in their societies, churches often still seem to feel uncomfortable with getting out of their niche.

### *Challenges of the last decades*

The small Lutheran churches in Central Eastern Europe, still traumatized by fifty years of Communist rule, in the early 1990s quickly had to accommodate to the new times and its rules. The new found freedom was used to reinstall choirs, Sunday school and social community work. Since structural (re)organization was often supported by Western partners, there were also attempts to implement the organizational patterns used by donors in their own settings (e.g., in the field of *diakonia*). The chosen patterns did not always work in Central Eastern European settings and were sometimes also implemented without a proper vision for sustainability. This might also have played a role in the somewhat reluctant attitude that developed in some parts of the region toward diaconical and advocacy work.

Attempts were made in many Eastern European Lutheran churches with regard to reforming worship service and the common spiritual life (the special role that liturgy and worship play in the life of most Central and Eastern European churches was already mentioned). While the intention of introducing liturgical reforms were manifold, the original intention in most churches was to give worship (especially the Sunday service) a more communal character compared to the elder, often Prussian-influenced worship orders of the nineteenth century that were in use in those churches. For instance, reforms foresaw the increased participation of the congregation in the liturgy, as strengthening of the role of the Holy Communion, etc.<sup>18</sup> New forms of worship forms are often regarded as being too Catholic by regular church members, especially in countries where there had been or still is a strong Roman Catholic Church and

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<sup>18</sup> To name few more examples: in some of the new liturgies (e.g., The Ev.-Luth. Church in Hungary) *Kyrie* and *Gloria* are given back their original honorable character. Their previous connectedness to the confession of sins and absolution had restricted their meaning (was originally introduced out of didactical reasons); the Prayer of Holy Communion includes anamnesis (also in order to increase the awareness of being a part of broader communion of Christians, not just of those present), the greeting of peace (also often causing a certain uneasiness among the critics of new liturgies) etc.

Lutherans had been persecuted in the past. Undoubtedly in some regions some aspects of liturgical reform did have a certain “catholizing” tendency.<sup>19</sup> However, reservations regarding the use of the new liturgies are frequently not based on theological but, rather, “external” arguments that refer to the “high church” character of proposed changes (including the discussion in many Lutheran churches of the region on the question if the clergy should wear a robe (*Talar*) or an alba). In some churches, strong opposition to new liturgical forms has led to the situation where the “new” ordo exists side by side with the “old” one: in the Hungarian and Estonian Ev. Lutheran churches for instance, communities are free to follow either of the two worship forms.

In some countries such as Estonia and Latvia, Roman Catholic movements like Opus Dei and the Pius-brotherhood, try to use the good ecumenical relationships forged during the Soviet period, where the openly hostile state had brought Christians from different traditions closer together. The intention is to (to put it somewhat bluntly) direct the developments in the direction “from Lutheran to Roman Mass, “from Conservatism to Catholic Conservatism,” “from High Church to Roman Church,” “from pietistic contemplation to spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola.”

What needs to be mentioned as well is the influence of Missouri Synod in some Central Eastern European Lutheran churches. The Missouri synod, which had banned historical-critical exegesis of the Bible in 1973, gained influence in the region after the fall of Communism. The level of influence varied in the different parts of the region.

The common enemy of the above mentioned movements, but also of many groups inside the churches of the region is “liberalism” although it is not always very clear what is meant by “liberal.” At present, the positions regarding the questions of family and sexuality are becoming one of the crucial points in defining “liberalism” and “conservatism.” In some churches, it seems that the acceptance of the historical critical study of the Scriptures, once an elementary part of Lutheran academic preparations for clergy, is increasingly becoming a criterion for “conservative”/“liberal.” The problem is that in Central Eastern European societies, where there are many religiously illiterate people due to the fact that religious education was as a rule forbidden during the times of the Cold War, one needs theologians and pastors who are able to be “good translators” of the message of the gospel. This requires a broader involvement with the Scriptures; otherwise the churches may run a danger of becoming sectarian. The churches of the region should therefore be more aware of the consequences of increasing number of groups within the church inclined toward fundamentalism and Biblicism under the label of conservatism (often enough, most “mainstream” conservatives would probably not agree with many arguments labeled “conservative” by the Biblicists).

The churches, which during the Communist era were so sensitive about the danger of becoming ideologized might therefore today sometimes fall prey to the same

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<sup>19</sup>In the new liturgical order of the Mass in the Estonian Ev.-Luth. Church, a prayer is foreseen for instance as part of the greeting of peace (*Pax*) where God is asked “not to look at our sins, but at the faith of your church”—a formulation which is rather unusual for a church rooted in a Lutheran tradition.

challenge without being aware of this. Christianity then only remains a useful tool in implementing a certain worldview, a certain ideology (this however applies both for the left and the right wing). But could this in fact not be the calling of the churches in Central Eastern Europe—to be sensitive to the tendencies that try to instrumentalize the church and Christianity; to speak out prophetically against it and to witness to the hope that is there in the midst of difficult political times and times ruled by material values?

## Conclusion

In my presentation, I tried have to point out some aspects that have played an important role in the formation of Central Eastern European piety:

- The Counter-Reformation which has caused a certain anti-Roman Catholic sentiment among many Lutherans in areas that used to be under the rule of Habsburg dynasty as one of the reasons for the still existing suspicion toward certain liturgical reforms (which are considered too “high church” by some and thus “Catholic”)
- The influence of Pietism and the Brethren Movement of Count Zinzendorff—a movement that had a strong social impact in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and had a strong tendency towards individualistic piety (“my personal relation to Jesus”), a tendency that prevailed during the Communist era, and to a certain extent pushing the church into a “niche”
- The search for an “enculturated way” of being Lutheran (i.e., looking for a “non-German way”) in some parts of the region during the 1920s and 1930s— a fact that created presuppositions for some churches for coming closer to Swedish and Anglican churches instead of following just the previous German orientation
- The Communist era could be described as a period of “conservation.” Newer theological impulses were often not taken up (e.g., liberation theology, feminist theology, etc.), also due to the suspicion of ideology. The involvement of the churches in the fields of peace and environment that was supported by the “Eastern block” governments took place only at the higher level of church representation and never experienced a true reception process in the churches. Due to the fact that this was the officially supported course, such slogans as “fight for peace and justice” were regarded with certain skepticism in the churches of the region. In the churches, there was a deeply-rooted fear of ideologies that might start to prevail over the truly Christian message
- As church life was often reduced to liturgical life, worship and liturgy gained special importance in the life of the church. Until today, worship is for many church members still truly the center of their church life and the place from where they derive their spiritual energy
- The influence of ultraconservative groups from different backgrounds since the 1990s in some churches (e.g., the negative attitude of Missouri synod towards the historical critical research of the Scriptures).