

Book Reviews

Christians in a New Europe by David Edwards. London: Fount Paperbacks, 1990. 257 pp. Paperback, £4.99.

Writing anything about Europe is a hazardous process these days, for the situation is evolving so quickly that even the most rapidly written chapters are out of date before they can be published. It is inevitable, therefore, that a book published in 1990 has already – in some respects – been overtaken by events. It is none the less a very useful book and – more importantly – a positive one. For it asserts that the inexorable, if not always very steady, progress towards a greater European identity is deserving of Christian support. Christians can, and should, do more than *react* to the changing international scene; they should be *proactive* in their promotion of a juster Europe.

Of course this begs many questions, for what exactly are we talking about? Definitions of Europe can range from the paid-up members of the European Community to a much wider group of nations with very varied aspirations. Is it possible, moreover, to support the unashamedly economic aims of the richer nations without marginalising the less well-off within the Community, never mind integrating the fragile and vulnerable economies of Central and Eastern Europe? These are difficult questions to which there are no easy answers, but doing and saying nothing is equally irresponsible. Christians – in a wide variety of shapes and sizes (we shall come back to some of these) – have played an important role in Europe's past; they should be equally active in its future.

The year 1992 is, however, an ambivalent date. If it marks a significant step in the creation of a new and welcome Europe, it has very different connotations for those on the receiving end of Europe's expansionist ambitions. And in the same year that Columbus discovered the New World (1492) – with all that that implied – Moorish Granada was recaptured by the Catholic Ferdinand and Isabella and those Jews who failed to convert were expelled from rechristianised Spain. At one and the same time Europe declared itself Christian, intolerant and expansionist.

The Provost of Southwark does not duck these difficult issues, but attempts – insofar as this is possible – an assessment of Europe's colonial past in terms of a balance sheet. He concludes that Europeans must be repentant but not despairing: not all that they have done is wholly bad. Collapsing – wallowing even – in or under a burden of guilt is not going to get anyone anywhere. Indeed, Europe herself has paid a very high price. For the continent came close to self-destruction in the wars of the twentieth century, from the second of which emerged a conviction that such an evil must never occur again. This conviction led, in turn, to the emergence of a European Coal and Steel Community in the early 1950s; coal and steel (the weapons of war) were subject to international control. Europe was given another chance, an opportunity to build, bit by bit, a new and better future.

How, then, can Christians contribute constructively to this future? David Edwards proposes, somewhat provocatively, a 'single market' in religion, arguing that it may

be helpful to compare the Church with the single market that is developing into economic and political union. He suggests that such a vision may help European Christians to see that their own union will grow as, in the life of the spirit, their spiritually enriching 'exports' and 'imports' continue to increase. No doubt there will be some, maybe many, who are offended by the language of trade applied to the realm of truth, for truth cannot be bartered. But the spirit (if we may use such a term) of this proposal I find attractive, for the worlds of European politics and ecumenism have a great deal in common. In both, for example, it is altogether more positive to think in terms of what each distinctive nation or denomination has to offer, rather than erecting barriers or boundaries that have to be defended at all costs. The divided Christian Church has much to lament. On the other hand such divisions have permitted the development of particular qualities and skills that can – in a better and more positive climate – be offered back to the wider Church. And anyone who has experienced British ecumenical endeavour at its best (Liverpool in the 1980s) will know that the resultant whole is immeasurably greater than the sum of its parts.

This is so much the case that I would suggest, in conclusion, that there is considerably greater potential in this model of exchange than the denominational give and take so far proposed. For the new Europe of the 1990s contains many Churches – whatever their denomination or national flavour – that have endured through difficult years. They have much to offer the sometimes complacent Churches of the West. On the other hand, endurance exacts a high price – a price that can, at least in part, be met from the economic, theological and organisational resources of more established communities.

This is one way in which Christians can contribute both to each other and to a better Europe. A second is to consider, critically, how to create and sustain a truly pluralist society. In this case, the dialogue – itself a form of exchange – must extend beyond the Christian Churches to the growing numbers of other-faith communities. They, too, have much to offer in and to a rapidly changing continent.

GRACE DAVIE

Stundenbuch einer deutschen Revolution by Hans-Jürgen Sievers. Zollikon: G2W-Verlag, 1990. 160 pp. Paperback.

Perhaps there were people present in Leipzig on 7 October 1989, the '40th birthday' of the German Democratic Republic, who foresaw that within one year of that day the GDR would be no more. If so, I met none of them. I myself had not the faintest idea that this would be so. One thing we all knew: there was crisis in the air that October day, and the next few days would see stirring events.

The first week of October in the GDR was an extraordinary time – a week that nobody who lived through it is likely to forget. On the one hand, there was only one topic of conversation when two or three were gathered together in a quiet place: what was going to happen? Things could not stay as they were, and all sober citizens knew it. However, there were some who claimed not to know it, and pretended to believe that everything in the GDR was splendid; they claimed that the '40th birthday' celebrations were real expressions of the people's joy, and that the murmurings of a few malcontents would be drowned by cheering. Such, at any rate, was the mood of party leaders, of press and television. Ordinary people knew that the leaders of the nation were living in a world utterly remote from reality. Older citizens could look

back to the spring of 1945, when the Führer was constantly ordering imaginary divisions, armed with imaginary weapons, to hold back the might of the enemy. The difference in 1989 was that the security forces were well armed, and the 'enemies of the regime', the people, held nothing but candles in their hands.

Germans who look back now to 1989 speak of the *Wende*, the turning-point, or the *Friedliche Revolution*, the bloodless revolution. The turning-point itself is nearly always dated to the evening of 9 October, when massive congregations left services of intercession in four central Leipzig churches, and formed the nucleus of a vast demonstration numbering perhaps 100,000 people. The terms 'turning-point' and 'bloodless revolution' are used as this was the first occasion on which GDR security forces made no attempt to use violence to restrain 'illegal' demonstrations. One should pause to record the fact that many people in Dresden are convinced that the turning-point happened in *their* city on Sunday 8 October. There are good reasons for holding this view, but all the same most Dresdeners are willing to grant glory to Leipzig.

Those October days were a time of sound and fury, of perplexity and turmoil. For the non-German enquirer of today it is no easy task to make out exactly what happened, and when. It is clear that the Churches, especially the Protestant Churches, played a vital part. But why should this have been so? Reliable sources of information are badly needed. *Stundenbuch einer deutschen Revolution* can be recommended unreservedly to such enquirers and students. Hans-Jürgen Sievers (the editor rather than author) has assembled a great many documents of different kinds which shed much light on the events of 1989 in Leipzig. The introductory essay, written by a Leipzig Roman Catholic priest who was very much involved in events, is most helpful in setting the scene. The documents can thus be seen in some kind of perspective.

One may doubt, though, if it would be easy for a reader unfamiliar with the one-time GDR to find his way around the documents. Sermons, declarations of church leaders, descriptions of intercession services, resolutions of synods, texts of prayers and the like are found side by side with reports by party members, extracts from the party press and reactions of the police to the disturbances. The reader will look for evidence of the widespread rumours that the *Kampfgruppen* (auxiliary police) were armed and given orders to fire on the demonstration to be expected on 9 October, so that the streets of Leipzig would run with blood as red that which had stained Tiananmen Square in Peking a few months earlier. What is the truth of the persistent reports that party leaders had prepared a 'hit list' of activists, including many church people, who were due to be interned without trial immediately after the 40th birthday of the GDR? The book does not solve the problems, but there is at least some relevant evidence to be found in its pages.

Few readers will fail to capture the sense of excitement, of tension, of worry and foreboding that belonged to Leipzig in those October days. Serious students of history will find a tremendous amount of useful material. The book also contains a full chronology, giving the dates of relevant events in 1988, 1989 and 1990 – secular as well as ecclesiastical. There are 12 pages of photographs.

Now that the heady days of the *Wende* have given place to (perhaps over-exaggerated) cynicism, the *Stundenbuch* should be studied with even more attention.

ARVAN GORDON

Es wurde wieder ruhiger: die Lebensgeschichte eines mennonitischen Predigers aus der Sowjetunion by Peter (Isaak) Derksen. Winnipeg, Canada: Mennonite Heritage Center, 1989.

This is the life story of a Mennonite from Ukraine who was born in 1905 and who lived through all the successive historical phases there: empire, revolution, civil war, forced collectivisation, Stalinist persecution, the Second World War with the Nazi occupation of Ukraine, the flight of the Germans to the West (the 'great trek' of 1944), 'repatriation' (or deportation) of those same Germans by the victorious Red Army, and then 35 years of exile in Central Asia. It is a record of suffering, but also of unshakable trust in God and undying hope despite terrible tribulation, imprisonment, labour camp, persecution and constant oppression. This is a personal testimony. Here is a man reviewing his life as though he wants to render account to God for his actions – his attempt to endure without stumbling under the burdens laid on him by God. What we have here is one man's inner debate on the question: 'have I always acted rightly before God and man?'

The keynote of the whole narrative is praise and thanks to God, who brought Peter Derksen through so many frightful experiences that cost the lives of hundreds of thousands. It is, then, a very personal book, full of personal impressions, assessments and evaluations that always arise out of the author's own deep faith. Even the language reflects this personal perspective. Lawrence Klippenstein, who edited the book for the Mennonite Heritage Center, has opted to let the narrator's voice come through with as little alteration as possible. This was surely the right decision. Peter Derksen writes a simple German – simple but powerful. There are nevertheless a number of places where this reader – would have liked the editor to have tidied up the language a bit. There are certain recurring grammatical infelicities that do in the end become annoying, and these could have been corrected without harming the authenticity of the work as a whole. But this is to quibble.

It is clear that the editor too saw this as above all a personal testimony. Derksen takes virtually no account of the political and ecclesiastical context. So Klippenstein introduces each chapter with a passage in italics explaining the historical background to the narrative. The reader is given a brief glimpse of an aspect of the life of the Germans in the Soviet Union which is then particularised by the community, the worshippers, the believers – but only by that specific community. The full complexity of the life of the Germans in the Soviet Union – even just of the Mennonites, with their various groupings – can only be hinted at in this way, however. We learn nothing, for example, about the relationship between the Church Mennonites and the Mennonite Brethren, or between both of these and the Mennonite Brethren in the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists. At some point the reader learns quite by chance that Derksen belongs to the Church Mennonites, but there is no discussion of what this means. The reader will gain no understanding from this book of what these different groupings represent – he will not even learn of their existence. Any researcher of the religious history of the Germans in the Soviet Union who might have been hoping that this book would provide him with new information will put it down disappointed.

Derksen is not concerned with answering the questions that 'secular' historians will be asking. His concern is to demonstrate through the example of his own life, which he is eventually able to live out in Germany, free from persecution, materially secure and even – after he is widowed – married for a second time, the guidance and grace of God. However hopeless and comfortless life may seem, runs the message, God is

capable of turning all to good in the end: He does not abandon His human creatures although they continually forget Him and deny Him. Derksen's book is an impressive testimony to the Grace of God: it aspires to be nothing else. One thing it certainly is not is a sourcebook for historians.

GERD STRICKER

The Convent at Auschwitz by Wladyslaw T. Bartoszewski. London: The Bowerdean Press, 1990. 168 pp. Paperback.

In the autumn of 1984 a small community of Discalced Carmelite nuns, a contemplative Roman Catholic religious order, established a convent in the Polish village of Oświęcim. The move was redolent with symbolism. The site bordered the main grounds of the infamous extermination camp which the Nazis called Auschwitz. The building which housed the convent, while outside the main camp compound, had been a storage facility for the poison gas that the Germans used to murder Jewish victims at Auschwitz. The convent drew its inspiration from Edith Stein, a Jewish convert to Catholicism and a member of the Carmelite order, who perished at the hands of the Nazis as a Jew by race. The mission of the nuns was to pray for the victims of Nazi mass murder, and to redeem the site from the Nazi attempt, as expressed by Pope John Paul II, to negate faith in both God and man.

A fund-raising letter to Catholic groups in Belgium the following year drew the convent to the attention of Jewish groups. A number of them expressed disquiet at what they saw as an attempt to 'dejudaise' the Holocaust by emphasising the Christian rather than the Jewish victims of the camp. For the following five years a bitter controversy embroiled the convent. In 1989, as a consequence of Vatican intervention, the Catholic authorities of Poland gave a firm undertaking to remove the convent to other premises. Bartoszewski provides a detailed and competent survey of the controversy, and the many issues, personal, theological and ideological, that underlay the affair.

As is so often the case with symbols, the historical underpinning of the Auschwitz complex, virtually the only Nazi death camp that survived the war intact, was badly understood by both sides. There were actually two centres of extermination at Auschwitz. The original camp, a concentration camp, was established in 1940 to house Polish prisoners. As part of the Nazi effort to eliminate the Polish intelligentsia, it was the site of the murder of approximately 270,000 Poles. In 1941 the Nazis constructed a sub-camp, Auschwitz II (Birkenau). It was here that gas chambers were used to exterminate well over a million victims, of whom approximately 90 per cent were Jews. Consequently, both Poles and Jews regarded Auschwitz as a place of unique national martyrdom, and neither was inclined to award priority to a rival claimant.

There were also stresses which arose from rival theologies. In the Catholic tradition, places of martyrdom are sanctified by the memory of the victims, and offer an appropriate location for chapels, shrines and places of pilgrimage. For Jews, a graveyard like Auschwitz was a site defiled by suffering – thus the outrage and incomprehension of Jews who were invited to 'balance' the Catholic convent by establishing a synagogue. The Belgian appeal letter could be interpreted as promising missionary activity, as could the link to the convert Edith Stein. The large cross outside the convent was viewed by some Jews as a provocation and an insult to Jewish

memory, serving as it did as the symbol of a faith which had persecuted the Jews for centuries, which had submitted them to forced conversion and which culminated in the alleged silence and inactivity of the Vatican during the Holocaust.

A further ingredient was the confusion attending Catholic church policy in Poland, where decades of communist intimidation and persecution had ingrained habits of secrecy and silence. Thus, a full and open discussion – to say nothing of a debate – was missing from the preliminary Catholic-Jewish negotiations as to the fate of the convent. This culminated in sudden ultimatums and directives to the local Catholic population, who were understandably puzzled by unexplained changes of policy and deeply offended by the perceived ‘expulsion’ of the Carmelite nuns.

Throughout the controversy commentators were prone to speak of the two adversaries as ‘the Catholic Church’ and ‘World Jewry’. As Bartoszewski continually demonstrates, this was a serious misnomer. The absence of unified positions, or even a clear negotiating centre for either side, hindered a settlement and guaranteed continued controversy. The Catholic side, which wished to avoid a public scandal and to resolve the issue in a gradual, quiet and non-embarrassing way, was represented by conflicting interests within the Polish Catholic hierarchy. The principal players were Cardinal Franciszek Macharski, the Archbishop of Kraków, in whose diocese Auschwitz was located, and Cardinal Jozef Glemp, the Polish Primate. It was Macharski, often with the best of intentions, who first negotiated the removal of the convent, and then rescinded the agreement in the face of an invasion of the convent grounds. Cardinal Glemp, a veteran of the underground Church, a man of a legalistic cast of mind, jealous of his prerogatives as the Polish Primate, displayed a rare talent for offending Jews and progressive Catholics through his clumsy interventions in the affair, often using expressions filled with antisemitic code-words. In the background was the European church hierarchy, eager to prevent a scandal, and, ultimately, the Vatican, Polish pope and all. Bartoszewski offers a primer on how the course of Catholic church politics now seldom runs smoothly in the wake of the democratising reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

‘World Jewry’ was no more able to offer a united position. (A particularly striking aspect of this was the complete insignificance of the miniscule Jewish community in Poland in the course of the debate.) At the forefront of negotiations were leaders of European Jewish communities and loose organisations like the World Jewish Congress. These leaders, often veterans of inter-faith dialogue, swiftly concluded a sweeping compromise with representatives of the Catholic hierarchy in Geneva in 1987. When the Catholic side proved unable to move as expeditiously as promised, however, moderates found themselves pressured by more militant voices. Most notorious was the intervention of the American orthodox rabbi and university lecturer Avraham Weiss, who led an incursion of Jewish protestors into the convent grounds on 14 July 1989. This demonstration was broken up by a group of Polish labourers, an event that provoked a flood of scandalised – and overheated – editorials and letters in the world press. In general, the Jewish response to the impasse appeared at the opposite extreme to the quietism of the Catholic Church: Jews sought to encourage movement by publicity and protest.

Underlying Jewish protests were some very serious assumptions and prejudices. If Jewish leaders were suspicious of the Church in general, still less did they trust the Catholic Church in Poland, its hierarchy, or even ordinary churchgoers, all of whom were believed to be inveterate antisemites who shared at least moral guilt for the Holocaust. (This attitude was summarised and popularised by Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah*.) Poles considered this attitude a gross distortion of reality, which not only

besmirched the national honour, but complicated Poland's negotiations for foreign aid in support of the ailing post-communist economy. (Ironically, at this same time Polish intellectuals, led by the critic and academic Jan Błóński, were engaged in a profound debate over the moral implications of Poland's role in the Holocaust.)

Seldom have so many complex issues been raised by such an insignificant and well-intentioned initiative as the establishment of a convent at Auschwitz. Bartoszewski notes in his summary that the whole affair has had a catastrophic effect on inter-faith dialogue and on Jewish-Christian relations. In the final analysis the affair demonstrates how tenuous these relations remain while both sides retain, in their collective memories, stores of ill-feeling, lack of knowledge and a dearth of empathy. These factors make comprehensible the scandal surrounding the Auschwitz convent, which presented to many outside observers the melancholy spectacle of two martyred peoples fighting over the ashes of a graveyard.

JOHN D. KLIER