

Friedrich-Martin Balzer

»And The Cock Crowed Again«

Essays on Political Ideology
and German Church History

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and German Church History**

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Foreword by Martin Rumscheidt, Halifax

Years ago, the American historian Sydney E. Ahlstrom wrote the following, highly insightful and hermeneutically decisive words: Each generation can only say that a different portion of the past is open for its examination, that its angle of vision is altered, and that new standards of explanation and relevance prevail. A new present requires a new past and the historian's responsibility for creating a meaningful past depends more on his [or her] interpretation of accepted historical knowledge than on his [or her] addition to the world's overflowing treasury of fact.¹

Friedrich-Martin Balzer's essays – in the present volume as in his other writings – not only argue strongly in support of Ahlstrom's dictum that a new present requires a new past but actually confirm it. But Balzer's altered angle of vision has its genesis elsewhere than Ahlstrom's: what the latter learned from his ceaseless and commendable reflection on the historian's craft, the former had imposed upon him – whether he wanted it or not – by the horrid reality of Hitler's Germany of which he, like this writer, was (is) a child. The *existential* reality of being confronted by a past that incriminates proves Ahlstrom right more powerfully even than the *intellectually* convincing and salutary conclusion of one who confronts the past in order to gain understanding through endeavoring to create a meaningful past. Balzer's work helps in shaping responsibility in and for history.

The »new present« of which Balzer speaks with passion is a present that has »repented« of its past. This is not a contradiction or refutation of Ahlstrom's conviction, it »flavors« it somewhat differently. While these essays do, indeed, add to the treasury of fact, they do so critical of the kind of historical research and interpretation that is satisfied with »telling how it was«. Instead, Balzer wants to »do« history so that we may have a new present for a changed future. What theologians like me refer to as »apocalyptic eschatology« is significantly present in

¹ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972. 3

his reflections: the perduring vision of our world transformed through the instrumentality of revolution which Balzer not only does *not* shun – in the horror typical of all who wish to keep things as they are because they sustain their power – but readily embraces as a genuine option in and for history. By his own admission, Balzer is no theologian; still, the vision of and the conviction that there will be a »new heaven and a new earth«, which are at the core of that eschatology, are palpably present in his writings. We are told that Erwin Eckert – with whom Balzer identifies himself and who influenced him deeply in numerous ways – could dream with an unbroken spirit »that one day ›the spirit and power of Christ‹ will determine life among the nations and peoples. This unshaken belief remains even with me in this dim environment [viz. the jail], and in spite of the fate which has befallen me exactly because of this belief in the will of God that He revealed in Christ. I will find strength in this vision of humankind united in solidarity and peace in my cell on Christmas Eve as I have found strength in it many times before.« (p. 41)

In a moving passage that has autobiographical character, Balzer quotes from a poem by the then twenty-two years old Jura Soyfer, a Jew who was murdered in Buchenwald. The poet's words ring with that vision of a humanity »fully alive«. (Irenaeus of Lyons, 130-202 ce)

»We were human beings once and will be human again one day when we completely recover from all this. But are we human today? No, we are not. All humanity has long been crushed. Let us not keep up the shallow appearance. If humans are to liberate themselves one day, there is only one way: to ask ourselves every hour if we are human, and to give ourselves the answer: No! We are merely the crudely designed sketch of a human being that still needs to be drawn, a poor prelude only to a great song. You call us humans! Hold back on that.« (p. 52)

The essays focus to a large extent on Erwin Eckert, a Christian pastor, a Communist, a German, a victim of injustice and more, all in one. The church defrocked him in 1931 and deprived him of his pension, citing the to this day ideologically (mis)interpreted »atheism« of Communism for that decision. The truth is much more that Eckert had spoken out against the National Socialists whom by that time a sizeable number of pastors had already joined. Eckert's witness to his

Lord Jesus Christ – many would dismiss it still as naïve or misguided – shows how a Communism, once freed of its party-hierarchy and rigid »new class« system, enriches a Christianity that intends to serve a humanity disfigured by the domination of the idols of this world's principalities and powers. Just as Eckert critiqued »the bourgeois pacifist circles that preach peace and reconciliation out of an outpouring of human kindness and sentimentality without supporting socialism« (p. 65), so he exposed the Socialism and Communism that leaves »the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short, [all who see life] from the perspective of those who suffer«² to their fate while making speeches that promise a new world order. In a personal affirmation of where his heart beats, Balzer reasserts what was true for Eckert.

»One thing is certain: the day will come when history is not to lose its meaning, and the belief in peace, justice, and keeping creation safe on earth shall reach its goal ... This may seem full of »pathos«. But pathos is the consequence of suffering from the fact that there is so little change, so little fundamental change, so slow a change. We all, and I as a member of the generation of »war children«, were given our lives and freedom in order to learn from the past and to prevent inhumanity, which does not come overnight and does not fall from the skies. In view of the things that have been possible there is no reason to opt for resigned withdrawal. Hope is essential to life in spite of everything. However, good intentions alone are not good enough, ... we need courage in order to translate with all our might into action what we have recognized as right.« (p. 118)

For Balzer that translation includes resolutely critiquing and, when the need arises, opposing those human institutions who have made self-preservation and self-advancement their mandate above everything else. Here Balzer gratefully acknowledges Dietrich Bonhoeffer's explorations on »the church for others«.

Like other historians who pursue the aim of creating a new past for a new present, Balzer chooses the essay for his medium of examina-

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972. 17

tion and communication. The essay seems to »fit« his commitment to combine historical research and personal testimony. I am reminded here of Fritz Stern of Columbia University in New York, whose own work as a historian is advanced in the essay format. Some years ago, Stern wrote:

»I find essays an attractive format. They allow for tentative explorations of new themes; they allow for a personal tone that larger studies tend to inhibit, though even in the latter the austere effort of »extinguishing the self, deemed imperative by some historians, has never been my goal or style. »Disciplining the self« might be a better dictum, awareness of the self a better guide ... I am drawn to studying earlier periods through individuals who are of intrinsic and representative importance. Of course there are »the broad, anonymous forces« that characterize the setting or structure of an age, but it is the interplay between these forces and actual people that allows us to recapture something of the spirit of an age. In this fashion one can hope to detect not only the rational political motives of particular actors, but perhaps something of their less conscious, more spontaneous responses as well.«³

Balzer's essays allow us glimpses and insights into his own life and responses as he lets us experience something of persons and periods of the very past that we need to see anew, with new eyes, in order to see our present in that same way: anew.

It is a privilege and a joy to be associated with a fellow-German, a *Mitmensch* and a colleague – particularly one who feels and expresses anger at the way things are – in the task of seeing with new eyes for the sake of God's deeply beloved creation, God's covenant-partners, the creatures God made – as we theologians put it – for the sake of the humanity no longer alienated from itself – as Socialists and Communists put it. And even though I do not share every interpretation and conclusion Friedrich-Martin Balzer presents in these essays, I am wholly at one with him in that »pathos« and »apocalyptic eschatology«. I would also have translated particular passages and words differently,

³ Fritz Stern, *Dreams and Illusions. The Drama of German History*; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987. 5-6

but I found the work of seeking to understand what moves so deeply in the essays rewarding, instructive, provoking.

The generation of those, who still had immediate and sustained contact with those who were at the very centre of the events that Balzer addresses in these pages will soon no longer be among us. For that reason it is good to have these essays to assist us and those who take over from us in creating a meaningful past for the task of working for change.

Martin Rumscheidt
Halifax, Nova Scotia
Labour Day (4. September) 2000