

century. Besides the Roman Catholic church there are Christian churches in the missionary race: Protestants, Evangelicals, Baptists, Pentecostals—they all try hard to get the best piece of the Third World cake. The “Consultation of World Evangelization” in Thailand in 1980 declared all of 700 million Hindus their worldwide target.

Missionaries come equipped with detailed instruction about successful techniques for converting Hindus: the use of “miraculous healing” and other special elements of the Hindu religion is advised. Another technique is “demonstrating social concern,” for example, for lower castes and tribes or other untouchables of the Hindu community. How to win the higher caste community, how to use illiteracy for successful “radio-evangelism,” and how to perform in a way that finally brings in the harvest are taught by professionals. Mass conversions spark Hindu protest and violence.

These different pressures demand reactions on different levels. In India, the Indian Rationalist Association has emerged nationally as a corrective force by rising above local events. When the Delhi BJP government in 1997 installed a Mantra Healing Centre in a state-funded medical college, we succeeded in forcing its closure within one month by mobilizing public opinion. When the “milk miracle” swept all over India and within hours millions of people were gripped by ecstasy, we succeeded in stopping the spectacle before dusk by explaining through television the laws of physics behind the phenomena. These two examples show the importance of rationalist presence in the media. fi

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Truth and Dogma

Robert M. Price

In a time of comfortably orthodox retrenchment among New Testament scholars, Gerd Lüdemann has been a bracing voice urging scholars not to forget, as they seem eager to do, the radical insights of David Friedrich Strauss. Lüdemann stands courageously for Strauss’s brand of intellectual honesty. And, like Strauss, who was ejected from the teaching profession, Lüdemann is now paying the price. Like the ancient Sanhedrin closing ranks against Jesus (why do they never even notice the parallel?), the Protestant authorities at Göttingen University have decreed that Professor Lüdemann shall lose research funding and that divinity students shall no longer study with him. Thankfully, he has not yet been consigned to the streets.

Lüdemann’s “crime” was to leap from the confining nest of Mother Church and to take wing with the pinions of critical reason and spiritual honesty. Long since having repudiated biblical literalism, he recently found theological liberalism equally galling. He could no longer brook the pretense that Jesus rose from the dead in some Pickwickian sense compatible with his corpse rotting, that the Christian should live in “eschatological hope” (the charade of Advent), even though the promise of the Parousia is over 19 centuries forfeit. As Socrates urged his disciples to think not of Socrates but only of the truth, Lüdemann at last decided that the truth itself was the only banner he could fly in good conscience. And this the Göttingen Sanhedrin deems “thoughtcrime,” a contagion from which tender seminarians must be shielded.

Some might regret Lüdemann’s treatment and yet grant that an institution has a right not to employ those unsympathetic to its official policy. Jello could no longer be expected to pay for Bill Cosby’s endorsement if he made it known he preferred Royal Gelatin instead. In this manner some likewise defended the pope’s decision, some years ago, to forbid Hans Küng to teach any longer at Tübingen as a “Professor of Catholic Theology.” But this defense is fatally revealing, is it not? For it is a bald-faced admission of the very crime with which Lüdemann has

implicitly charged the Church: preferring a particular party-line, a given set of opinions, to the truth per se. Is the truth material, a set of dogmas we already possess? Or is it formal, a North Star by which to navigate our search? If the truth is not open-ended, it is hypocritical to pretend to search for it. And that is the pretense (if that is all it is) of great

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universities such as Göttingen and Tübingen have been. But of late they seem enamored of becoming indoctrination mills, glorified Bible colleges. The difference is exactly that between academic freedom and intellectual honesty on the one hand and mere catechism on the other. To condemn Lüdemann because he won’t “get with the program” as a loyally gray apparatchik shows where his university stands.

We as humanists, including Gerd Lüdemann, do not share the Christian faith, however much we may respect it. But we may be said to embrace a faith of our own: the confidence, perhaps naive, that the truth will out. It must evidence its superiority in the

contest of ideas. This is why we do not try to “protect” ourselves/our students from any knowledge from any source. We trust the free and inquiring mind to make its own responsible choice. Apparently religious institutions like Göttingen University eschew that faith. But they betray their own as well, since they must deem the Christian faith of seminarians too brittle to withstand the impact of critical scholarship like Lüdemann’s. Ironically, by their action, the good Christian elders of Göttingen have only

vindicated Gerd Lüdemann’s decision to leave his Christian allegiance behind. In the process they have confirmed our long-held suspicion as well: ultimately a religious creed and intellectual honesty must act each upon the other as fire and water. fi

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A Plea for Academic Freedom

The following letter was sent to officials at Göttingen University from the Jesus Seminar on behalf of scholar Gerd Lüdemann.—EDs.

We are writing to you out of concern for the situation of our colleague, Professor Dr. Gerd Lüdemann.

We have followed his situation with keen interest because it involves the freedom of professors to express freely the ideas that will ultimately lead to progress and clarity in the field of theology. We understand that the manner of pursuing theological education is different in Germany from the way things are done here in the United States. We also understand that the relationship of the church to theological faculties in your state universities is quite foreign to our way of thinking about state-sponsored education. However, taking all of this into account, we still find reason to be distressed over Professor Lüdemann’s situation.

To many of us it seems right and appropriate that the church should show proper concern for the education of its clergy, and to exercise some control over who should participate in the process of qualifying students for ordination. Thus, it does not trouble us that Professor Lüdemann may no longer read the church exams, or offer courses to students preparing for ordination to the ministry, even though many of us believe that Professor Lüdemann’s ideas might even prove helpful to the church as it seeks to clarify the meaning of Christian faith in the twenty-first century. That the Theological Faculty has not seen the opportunity to engage Professor Lüdemann’s ideas within the context of its theological work is quite unfortunate, and represents a loss to the quality of the intellectual environment.

What is most distressing to us is the fact that Professor Lüdemann has also been barred from reading the faculty exams,

advising doctoral students, and evaluating the work of Dozents. None of these educational programs necessarily involves the training of persons to serve in the church. That the state, through the offices of the University and the Theological Faculty, should bar him from participating fully in these areas is a grave stroke against academic freedom. The issue here is not the quality or persuasiveness of Professor Lüdemann’s views. In fact, many of us have criticized his ideas, even as he has criticized ours. The issue is the free exchange of ideas, in print, and in the classroom. It is our understanding that, through the actions taken by the University and the Theological Faculty, Professor Lüdemann has effectively been barred from offering courses or advising students. This goes to the heart of academic freedom. The classroom is above all the place where academic freedom must be exercised. Without this, there is no real academic freedom. And without academic freedom, there is no intellectual integrity.

We understand that our ways are different here in the United States, and that the University must balance the interests of both the church and the broader culture in this matter. We realize that this is not an easy thing to do. And we appreciate the fact that thus far the University, the Theological Faculty, and the Ministry of Science and Culture have sought a solution that does not involve the dismissal of Professor Lüdemann altogether, as the church had apparently desired. Still, the present situation has left Professor Lüdemann without a voice in the classroom. We would therefore urge you all to seek a new solution to the problem, one that restores to Professor Lüdemann an active role in the education of students who are not necessarily preparing for ordination in the Lutheran church. This would include offering courses with

credit to students who are not preparing for ordained ministry, participating in the Faculty Exams, advising doctoral students, and evaluating the work of Dozents.

As we enter a new millennium, it has become clear that one of the tasks that lies before us in the West is a critical coming to grips with our Christian past. This is a task not only for the church, but for everyone who is an heir to this cultural legacy. This is precisely what Professor Lüdemann is asking us to do, albeit in a very provocative way. That this challenge should be taken out of the theological curriculum altogether is a travesty. Is there a more important issue with which our students should be forced to struggle at this critical time in our history? We do not think so. That is why we are asking you to reconsider this situation, and to find a new solution that reaffirms his right to engage in full academic discussion of his research regardless of its results or his personal views.

Sincerely Yours,

Robert W. Funk
Director, Westar Institute
Chair, Jesus Seminar, on behalf of the
Fellows of the Jesus Seminar