

THE PROTESTANT REVOLUTION
or
WIDER DIE FALSCHHE GELASSENHEIT.*

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This contribution was prompted by events in East Germany that ultimately led to German unification. Many forces contributed to the collapse of the GDR as a separate state, the final and most visible was the mass exodus via Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The Communist regime resisted change when change was taking place in most of East Germany's neighbors to the east and southeast. But an ever increasing number of increasingly restless citizens insisted on it and, not given a chance to change matters by improving the system, effected the most radical change of all: they swept away an unresponsive, cynical and calcified government.

In this process the role of one institution stands out, that of the **Protestant Church**. What finally turned into massive, yet peaceful, demonstrations with hundreds of thousands participating, began as prayer meetings in Dresden's Holy Cross Church, the Nikolai-Church in Leipzig, the Gethsemane-Church in Berlin, and many others. It was here that small "opposition" groups were formed who began to formulate sets of demands for reform that were eventually adopted by regional Church Assemblies, Federation Synods and Ecumenical Conventions. Isolated units of church-based, politically concerned Protestant citizens eventually evolved into a mass movement endorsed by the Protestant Church as an institution whose hierarchy gradually and reluctantly abandoned the notion of a "Church within Socialism." The newly inspired Church exhorted the government to be responsive to the people, and the people, to demonstrate peacefully but persistently.

This change of official church position from caution to solidarity is documented in a splendid book by Gerhard Rein, **Die protestantische Revolution, 1987-1990.*** Equally important, it shows the emancipation of a people as they learn to speak for themselves and outgrow the need for the clergy to act as mediators. Even-handed and fair, the book also provides a forum for some who claim that there was no revolution at all, merely the collapse of a decayed system, and for angry voices raised against opportunistic church officials, Catholic and Protestant, who did little and joined late.

The book is ingeniously organized as chronicles of events, followed by documentation relating to them, generously supplemented by the author's commentary and analysis as broadcast at the time over the South German Radio in Stuttgart. It follows on the heels of another volume which contains "blueprints for a different kind of socialism," and compiles between two covers the sometimes conflicting ideas of important reform groups like "**New Forum**," "**Democratic Initiative**," "**Democracy Now**," and others who felt that East Germany might have a future as a separate state under a "socialism with a human face" but were swept away in a rush toward unity with West Germany that no one could and few wanted to stop.

Die protestantische Revolution, as the title implies, restricts itself to the role of the Church, i.e. hierarchy, clergy and prominent laity. The title also implies, and the introduction makes it explicit, that this is "the first Protestant revolution in Germany." The claim seems extraordinary but is based on the fact that **Luther** abhorred the very idea of a revolution and wanted no part of it; he understood his mission as solely religious and fundamentalist-reformist. In 20th century East Germany, by contrast, what began as a reform movement eventually became a political revolution supported by the Protestant Church.

In June of 1988, each weekend saw another regional Protestant Church Convention (evangelische Kirchentage) in **Erfurt**, **Rostock**, **Goerlitz** and, finally and most importantly, in **Halle**. Here the assembly adopted twenty theses, prepared in Luther's own Wittenberg, that gave voice to urgent concerns, demanding renewal and open discourse; deploring bureaucratic apathy, tyranny, and a shackled press; insisting on governmental accountability and truth in reporting; demanding the creation of courts to settle grievances, since petitioning the government was an exercise in futility. Cut the claim to socialist superiority, they demanded; cut the propaganda in the educational system; open the borders, all of them; establish a more realistic pricing system for basic food stuff and energy to eliminate horrendous waste and pollution.

This defiant resolution proved to be a catalyst. Since there was always the danger (and many real instances) of violent repression, cautious voices had introduced the notion of **Zumutbarkeit** ("reasonableness," gladly adopted by the SED, the ruling party): What demands will the government find acceptable? Paralyzed by so much pragmatism the synod of the Federation of Protestant Churches meeting in Goerlitz in September of 1987 could not get themselves to act on a resolution calling for open borders.

The regional convention in Halle in 1988 changed all that. From now on, each Federation synod passed similar resolutions with ever greater assurance and determination, insisting on comprehensive civil and human rights,

including the right to unrestricted travel, and the right to opposition and to peaceful demonstrations. **The synods had become a substitute parliament or, if you wish, an extra-parliamentary opposition, East German style.** In June of 1989, commenting on the fraudulent May elections, the Federation hierarchy expressed sympathy with an angry populace but still rejected "overreactions and demonstrations" as inappropriate for the church. However, the statement was immediately challenged by other prominent clergy. The month of October saw one more concerted police action against dissidents and demonstrators, but an unstoppable momentum had been generated and the mass protests continued until a repressive system collapsed, ironically as it was celebrating its 40th anniversary.

Well, what is so special here? To understand the enormity of this Church-supported activism one has to remember the **stifling tradition, in Germany, of Martin Luther's political doctrine**, particularly his guidelines addressing the relationship between government and the governed, the bulk of it formulated shortly before and during the **German Peasants' Revolt in the 1520s**. Here we encounter but one of many occasions where legitimate but misplaced religious concepts get in the way of common sense and social progress. I will briefly deal with one of the most potent, namely **Gelassenheit** (detachment, serenity, repose) and its conceptual field.

Within the mystical experience, **Gelassenheit** is the final state the Self must achieve before it can experience the mystical union. It is a state reached by eliminating, or "purging," all that stands in the way of progress toward God; by renouncing all that is material, sensual, transitory; by renouncing one's own, individual will; in short by giving up all claims to autonomy: reversing, as it were, the process of individuation. In a Christian context the point of reference is usually a sentence from the Scriptures to the effect that no one can hear the word of Jesus and be his disciple unless he has renounced himself first (e.g. **Matt. 16,24**). German mystics and theosophers from **Meister Eckehart to Jacob Boehme** have elaborated on it. In their writings, **Gelassenheit** is a state of pure contemplation, of illumination in the presence of the divine: the Self "desires nothing, asks nothing, is utterly passive and is thus prepared for the Union, the true goal of the mystic quest" (Evelyn Underhill).

This idea of a contemplation that desires nothing and is utterly passive resurfaces, centuries later and filtered through the process of secularization, as "**disinterested contemplation**" (interesseloses Anschauen) in **Kant's aesthetics**. My colleague M.H. Abrams who traces both the classical and Christian prototypes of this "impersonal and absorbed contemplation" in his essay "Kant and the Theology of Art" [Notre Dame English Journal, XIII, 1981] comes within a hair of identifying the mystical concept of Gelassenheit as the chief Christian influence on Kant's formula.

As early as the beginning of the 15th century the classical stoic tradition, although never quite extinct, reemerged forcefully. Hence the term that is still with us today: stoische Gelassenheit, stoic detachment, equanimity, with its chief advice not to form a strong attachment to what is transitory lest a loss of possessions or persons be experienced as a crushing blow. It is one of the main lessons Death teaches the bereaved husband in the **Ackermann aus Boehmen**, written around 1400; it is a contemptuous remark the Grand Inquisitor hurls at King Philip in Schiller's **Don Carlos**, written 400 years later. It forms the simple basis for the very complex issue of **Entsagung/renunciation** in many German classics: namely the mature yet painful decision to reduce one's agenda, to justify a gradual slowdown and the prudent preservation of energy. 17th century Protestants, already familiar with the tops of vanity, embraced stoic detachment, discovered, as had Meister Eckehart before them, detachment's proximity to such other virtues as constancy and fortitude, and produced some beautiful poetry on the subject; many of their religious hymns are still found in church hymnals the world over. Of course there were pedants among them in whose hands the merged traditions yielded but pious insensitivity. **Opitz'** lengthy and stultifying Consolation in the Adversities of War is an example.

The lack of human warmth associated with our term finds its extreme expression in the sublimely indifferent attitude of **Rilke's Angel**, "der es gelassen verschmht, uns zu zerstren." There is an echo here both of **Nietzsche's** rare use of the word: "Mit einer ungeheuren und stolzen Gelassenheit leben; immer jenseits-," Jenseits von Gut und Bse, that is, from which this sentence is taken, and **Goethe's Faust** raging at Mephisto: "Du grinsest gelassen ber das Schicksal von Tausenden hin." In a secular context, it is best reflected in the fatalistic, yet courageous attitude of protagonists like **Goethe's Egmont** who are determined to exercise what limited control they have over a life that is compared to a chariot drawn by horses running wild.

Then there is detachment as serenity, the **heitere Gelassenheit** of people who have aged gracefully like Philemon and Baucis in Goethe's Faust II. Or the two old men at the end of Hesse's Siddhartha whose serenity appears as the idiot grin of senility to some, but to others is radiant with energy and non-verbal eloquence. Or people who are content with their place and state in life, settled and fulfilled and at peace with themselves and their environment, quite often women like Lotte, Gretchen, Ottilie, Diotima, until some unsettled ("unbehaust") and unsettling men enter their lives. Or the serenity that comes from unselfconsciousness until vanity or curiosity effect a change that leads to self-consciousness and the loss of paradise: romantic literature is full of versions of the fall from grace.

Selig is an intimately related term, "blissful" in modern German, but it means self-sufficient and self-contained in earlier usage and is applied to gods, human emotions, and beautiful objects alike. (Makarie and her world).

The magic power of **Janus-faced music** belongs in this context, with its ability to cause states of mind from extreme agitation to serenity: "Which passions cannot music raise & quell" (John Dryden). So does the question of whether to resist the lure of gravity or give in to it, that is posed in much of "decadent" literature, works by Thomas Mann and Rilke among them.

"Stoic repose" with its related attitude of **Ergebenheit** (servitude, submissiveness) appears to be the sole association for **Joseph Goerres**. The first volume of his multi-volume study *Die christliche Mystik* has a chapter called "Starkmuth und Gelassenheit in jeder Art des Ungluecks" which tells the stories of women (!) who suffer gladly and vicariously, very much in the spirit of Genovefa as French legend and the German Volksbuch depict her.

Early on, that aspect of Gelassenheit that signaled acceptance of prevailing conditions was linked to **obedience**. And this becomes the corner stone of Luther's political beliefs. They were drawn from and confirmed by multitudes of Christian authorities from St. Paul to a semi-mystical tract of the late 14th century called "A German Theology" which he edited partially in 1516, two years later in its entirety.

All government, he taught, is divinely ordained. The ruler's legitimacy is derived not from the will of the people but from the grace of God who installed secular government to be his arm and instrument. More than 400 years later, in Hitler's Germany, the prominent Protestant theologian **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**, echoing Paul's Letter to the Romans and Luther's Catechism, reiterates the archaic doctrine in his Ethics: "Government is divinely ordained authority to exercise worldly dominion by divine right. Government is deputyship for God on earth. It can be understood only [as emanating] from above. It does not proceed from society, but orders society from above."

Luther believed in order more than he believed in justice and had no interest in destabilizing secular authority. On the contrary, by appointing the individual Protestant rulers heads of their regional churches, he made the Protestant Church a pillar of the state. If you have grievances, he taught, petition the government. If you are not heard or receive no redress, go home and go quietly about your business. Under no circumstances whatever do you have a right to rebel. If your government is good, praise the Lord for an undeserved gift. If it is bad, remember that you deserve worse than they can hand you. It is only in matters of faith (the right faith) that secular government has no authority and must be resisted if necessary.

Luther believed in government for the people, and never mind the of and by. Man was fallible, constantly tempted to abuse his free will, and had to be kept in line. Needless to say, regicide, including the assassination of even the most odious tyrant, was out of the question, because even in his villainy he was an arm of God. Stability headed the list of social priorities. It is hard to imagine now what shock waves rocked Europe when the **Puritans executed Charles Stuart** on January 30, 1649 after he had gotten himself into a needless (Churchill) conflict with Parliament. The Protestant German playwright **Gryphius** composed a tragedy (Carolus Stuardus) that raises Charles I to the level of a Christian stoic martyr, reflecting Charles' self-image as recorded in his final words: that he died a good Christian and a martyr to the people. Luther was convinced of the imminent second coming of Christ and wanted his people to concentrate on one thing alone: finding and keeping the right faith to escape eternal damnation. The 17th century English Puritans, by contrast, also certain that the millennium was at hand, proposed to prepare for it by doing everything within their power to return mind, body and the land to their original, pre-lapsarian state: hence their emphasis on education, medicine and agriculture.

Eschatological anxiety was one of the forces moving Luther. Horror of rebellion and fear of being branded a rebel himself was another. The reason is simple. In Christian lore it was rebellion that brought evil into the world. **Lucifer** who would not accept his place in the order of things became the original rebel in Judeo-Christian myth, his rebellion generating a momentum that caused the disobedience of **Adam and Eve** and the corruption of all creation. Jacob Boehme describes the fall of the "beautiful morning star," as he and the Old Testament call him, with great awe and genuine grief; it is a tumultuous upheaval at the dawn of time in a universe of pure energy, still devoid of matter.

But the violent act of disobedience that bears the name of **Lucifer** produced a reaction of equal magnitude whose name is **St. Michael**. In this instant, two principal protagonists are born: the rebel and the loyalist; the outlaw and the law enforcer; Achilles the aggressor, Hector the defender; the courtly knight on a quest, the feudal hero of the heroic epic; Prometheus and Ganymede as Goethe sees them. The types remain the same while standards of judgment change. Faust who will not recognize the limitations placed upon humans deserves hell in the Faustbook and in Marlowe, while he finds favor with Goethe's God for the very same reasons. It is he, Faust, not Mephisto, who lives by the spirit of Boehme's Lucifer.

But to Luther any rebel was a follower of Satan and himself a devil. This is how he inveighed against the rebellious peasants of his time who had ignored his passionate pleas for calm and order:

Let everyone who can do so, smite, slay and stab them, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing is more poisonous, injurious and devilish, than a rebel. ... If a prince or governor can punish them and does not, then he is guilty of all the murder and evil these brutes commit. ... The men in power may destroy them in good conscience, remembering that rebellion must not be tolerated, and that the destruction of the world is to be expected every hour.

<> This unconditional support of secular authority in secular matters reaffirmed ancient doctrine and set the tone for centuries to come. It appears variously as belief in the sanctity of the status quo, as unquestioning obedience, or as an excuse for acquiescence and apathy. Even **Kant**, the revolutionary philosopher of a revolutionary century, firmly upholds the conservative tradition although his reasoning is secular. He is clearly a friend of the American and French revolutions, yet he flatly and paradoxically denies the individual's right to rebel. **Goethe**, never a friend of the French Revolution, and **Schiller**, horrified by its excesses, gently redirected the focus of their pedagogical agenda from "citizen" to "person," Schiller in his *Aesthetic Letters*, Goethe in his *Wilhelm Meister*. The philosopher **Fichte** who defended the French Revolution in print as late as 1793 was promptly branded a Jacobin, accused of atheism (a catch-all charge in those days) and eventually dismissed from his chair in the University of Jena (1799). True, Faust's final vision of an ideal state looks very much like the young **United States**, of revolution born, but it is important to note that Faust's new land is wrested from the sea, not from the Crown.

In his drama of national liberation, **Wilhelm Tell**, composed in post-revolutionary Napoleonic Europe, Schiller seems to justify the assassination of a foreign tyrant. But even here he remains true to the Lutheran tradition that so obsessed and tormented this most political of writers, as it did generations before and after him. Luther permits one exception to his ban of tyrannicide: if the assassin is unmistakably chosen by God. The Old Testament story of **Samson** provides the model: in a critical moment the blind Samson is restored to superhuman strength, and he brings the temple down on himself and the foreigners who occupy the land and exploit the people. The circumstances surrounding **Tell's miraculous escape** from the governor's ship in a raging storm, requiring superhuman strength like Samson's, are usually ignored or considered unfortunate hyperbole. But they serve to make unmistakably clear that Tell has been ordained by Providence to assassinate the despot and thus help free his people from tyranny and foreign rule.

It is hard today to appreciate the soul-wrenching deliberations of the fictional, utterly non-political Tell, and of some quite real military officers, civil servants and clergy who participated (and some who couldn't in good conscience) in the failed attempt on Hitler's life on July 20, 1944. **Carl Friedrich Goerdeler**, the former Lord Mayor of Leipzig who had resigned in protest against the Third Reich's racial policies, now chancellor designate and executed for his role in the conspiracy, left notes revealing his agonized belief that Hitler's escape constituted God's own verdict condemning the plot to assassinate the dictator.

There had of course always been exceptions. Politically astute men and women had long thought that Luther's political pronouncements, including those pertaining to tyrannicide, needed revision. Dietrich **Bonhoeffer**, a member of the admirable **Bekennende Kirche** (witness bearing church), who eventually became one of the conspirators against Hitler and was executed shortly before war's end, wrote on the topic of "action" that now serves as a kind of preface to his **Ethics**: "Not in the flight of ideas / but only in action is freedom." Here, the German Protestant theologian sides with a thoroughly disillusioned and word weary academic, the German professor Heinrich Faust as he attempts to render the **Gospel according to John** in German. In the beginning was the Word, says John. In the beginning was Action, says Faust. Bonhoeffer writes from his prison cell: "If a lunatic driver races through the streets, I, the pastor on the scene, cannot be content just to console or bury the victims; I must interfere (dazwischenspringen) and stop him." The Allies dismissed the incident. Rising in the House of Commons a few weeks after the event Churchill termed it a war among Nazi dignitaries. He knew better. He and Anthony Eden had been informed by the German Resistance who pleaded to be recognized should they succeed. Bonhoeffer and the Bishop of Chichester, among many others, acted as intermediaries. The OSS' Allen Dulles, from his listening post in Switzerland, furnished the US Government with detailed reports, based in part on his direct contact with members of the conspiracy. But the Allies refused any promises. They were now obsessed with the notion of unconditional surrender, formulated at Casablanca. The war effort demanded the pretense that there was nothing redeeming in any German initiative. The New York Times, untypically muddleheaded, thought bomb planting worthy of gangsters and, echoing the uncompromising Martin Luther rather than the pragmatic Anglo-Saxon tradition, noted reproachfully that Germany's military elite had busied themselves for a whole year with plans "to capture or kill the Head of State and the Commander-in Chief."

Ignoring a long tradition of church sponsored civil obedience the East German citizens did not "go home quietly to mind their own business" once their petitions were denied. Show them how many you are, pleads the radical priest Roux in **Peter Weiss'** Marat/Sade. They showed them. They came back, ever more numerous, non-violent, and they succeeded stunningly. And, improbably, the German Protestant Church had been part of the solution, had finally (if ever so slowly and reluctantly, like wading through molasses, pestered and pushed by an impatient people) adopted a political voice. The Church resolved at last to identify with and participate in the struggle against intolerable conditions, and to oppose the rulers responsible for them. That, too, was a "Protestant Revolution." The question of **Zumutbarkeit** ("What will the government find acceptable?") got turned around to stand on its feet instead of its head and became a question of legitimacy: "Do We, the People, find this an acceptable government?"

After the failed uprising of 1953 the **East German regime** declared that it had lost faith in the people, and that the people must work hard to restore it. **Luther** would have applauded this breathtaking display of mandarin arrogance and political illiteracy. **Brecht** asked slyly at the time: "Why doesn't the government dismiss the people and elect another?" Some thirty-five years later Luther's paralyzing rules of conduct were quietly modified. Even **Edmund Burke** would have approved: "...a revolution will always be the very last resource of the thinking and the good." It was the last resort. The revolution of 1989 coincided with and overshadowed the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution. But the strategies employed now, lest things get out of hand, were those of **Mahatma Gandhi** and the other Martin Luther, **Martin Luther King**.

Select publications from the time in question, 1989-1991

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