Dinler Tarihi Araştırmaları - III
(Sempozyum, 09-10 Haziran 2001, Ankara)

2000. YILINDA HİRİSTİYANLIK
(DÜNÜ, BÜGÜNÜ ve GELECEĞİ)

Ankara
2002
In the Year 2000, “Dominus Iesus”, a document of the Vatican led to some irritation in the Ecumenical movement because it stated that only the Orthodox and Oriental Churches as well as the Roman Catholic Church are true churches, the Protestant Churches, on the contrary, are not because they have no clergy in the sense of the Apostolic tradition, namely that each, priest and bishop is, through an uninterrupted line of ordinations, connected with one of the Apostles. The document, herewith, defends the classical position of the Roman Catholic Church on this issue and thus repeats its stance in a long discussion about the authentic structure of the Church.

This paper cannot develop the discussion in details but it aims at giving the main results and facts as concerns (1.) Jesus and the Bible, (2.) the situation of the Christian Church from the end of the first century onwards, (3.) the influence of monastic life on the clergy, (4.) Protestantism, and (5.) a final remark in the perspective of Phenomenology of Religion.

1. Jesus and the Bible

The debate referred to in the introduction came to the conclusion that the Bible offers two different types of Christian communities: one which is found in some letters of St. Paul and seems to have a rather democratic community in mind, with different functions (charismas) but no visible hierarchical structure; and a second type where primitive hierarchical elements can be found, such as St. Peter speaking for all of the Apostles (Acts 15, 7 ff) or functions like those of elderly responsibles (presbyteroi) and supervisors (episkopoi). In the Gospels of the New women. Among all these. St. Peter was specially addressed by Jesus, according to Matthew 16, 18 where he was said to be the one on whom the Church will be built.

*Uluslararası Dinler Tarihi Derneği (IHAR) Başkanı, Hannover Üniversitesi / Almanya
This last sentence is seen, by many specialists today, as an expression of a later development with regard to the first communities found in the letters of St. Paul.

The open question, therefore, is whether the first Christian communities had followed different models of internal structure and what this had to do with Jesus' original intentions as concerns the Church.

It is obvious that whatever answer it might be given to this question it has direct consequences for the type of Church that will follow. Consequently, the answer is both, a result of academic research and of political relevance in the Ecumenical debate.

Heinrich Schlier, a Protestant New Testament scholar who converted to Catholicism because of his findings, some 40 years ago, has shown that St. Peter's type of Christian community became stronger and stronger in the Church during the time when the New Testament was written. It was thus no surprise that by the end of the first century C.E. we have the Church organized in a hierarchical way.

2. The Situation of the Christian Church from the End of the First Century Onwards

The Church that we find described in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch as well as in Polycarp's writing is, without any doubt, structured in a hierarchical order in which deacons, priests, and bishops do exist, are clearly recognizable as such and have Church leading functions. Women have special functions as widows and deaconesses but are not mentioned in higher positions in mainstream Christian Churches. In the third century, a certain number of bishops form a province guided by a patriarch, a kind of bishop in chief, so that the hierarchical structure is even extended beyond the rank of the bishop to his higher position which is seen as the leading function for the bishops. It is, therefore, perhaps not surprising that, after the breakdown of the Roman Empire in the West, the Bishop of Rome claimed to be the leader of Christianity as a whole so that all patriarchs should accept his authority as that of the representative of the Christian Church. No need to say that this development was not accepted by all and led to splits within Christianity of which those between Orient and Occident as a consequence of the first councils in the 4th-6th century C.E. and those between the Greek Orthodox Churches and the Latin Western
Church in 1054 C.E. were the most important ones. All these Churches have one more element in common, besides their hierarchical structures, namely a strong influence of monastic life on the clergy.

3. The Influence of Monastic Life on the Clergy

It is noteworthy that Christianity when it became a mass movement developed a more specific way of total devotion to God through monastic life and chastity as a renunciation of being married. And need is to add that it became a rule that only unmarried men could become bishops so that more and more former monks were found as bishops and thus won great importance in formulating the Christian ideals of pious life.

In the Oriental and Orthodox Churches, priests could and still can be married if they marry before ordination; once ordained, however, they are not allowed to marry.

In the Latin Western Church several attempts were made to extend the law for bishops to all priests. As a general rule, it was formulated in the Middle Ages but has effectively been established only in more recent times when confronted with Protestantism.

4. Protestantism

Most of the Churches of the Reformation period rejected hierarchy and monastic chastity for the clergy. They practiced a proto-democratic form of Christian community and have clergymen who are charged with certain service functions but are not different from ordinary Christians with whom they share the general priesthood of all Christians (cf. 1 Petr. 2, 9), without any distinctive kind of special ordination. In this line of being nothing else but ordinary believers is also that they are allowed to be married whatever their functions in the community might be, clergymen or bishops, and more recently as both, men and women.

Though emphasis was laid upon rather democratic forms of participation, history shows that soon, new forms, of rulership replaced more democratic ones. This was the case in the Lutheran tradition by giving a decisive role to regional kings and aristocratic leaders (Landesfürsten). It was so in the Calvinist community where the City Council of Geneva became the decisive body. Obviously, democracy had problems to be maintained as such in the Christian Church. This observation leads to a final and more general remark.
5. A Final Remark in the Perspective of Phenomenology of Religion

The development from more democratic structures towards hierarchical structures is not only typical of the New Testament and Reformation periods, it seems to be so even beyond the Christian frame. Similar developments can be noticed in Early monastic Buddhism as well as in other religions and in political movements such as Communism, to give only one example.

If so, we are confronted with a contradictory situation because, on the one side, equality is not only a dream but can be put in practice; yet, on the other side, this practice seems to be effective for a short while only and is then followed by new hierarchies of power, law and order. This deserves our attention and should encourage more case studies in the frame of Phenomenology of Religion. It would thus not only enlarge our knowledge in the field of the History of Religions but would, moreover, be a valid contribution to better understanding human behaviour and thus helping to develop theories in Anthropology as well.

Suggested Reading


