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Open-mindedness and Trust in God

Prayer and the Political and Social Mission of the Protestant Academy of Thuringia

The erosion of the Protestant milieu is most advanced, where it historically originated. This is related to the historical uniqueness of Protestantism. Religious convictions penetrated deeply into daily life and were shaped into secular patterns: the family, attitudes towards work, leisure and celebrations. Faith, as an underlying conviction, was capable of transforming daily life. Thus it was possible to talk of “Protestant Ethics”.

This analysis by historian Henning Ritter in a leading German newspaper¹ seems to be adequate. For people grown up in this tradition this resembles what the apostle Paul wrote as encouragement and exhortation about the “service in daily life in the world” (Romans 12: 1-2). Or Martin Luther, who – in line with Paul – viewed any occupation as a calling with its own, almost religious dignity.

But what happens, when the so-called “religious convictions” evaporate? What happens, when more or less extensive residuals of the Protestant Ethics are still vivid in society, but they survive in the superficially enlightened secular world, without religious grounding, pious foundation, spiritual vitality, perceivable ritual form and culture, without (borrowing the words of Schleiermacher) “understanding and taste for the universe”, without God?

For historian and journalist Henning Ritter the Protestant academies in Germany are part and parcel of this “ethical expansion”, part and parcel of this process of Protestant self-secularization. He views the Protestant academies as vanguard of the Protestant intellectual “assimilation to the world”, which Paul so vehemently opposes in his letter to the Romans. For him, the Protestant academies are locales, where “opinion without consequences” is cultivated. Already since generations they are smiled at, according to Ritter, due to the Protestant preference of following the current of public debate.

¹ Henning Ritter, *Erosion eines Milieus. In die Ökumene vernarrt: Der deutsche Protestantismus*. In: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Feuilleton, Nr. 55, S. 39, vom 6.3.2004.

*This willingness to engage with everything as long as it is alien enough to religion, is, still following Ritter, the key to success for the Protestant academies.*²

Let me reply to this critique, by addressing three aspects:

1. Alleging that the Protestant academies commit unconditional surrender to the *zeitgeist* does neither justice to the intentions and aspirations of these institutions nor is it validated by historical research.³
2. A more detailed analysis of the development of the academies after their inauguration in 1945 would bring to the fore rather different developments in East and West Germany. These differences, in turn, had consequences for more affirmative or more critical approaches. In addition, it would be necessary to differentiate between the impact inside the church and the impact on social and political discourses in society at large.⁴
3. Notwithstanding, the critique of being too distant to proper religious topics hints to a vulnerable or rather blank spot, especially with regard to certain Protestant academies in formerly West Germany. Unfortunately, the journalist Ritter did not realize, that this critique is not valid with regard to the Protestant Academy of Thuringia.

Thus, I am very grateful for the opportunity to present here, how we at the Protestant Academy of Thuringia already since several years are trying to avoid such blank spots. We define our 'usp' (unique selling proposition), our specific profile, which constitutes a significant difference to other political or scientific academies and foundations, as being "Protestant". This does not need much explanation, but requires an intentional and well groomed culture of the academy. We profile the work of the Protestant academy as the service of a *religious agency* for church and society. By employing this concept, which was coined by my colleague Frank Hiddemann, we hope to be able to develop and maintain a unique profile.⁵

² Ebd.

³ Der derzeitige Vorsitzende der Evangelischen Akademien in Deutschland e.V. (EAD), Fritz Erich Anhelm, Direktor der Evangelischen Akademie Loccum, skizziert diese Geschichte in: In der Präambel der 1947 verabschiedeten Satzung des damals sog. Leiterkreises der Akademien in Deutschland heißt es: „*Die Evangelischen Akademien [...] dienen dem Ziele, dem modernen Menschen in den Fragen seines Alltags zu begegnen, diese im Lichte des Evangeliums einer Klärung näher zu führen und so die Einheit des Lebens in der Freiheit des Evangeliums zu bezeugen.*“

⁴ Frank Hiddemann erwähnt in einem Artikel die unterschiedlichen Geschichten und Existenzbedingungen der Evangelischen Akademien in Deutschland Ost und West. Er geht dabei auch auf die binnenkirchliche Funktion der Akademien ein: Ders., *Religiöse Agenturen. Vorbereitungen für die Neuerfindung der Akademiearbeit im Osten Deutschlands*, in: Erich Garhammer/ Wolfgang Weiß (Hg.), *Brückenschläge. Akademische Theologie und Theologie der Akademien*. Würzburg 2002, 366-379

⁵ Ich nehme damit eine Formulierung von Frank Hiddemann auf, die er in dem eben genannten Artikel entfaltet.

Position Finding and Perspectives

In the summer of 1997 we celebrated in Neudietendorf (which is located not far from Weimar in the vicinity of Erfurt) the 50th anniversary of the Protestant Academy of Thuringia. At this wonderful occasion our new administrative building in the court of the Zinsendorf Mansion was inaugurated. The inauguration speech was delivered by Joachim Gauck, a theologian and politician, who has been the Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former German Democratic Republic.⁶ He chose the sermon like topic: “‘Do not be afraid!’ The Educational Task of Protestant Academies in East Germany.”⁷ In this lecture Joachim Gauck unfolded the twofold hermeneutical concept, which is fundamental for our work. On the one hand’s side, reaching back to the “source of our hope”, to the “memory of the great deeds of God”, the biblical tradition, the sometimes sceptic, sometime joyful *trust in God*, and, on the other, reaching forward towards the manifold aspects of life based on a specific Christian open-mindedness, which aims at the individual and collective edification and education, at ethically responsible appropriation of the world, and which finally aims at transformation. In the words of Joachim Gauck:

*It would be necessary to talk about our authority and mission, about the difficult task to convince individuals and societies of the obviously given positive reality – not only possibility – and to fight against the dominance of the obviously also existing destructive aspects of life.*⁸

In the weeks preceding the anniversary our team at the academy addressed and fulfilled two tasks: First, we have analyzed the historical development of the Protestant Academy of Thuringia and have drawn conclusions for the current situation and, second, we developed a concept for the mission of the Protestant academy after the Peaceful Revolution and German unification in a widely secularized society in East Germany.⁹

⁶ Vgl. Nobert Robers, *Joachim Gauck. Die Biografie einer Institution, Berlin 2000*. „Alleinstellungsmerkmal“, im dt. Text mit dem theologischen Verweis auf EG 179: *Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr und dank für seine Gnade, darum daß nun und nimmermehr uns rühren kann kein Schade. Ein Wohlgefalln Gott an uns hat; nun ist groß Fried ohn Unterlaß, all Fehd hat nun ein Ende.*

⁷ „Fürchtet euch nicht“. *Festrede zum 50jährigen Jubiläum Evangelischer Akademiearbeit in Thüringen*, abgedruckt in der Jahresgabe 1998 der EAT, Verlag unverlegt, Jena 1997, 15-28.

⁸ Ebd., 15f.

⁹ Vgl. dazu u.a.: Erhart Neubert, „gründlich ausgetrieben“. *Eine Studie zum Profil und zur psychosozialen, kulturellen und religiösen Situation in Ostdeutschland und den Voraussetzungen kirchlicher Arbeit (Mission)*, in: Lutz Motikat/

The historical review brought impressive endeavors and successes, but also threatening distress to the fore, which were part of the way of the Protestant Academy of Thuringia in the years from 1947 to 1989 under the communist dictatorship.¹⁰ Part of this history is the significant breakdown of the educated Protestant middle class due to migration to West Germany and enforced proletarianization in the GDR between 1945 and 1961.¹¹ In addition, the reviewing of the history made us more merciful in our judgment. Maybe, because it made us more sensitive for the proneness of human beings to make mistakes, which is part of all human endeavor and not less true for the endeavors of the church. Thus we were reminded of Luther's insight that Christians, although justified by faith, remain sinful, that we are always *simul iustus et peccator*.

However, it was the shared process of discussing and developing "Visions of the Work of the Protestant Academy of Thuringia", which was of utmost importance. I would like to introduce to you some of the results of this endeavor. We epitomized the visions by three concepts: Reflection, Dialogue and Spirituality.

REFLECTION

The Protestant Academy of Thuringia is an institution of reflection: in and for the church – in and for the world.

DIALOGUE

The Protestant Academy of Thuringia is, grounded in the spirit of Protestantism, a locale for the uplifting of the culture of political debate.

SPIRITUALITY

*The Protestant Academy of Thuringia is a "Protestant short-term community."*¹²

Helmut Zeddies (Hg.), *Konfession: keine. Gesellschaft und Kirchen vor der Herausforderung durch Konfessionslosigkeit - nicht nur in Ostdeutschland*, Frankfurt 1997, 49-160.

¹⁰ Ebd, 4f: Thomas A. Seidel, Zur Geschichte evangelischer Akademiearbeit in Thüringen. Vgl. auch Susanne Böhm, *Die ersten zehn Jahre der Evangelischen Akademie Thüringen*, in: *Thüringer Gratwanderungen, Beiträge zur fünfundsiebzigjährigen Geschichte der evangelischen Landeskirche Thüringens*, hg.v. Thomas A. Seidel, i.A. der Evangelischen Akademie Thüringen und der Gesellschaft für Thüringische Kirchengeschichte, bearb.v. Dietmar Wiegand, Leipzig 1998, 189-208.

¹¹ Vgl. Thomas A. Seidel, *Im Übergang der Diktaturen. Eine Untersuchung zur kirchlichen Neuordnung in Thüringen 1945 – 1951*, Stuttgart 2003.

Though we might today employ here and there different terms, the concept is over all still valid. For those who are familiar with the landscape of Protestant academies in East and West it might be obvious that, in difference from the former self-understanding of some academies in West Germany:

1. We assume a benevolent critical and functional relation with the (institutionalized) church and the liberal democratic fundamental order of the German state (which does not exclude disagreement and debate in several problematic fields!)
2. We comprehend religious and theological education as a genuine political issue and part of the mission of the academy.
3. We do not distinguish our enterprise as sharply from general Protestant adult education as some of the bigger academies in West Germany do.

Tradition and Innovation

In addition to this intellectual and spiritual orientation the work of our academy draws on the connection with the location Neudietendorf. We participate at and contribute to the architectural and cultural development of the village.¹³ The tradition of the Moravian Brethren founded by Count Zinzendorf (1700-1760) formed the *gestalt* of this village. The ‘stone built spirituality’ of Moravian settlements follows all over world, wherever Moravian missionaries came, the same, easily understandable architectural blueprint. The main buildings – the quarters for the sisters and the brothers, the church hall, the library and the pharmacy – line the rectangular yard. In its center there is a carefully sculptured dwell, which symbolizes the center of the congregation and refers to Christ as the source of life (cf. Joh 4: 13.14; Moravian Hymnbook 120,7; 531,1; 663,1). In Neudietendorf the dwell is currently taken over by some trees – a practical problem which might be resolved rather easily.

This architectural structure resembles a monastery, which opens itself into the world. Its green surroundings are not closed off by high walls, at most they are surrounded by a wooden fence, which allows easily for looking beyond. If you take the chance to peek over the fence you will spot an idyllic picture: a big meadow, high trees, a groomed parsonage garden with a little tea pavillon, the wonderful God’s acre and the currently a little run wild park. We thus gave the

¹² *Reflexion-Dialog-Spiritualität. Perspektiven evangelischer Akademiearbeit in Thüringen*, unveröffentl. MS, redigiert von Thomas A. Seidel, für den Konsolidierungsausschuss der Landessynode der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche in Thüringen, vom 14.5.1997.

¹³ *Kommunität und Öffentlichkeit. Ortsentwicklung Neudietendorf in herrnhutischer Tradition*, unveröffentl. MS eines Vortrages von Thomas A. Seidel für das Symposium „Thüringer Wege ins 21. Jahrhundert“, Neudietendorf, am 13.6.1998.

location of our academy in the nineties a loving, yet a little euphemistic name. We call it a “Moravian oasis.”¹⁴ We take pleasure in featuring these special attractions and also the a little old-fashioned charm of the Zinzendorf Mansion, our conference center, on our website, on historic tours and on other occasions.

Zinzendorf and his impressive *oeuvre* was more than once the focus of our conferences: “Zinzendorf – A Feminist Theologian of Baroque”, or “Zinzendorf’s Ecumenical Concept.” In the year 2000, the tricentennial of Zinzendorf’s birthday, we not only sponsored an anniversary conference with the topic “Zinzendorf 2000. Mystic, Manager and Churchman”, but we also invited entries for a preaching reward. A literary sermon, which should reach the signification power of contemporary literary language, was sought after.¹⁵

We also find some rituals and elements of this unique evangelical awakening movement quite inspiring and worth to be preserved. One of which is the Moravian Text Book with the daily watchwords.¹⁶ For many staff members reading the watchword is for decades part and parcel of the daily morning ritual, which precedes the family breakfast.

Prayer and Work

Who missed the reading of the watchword in the morning has another chance: The reading is included in the daily midday devotions, to which all guests are invited into the chapel. The equipment of the chapel with contemporary religious art is an important element of this spiritual space. The rather simple liturgy of the midday devotions is dramaturgically centered around a time of silence in between song, psalm, watchword and prayer. The fact that the sheets with the readings have regularly to be replaced, indicates the popularity and liturgical plausibility of this spiritual intermission of the daily routine. This spiritual dimension is also a necessary part of the work process of the academy. Meetings are opened by prayer and meditation.

¹⁴ Götz Planer-Friedrich und Thomas A. Seidel, Die Geschichte des Zinzendorfhouses, in: *Neudietendorf*, hg.v. der Gemeinde Neudietendorf, 2. überarb. Auflage, Wechmar 1999, 201-220 und 251-254.

¹⁵ Vgl. dazu Frank Hiddemann, *Der Zinzendorf-Predigtpreis. Aus dem Homiletischen Tagebuch*, in: Zeitschrift für Gottesdienst und Predigt 19 (2001), Heft 4, 57f. Die Preisträgerpredigten von Reinhard Laser, Duisburg und Wolfram Braselmann, Münchehagen wurden in den Heften 3/2001 und 1 /2002 der Zeitschrift für Gottesdienst und Predigt veröffentlicht. Der Preis wurde aus Mitteln der Thüringer Literaturförderung finanziert.

¹⁶ *Die täglichen Losungen und Lehrtexte der Brüdergemeine für das Jahr 2004*, 274. Ausgabe, hg.v. der Direktion der Evangelischen Brüder-Unität Herrnhut und Bad Boll, Basel 2004. Eingeführt von Nikolaus Ludwig Graf von Zinzendorf am 3. Mai 1728.

By the way, the Moravian watchword often serves as the opening of conferences of the academy. It is included in the welcoming words and technical announcements. For our guests – of whom many come from a rather secular background – this practice seems to be impressive. It is like a guest from a world believed to have long vanished. Scripture quotations in Luther's German, selected three years in advance. A never ending chain of special words and pictures, which was initiated in the early seventeenthcenturies by a nobleman and which now seems to continue irresistibly. Words, which are – translated in over 30 languages – read, meditated and reflected on daily by millions of people. That evokes astonishment and provokes questions and conversations.

Even more surprising, often a unique, implicit and very delicate coincidence between the alien, accidental biblical text and the theme of the conference emerges. This is often not planned, unforced and especially because of this impressive, difficult to comprehend and believe. Sometimes a keyword appears from such an occurrence, which is repeatedly present in the discussions of the conference and thus gains new meaning. A great opportunity to link up with in the morning devotions.

Themes and Formats

I would like to use a concrete event to illustrate the special profile of our Protestant academy. In 1999 the city of Weimar in Thuringia was selected as Cultural Capital of Europe, a very prestigious reward. Every year a different city is chosen and is helped with sponsoring special cultural events throughout the year. The churches were invited to participate in this project and were asked to contribute specific religious cultural projects. For the Protestant Church this meant to submit specific Protestant cultural projects to the jury for approval and funding.¹⁷ Amongst the few accepted projects were two formats designed by the Protestant academy. In addition to a lecture series¹⁸ a special preaching project was chosen. The title was: "52 Sunday Sermons. Talks on God and the World." The Protestant preaching tradition was presented as a significant Protestant cultural contribution.

¹⁷ Vgl. dazu die ausführliche Beschreibung bei: Hiddemann, *Religiöse Agenturen ...*,

¹⁸ Unter dem Titel „Die Christenheit und Europa“ bezogen sich vier europäische Intellektuelle auf Novalis' Vortrag „Die Christenheit oder Europa“, der 1799, 200 Jahre vor dem Weimarer Kulturstadtjahr in Jena gehalten wurde. Alfred Grosser, Andrzej Szczypiorski, Lars Gustafsson und Peter Sloterdijk kommentierten und interpretierten diesen Text, der sich vor der vorletzten Jahrhundertwende mit Europa, der christlichen Religion und der pluralen oder einheitlichen Kultur dieser Region auseinandersetzte.

The basic idea of this project was to invite guest preachers from the surrounding culture into normal liturgical services conducted by the local minister. 24 congregations in Thuringia volunteered to participate, which allowed for inviting lay persons on all 52 Sundays of the ecclesiastical year to preach on the prescribed text. The underlying idea was to initiate an exchange of oral cultures: bank directors, artists, medical doctors and politicians were supposed to engage each Sunday with an alien text. Naturally, due to the widely secularized situation in Thuringia, there were outspoken atheists among the preachers.¹⁹

This project turned into a scandal because the planned sermon of one of the leading figures of the post-communist party provoked a public outcry within the church but also in society at large. This issue triggered not only debate but also very serious action by the church administration, which eventually inhibited the deliverance of this sermon.²⁰

Interestingly enough, this project of the academy inspired several similar enterprises all over Thuringia, in which the exchange of secular and Christian voices interpreting the biblical text were initiated. The conflict about this preaching project in Thuringia became also subject of the academic discourse on Practical Theology and was mainly criticized.²¹

Anyway, this conflict was neither intended nor expected, but provided the opportunity for at least three things:

1. We discussed internally intensively and in a very personal way all aspects related to this project. We studied very thoroughly the theology of Martin Luther. And we all experienced the exhaustion and liberation which stems from such struggle with existential issues.
2. This conflict paved the road for the initiation of a committee of supporters of the academy, who as volunteers assist the work of the academy. It is important to note that

¹⁹ Sehr instruktive Überlegungen zu einer „Ökumene der dritten Art“, die auch den weltanschaulichen Atheismus mit ins Gespräch zieht, bei E. Tiefensee, Homo areligiosus - Eine relativ junge und noch regionale Spezies, in: W. Bergsdorf/H. Hoffmeister/J. Rüpke (Hrsg.), Weltreligionen im 21. Jahrhundert. Dreizehn Vorlesungen, Weimar 2001, 75-98.

²⁰ Frank Hiddemann / Jürgen Reifarth (Hg.), *Öffentlich Predigen. Prominente Predigten aus dem Thüringer Kanzelstreit*, Gütersloh 2000, dort besonders: Streitfall „Predigt“. *Der Thüringer Kanzelstreit: Eine kurze Geschichte samt theologischer Nachlese*, 9-30.

²¹ Wilfried Engemann, *Wie kommt ein Prediger auf die Kanzel? Elemente zu einer Theologie der Predigt im Kontext des Weimarer Predigtstreits. 21 Thesen*, Waltrop 1999. Auch in einem neuen Standardwerk der Homiletik findet der „Thüringer Predigtstreit“ unrühmliche Erwähnung als verfehelter Versuch, der Predigt mehr Öffentlichkeit zu verschaffen. Der Begriff „Öffentlichkeit“ wird dabei in einem reduzierten Sinne gebraucht und pejorativ wie „ins Gerede bringen“ verstanden: Wilfried Engemann, *Einführung in die Homiletik*, Tübingen/Basel 2001, 104f. Dagegen wandte sich der Erlanger Systematische Theologe Walter Sparn: Walter Sparn, *Predigt registered. Der Thüringer Streit gibt zu denken: Was heißt evangelisch predigen?*, in: Die Zeichen der Zeit. Lutherische Monatshefte H. 5 (1999) 30-32.

in this committee there are people who backed the preaching project as well as folks who strongly opposed it. We experience this as an expression of Protestant freedom and plurality! In addition this led in 2001 to the establishment of the Foundation of the Protestant Academy of Thuringia. This foundation is supposed to take over the fiscal and legal responsibility for the academy in the long run.

3. Last but not least, the conflict about the preaching project was a very efficient public relations event. It made the academy known well beyond the borders of Thuringia and engendered the image of the academy as being a center of competence for the moderation of public conflicts about religion and Christendom.

When the German National Theater in Weimar invited a guest production of the play “Corpus Christi”, which narrates the passion of Christ in a gay community, the academy was invited as counselor in order to deal with the expected conflicts. At other locations the production had provoked conflict and protests of fundamentalist Christian groups. The academy organized and hosted a panel discussion after the show with the representatives of the different parties of the conflict and engaged them in a theological, political and artistic debate.

At another occasion, the academy sponsored seven debates on the theses of the philosopher Herbert Schnädelbach from Berlin, which are highly critical of Christendom and stirred quite some public attention.²² The special format *disputationes* was invented, a procedure which helps to work orderly through the theses of a critic of Christendom and a Christian apologetic. This event was located in the café of the famous hotel Elephant in Weimar. Amongst the disputants who were invited to debate at this peculiar place were the then candidates for the office of bishop of the regional Protestant church.²³

Let me also briefly hint to some other topics and formats which are important for our work: For example the “Silent Days in the Academy” during Holy Week or similar conferences, which are all part of the format “The Academy in the Festival Cycle of the Year”. Or to special conferences for girls and boys, in which it is attempted to introduce mostly secular teenagers to philosophical and religious dimensions of life. In addition there are series of conferences dealing with historical topics and the question of an adequate culture of memory

²² Herbert Schnädelbach, *Der Fluch des Christentums*, in: Die Zeit Nr. 20 vom 11. Mai 2000, 41f.

²³ Die Kandidaten waren: der Oberkirchenrat Dr. Hans Mikosch, Gera, der Landesjugendpfarrer Ricklef Münnich, Eisenach, und der Theologieprofessor (und jetzige Landesbischof) Prof. Dr. Christoph Kähler, Leizig.

and commemoration as part of the Jewish-Christian tradition. Furthermore there are events for special target groups, for example for entrepreneurs in Thuringia. Related to this are the “Table Talks in the Zinsendorf Mansion”, which are hosted by the bishop and the director of the academy aiming on a dialogue between the church and the economy about values and problems in the realm of the economy.

I do not want to get lost in details now, but rather use my time to present to you three aspects which are constitutive for the uniqueness of the work of our academy:

1. The Protestant Academy of Thuringia as “Locale of Orientational Reflection”

The work of the Protestant Academy takes place not only in the special social and cultural situation of a post-communist transformation society, but also in the context of a rapidly and globally changing economic and social structure, which only can roughly be described with the notion of globalization. Both has tremendous consequences for the cohesion of traditional, constitutive and stabilizing institutions in civil society – such as the churches.

The Protestant churches in Germany not only since the reformation often have been important participants in the intellectual and cultural discourse in German society. However it seems that they lost most of this societal influence. This is not only due to the process of secularization, which can be observed in most modern European respectively Western affluent societies, but also to the anti-religious and more specifically anti-Christian ideology during two dictatorships.²⁴

Within the Protestant milieu – and here I am linking up with the thesis of Henning Ritter mentioned earlier – in the last 30 or 40 years there developed an “identity crisis of German Protestantism.” In East Germany we can observe the tendency of an ecclesiasticalization: the churches were forced to leave the public sphere and lived basically within the boundaries of an ecclesiastical ghetto. In the Western part, the tendency towards an over-politicization was prevalent.²⁵ Both resulted in the loss of competence in the field of religion proper as well as in the field of public (religious) communication. Which in turn disables the churches to respond properly to and profit from the increasing demand for ethical orientation and the reviving curiosity in religion. Nevertheless the churches as intermediary organizations and as

²⁴ Neubert, *gründlich ausgetrieben...*, a.a.O.

²⁵ Herbert Ammon, *Zur Identitätskrise des deutschen Protestantismus (A.D. 2000)*, in: Seidel, *Gottlose Jahre...*, 217-236.

important agencies of diaconical and social services and as big employers in this field are still held in high esteem.

This social prestige should not be underestimated, but also should not be overemphasized. The foundations of the Christian churches are not diaconical but religious by nature. Where the social impetus dominates Protestant life in preaching, teaching and education, or even replaces it, the appeal and the missionary energy of the biblical tradition, the power of prayer and the resulting faculty for ethical judgement and open-mindedness will be neither perceivable nor communicable – and will also not be politically effective.

The Protestant Academy of Thuringia reaches out with its events to such religious seekers, to intellectual and otherwise mobile people, to confessing agnostics and transcendently homeless, to curious youth and adults, to decision makers in politics, economy, culture and art. All those are invited to find in our "Moravian oasis" an attractive **locale of orientational reflection**.

2. The Protestant Academy of Thuringia as "anti-totalitarian protest"

The aforementioned mission statement of our academy from 1997 commences with a quote from the former German Federal President Roman Herzog, which expresses adequately intention and mission of our work, the critical potential of the relation of open-mindedness and trust in God. Herzog, who is also a generous donor to our foundation, relates with his statement to the experiences of those of us, who had to live in a totalitarian regime. The emphasis on real and open dialogue thus becomes an anti-totalitarian protest:

The church, which only reproduces the lack of orientation of society, has made itself already superfluous even before others acknowledge it [...].

Too many things that affect both state and society give the impression that ultimate and extremely important matters are at stake. The church, however, should incessantly remind us that our debates deal – at best – with matters of penultimate importance.

Moreover, this is where I see the extraordinary mission of Protestant academies. Since their foundation it has been their goal to make possible dialogues between very different groups of our society [...].

A dialogue that aims at results means a lot more than a pseudo-consensus that does not change anything.

Thus, especially a fair dialogue needs the imposition of another dimension. [...] Hopefully, this is what both the church and the Protestant academies contribute to state and society.

But caution! We have to be aware of the danger of clerical arrogance and presumption. Decisive for a creative, life-serving thus Protestant reception of this statement are two things:

1. The above described social and cultural context has to be taken into account. The church and thus also the Protestant academies in East Germany are the voice of a qualified minority. The churches are still rather big voluntary organizations, but they are far from being as saturated and well funded as the churches in West Germany, which are also well integrated into the civil religion of parliamentary democracy. The dispassionate perception of this minority situation not necessarily has to be depressing. It also can be seen as an incentive and chance.
2. The church – including the Protestant academies in East Germany – must not forget that they need in themselves this *imposition of this other dimension*, that there is always a gap between aspiration and reality, between promise and redemption, between the visible and the invisible church. The dispassionate perception of these actual fragil and imperfect situation in the church also can be inspiring and helpful.

3. The Protestant Academy of Thuringia as Religious Agency

The erosion of the Protestant milieu is [...] related – as we have heard at the beginning – to the historical uniqueness of Protestantism. Religious convictions penetrated deeply into daily life and were shaped into its secular patterns: the family, attitudes towards work, leisure and celebrations. Faith, as an underlying conviction, was capable of transforming daily life. Thus it was possible to talk of “Protestant Ethics”.

For people grown up in this tradition this resembles what the apostle Paul wrote as encouragement and exhortation about the “service in daily life in the world” (Romans 12: 1-2). Or Martin Luther, or Schleiermacher, or Karl Barth...

However, work and calling are still mundane affairs. This is also true for the work of the academies. It is not decisive for salvation, for what gives meaning and depth to life before God. They are subordinated, integrated. This is something different from and additional to the anti-totalitarian relativization of political and ecclesiastical presumption.

With the words of famous Lutheran hymn writer Paul Gerhardt I would like summarize this Protestant insight:

*If God Himself be for me, / I may a host defy, / For when I pray, before me /
my foes confounded fly. / If Christ, the Head, befriend me, / if God be my support, /
The mischief they intend me / shall quickly come to naught.*

And some verses further this gifted Protestant poet, in the midst of the catastrophies of the Thirty Years' War, even more devoted and thus more bravely:

*His Holy Spirit dwelleth / within my willing heart, / Tames it when it rebelleth, /
and soothes the keenest smart. / He crowns His work with blessing, / and helpeth me to cry /
"My Father!" without ceasing / to Him Who reigns on high.²⁶*

This Protestant insight, that the self-chosen immaturity of faith is the presupposition for the maturity and freedom of thinking and acting in the world,²⁷ is difficult and cumbersome – not only for cold enlightened fellow citizens, but also many Protestants protest against this religious imposition.

Often this protest takes shape unnoticed, unreflected and maybe even unintended – and thus sometimes very loudly. With the strong, elevated pathos of Protestant certitude appeals to saving the world are issued.

But – we ask once more – what about those fellow citizens, who are not reached by these appeals, since they avoid the sphere of the church in general? People, who do not have any clue about Protestantism and its theological and cultural matrix? Those who were brought up

²⁶ "Ist Gott für mich, so trete", Paul Gerhardt, 1653, EG 351: 1 and 7.

²⁷ In a sophisticated opposition to Immanuel Kant's formulation: "Enlightening is the outstep of men from a self-imposed immaturity (tutelage)...".

in a vulgar positivistic faith in science and pseudo-marxist distance from religion? The many new citizens of the Federal Republic without perceivable civil self-esteem?

In this social and cultural context the work of the academies has to retrieve and preserve religious knowledge and feed it into the current discourses – not apologetically, but dispassionately, inspiring and spirited.

In this context the work of the academies can make a contribution to the development of civil society. The work of the academies is civil activism and reflects on – based on vital religious knowledge – the dark side of the European enlightenment as well as its illumination and reason, without which a modern state based on the rule of law can not survive.

Insofar it is justified to subsume the reflections of our team in the last years about the profile of the work of the Protestant Academy of Thuringia under the term *religious agency*. It is religious, intellectual and political education for youth and adult – a school for heart and mind. This is exactly what the work of a **Protestant** – or in a non-fundamental meaning: evangelical – academy means: to preserve the knowledge that open-mindedness without trust in God rests on feet of clay.

Dr. Thomas A. Seidel,

Director

[translated by Dr. Michael Haspel]

Reflection - Dialogue - Spirituality

Perspectives of the work of the Protestant Academy of Thuringia

REFLECTION

The Protestant Academy of Thuringia is an institution of reflection: in and for the church – in and for the world.

The Academy offers a practically oriented reflection of the world in the light of the Gospel. In order to achieve this, it makes use of the knowledge and insight of the humanities and the natural sciences and tries to impart education in an objective and holistic way. The Academy prefers an interdisciplinary approach to answering actual and long term questions. Within the given frame work, the Academy promotes the creation of a Protestant elite, co-operating with other institutions within or outside the church.

As a competent and respected counsellor the Academy tries to help the administration of the Protestant Church, the parishes, institutions, and other social groups to adequately react to current cultural, social and economic changes or to act with foresight.

DIALOGUE

The Protestant Academy of Thuringia is, grounded in the Spirit of Protestantism, a locale for the uplifting of the culture of political debate.

In discussions, conferences, congresses, hearings, lectures and in work groups the Academy wants to bring forth and shape a dialogue about actual important religious, political, economic and ecological topics. This dialogue is carried on in a way that is true to the fact and that aims at results. Furthermore, it includes the ability to solve conflicts and the disposition to find compromises. Thus, an encouragement of a dialogue between different cultures and religions bridging is becoming more and more important. As an independent forum of dialogue and civilized argument the Academy is the advanced post of an open-minded church in an open-minded society.

SPIRITUALITY

The Protestant Academy of Thuringia is a “Protestant short-term community.”

Through devotion, meditation or special church services it is possible to inspire both non-religious and religious people with a “religious musicality” and to reveal the power of Christianity.

In doing so the Academy takes up questions on the meaning of life as well as religious experiences without being occupying or ideological.

As a place for developing spirituality the Academy also represents a point of reference for those who search for personal affirmation.

Since a liberal democratic order can not produce the presuppositions of its own existence (orientation, meaning, shared basic values et cetera), the development of spirituality, religious and theological education is an urgent societal task of the youth and adult education of the Protestant Academy.

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