

Religion and Radicalism Conference  
Herrnhut, Saxony, Germany  
22-24 March, 2013

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***“Christian Communism” Today:  
The Experience of the Basisgemeinde Wulfshagenerhütten***

The Basisgemeinde Wulfshagenerhütten is a community of 50 people living and working together on a property in the village of Wulfshagenerhütten, not far from Kiel in northern Germany. A further 10 people live as community in Prenzlauer Berg, a suburb of Berlin. We are a group of people, married and single, who have committed ourselves life-long to each other in the community. Although the community grew out of the Lutheran Gemeinde in Kornwestheim, near Stuttgart in southern Germany, we do not belong to an organized church, rather seeing ourselves as an attempt to be church as it can be imagined in the texts of the New Testament. We practice common ownership of goods and the income from our work is held collectively. Since moving from Australia I have been a member of the community since 2002. This year we are looking back at the forty years since the beginning of the Basisgemeinde.

The origins of the Basisgemeinde go back to the 1960's. In this time of social upheaval Western societies were deeply shaken by the critique of existing power structures and power relations in all of their manifestations - politics, economics, military, culture, sexuality, education, health, and religion and so on, AND by the reactionary attempt to crush or downplay this criticism.

The churches of Germany were at the same time an object of critique as well as a place where critique was practiced. The pastor of the Johannesgemeinde in Kornwestheim – Gerhard Weber – was part of this movement of renewal within the Lutheran Church in Baden-Württemberg. As member of a group of younger pastors looking for renewal in the Lutheran church – Gerhard Weber, and with him members of his church and others, looked for new ways to express their faith.

The first members of the Basisgemeinde put it this way:<sup>1</sup>

*“We were tired of faith seminars and policy discussions with their never-ending talk; we were tired of the church and its leaders, and of making lists of everything that they*

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations from the Basisgemeinde and Gerhard Weber are taken from internal documents of the Basisgemeinde Wulfshagenerhütten. The translation from the German is mine.

*were doing wrong; we were tired of waiting for a reform from above. We wanted to get serious, and so we wanted to start being church."*

This wish "to get serious" crystallized in 1975. As it was put at the time:

*"In 1975 the vision of living together in justice began to take shape. In 1975 the first residential communities were created in several houses in Kornwestheim, with the aim to create an environment in which young and old, 'sick' and 'healthy', singles, families and children could live together. What emerged here was an attempt to be church as seen in the New Testament in the footsteps of Jesus: without top and bottom; without private property; without the subordination of women and children; and without the exclusion of the poor and the vulnerable."*

## **The Critique of Religion and Society**

The move towards a practical realization of "being church" was accompanied by a critique of religion, which simultaneously attempted to expose how religion functioned in the churches as a support for capitalistic society - religion in the service of power; *and* to propose a concretely lived faith inspired by the Bible. The first move was to establish that the *Religionskritik* as practiced by Marx, Freud und so on, was not something new but was actually the deepest concern of the Bible. As Gerhard Weber argued:

*The criticism of religion was certainly not an invention of Sigmund Freud. This criticism of religion is as old as the church itself: because that's always been the worst danger to Christianity: religion. Again and again, the freedom of a Christian is threatened by religion. Again and again, the religious rubble has overshadowed the power of Christianity. Again and again, Christianity must prevail against religion. But this critique of religion is as old as the Bible itself, it begins in the Old Testament and ends - never.*

In this context, religion was understood as that which supported the existing order und structure of society, particularly as these came to ideological expression in the churches.

Gerhard Weber again:

*What is religion? Religion is:*

- *Distraction from the oppression*
- *Glorification of the cycle from birth to death and the annual cycle in nature*
- *The guarantee that everything will remain as it is*
- *The celebration of the status quo*
- *The statement that my life has meaning just as it is*
- *The statement that everything should remain the same*
- *Bandaging the wounds and not seeking a cure for their causes.*

Religion is that which obscures our dependency on, and our lack of freedom in, this system of injustice. Religion is that which enables us to avert our gaze from the realities of our world, and to do this with a “good conscience” (in inverted commas). “Religion”, in the theology of Gerhard Weber, is something very different to “faith”. Gerhard Weber again:

*“The function of religion is to compensate for the deficits of life as it is experienced, and to satisfy in the imagination those needs which in real life are unmet. But religion is much more than mere private wish-fulfillment; it has a public, social function: religion is designed to satisfy desires **in the imagination**, so that this does not have to happen in the real world.”*

In his theology, Weber took aim at those institutions in German society of the 1970’s which for him embodied the maintenance of the existing order. These largely corresponded to the institutions which Louis Althusser named as the Ideological State Apparatuses: religion, education, law, politics, trade unions, media, culture and the family.<sup>2</sup> Two quotes from Weber illustrate this: the first a critique of the church:

*We need to see the bitter truth that more and more of our contemporaries view the church as a service company for religious needs. The church has its justification in society according to how many services it produces for that society. Church then is a bureaucratic organization like many other; a charity; a business catering for religious needs - which operates according to the market principles of supply and demand.*

Now a description of how religion functions to support private ownership, competition, the nuclear family and violence:

*Why is it that not just the powerful, but many other people as well become aggressive and angry when Christians practice the criticism of religion? To understand this, we must realize that the gods were honored in ancient societies not only by those in power, but by all the people. Each and every citizen in our society is raised and has implanted in his conscience the religious consecration of the cornerstones of our society - ownership, competition, the nuclear family and violence.*

In the theology of Gerhard Weber, religion functioned to provide cover for the institutions and structures of injustice and violence in German society and the world. The critique of religion and its role in society was accompanied by a critique of this society. Only the practice of a non-religious faith could enable a clarifying look at the conditions of our world, and support the preparedness to live an alternative to this.

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<sup>2</sup> Althusser, L. (1970), "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", 135–39.

## **The radical (re)imagination of some New Testament texts**

I would now like to introduce four texts from the New Testament, which have been significant to the development of the Basisgemeinde, and which are important to the social, political and personal self-understanding of the members Gemeinde. I am not interested here in an exegesis of these texts, but rather how they function in the community, and how they shape and encourage a radical vision of Christian life.

### ***The “Sermon on the Mount”***

From the beginnings of the Basisgemeinde the “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew’s Gospel, chapters 5-7) was understood to be the programmatic text for the community. In this the Basisgemeinde was not new. The Sermon on the Mount was (re)imagined as a program or charter for the new way of living which Jesus had lived and proclaimed. This new way of living – the Kingdom of God – was understood to be a reality that was to take shape on the earth. This new way of living was the practice of justice and peace among the members of the community. The visibility and viability of this new way of living would then entice others to commit themselves to this alternative.

### ***“Come follow me...”***

When the Sermon on the Mount is understood as a program for a new way of life on earth, how does this new way begin? Here the “call to discipleship” texts are important:

*And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother who were in their boat, mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him. (Mark 1:16-20)*

Here is an image which can capture the imagination: four hardworking men, used to the hard realities of life. They are involved in their daily occupation with their father and his hired hands. Jesus comes along, calls them to follow him and immediately – without considering or asking leave – they down tools and leave their family, their village, their means of support behind them, heading off, with Jesus, into the unknown.

It was understood early on in the Gemeinde that in order to begin something new in this world, some things would have to be left behind. In the beginning of the Gemeinde it was not clear what shape the community would take, but what soon became clear was that the ability to let go of things that were near-and-dear, was absolutely necessary in order to create space for a radical form of living. The things that hindered or prevented this move into a radical alternative soon became clear. For example: family expectations and obligations; employment and career plans; house-ownership and mortgage, etc. Mark’s “call

to discipleship” text is just the sort of text which can be read to justify a cut with the existing situation and allow a move into something new.

***“They had everything in common...”***

The “call to discipleship” allowed members of the Gemeinde to leave behind those forms of life which were understood as being at odds with the demands of justice in the world. But in order to begin something new, another sort of text was required. This we find in the Acts of the Apostles:

*Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common... There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made to each as any had need. (Acts 4:32-35)*

This classic text of so-called “primitive Christian Communism” is a central text in the self-understanding of the Basisgemeinde. The critique of religion, which for Gerhard Weber involved a social, economic and political critique, meant that faith was constituted by a simultaneous movement away from the gods of money and violence, to a way of life in which unity between people lay at the center of a lived faith. This conviction led to the rejection of private ownership and the move towards a face-to-face community of sharing. This sharing of goods is not confined to the level of material possessions and financial income, but is understood to involve the whole person. The individual brings him or herself into the community – along with his or her assets (or debts!) – and contributes how he or she can. Over the years experience has shown that the person brings not only their positive attributes to the Gemeinde, but also their weaknesses, failings and idiosyncrasies. These belong, too, to the common life of the Gemeinde. A quote from Gerhard Weber points in this direction:

*In the 'communism of Christ' we are invited to share all our possessions, both our material goods, as well as our intellectual goods (ideas, knowledge, natural talents, etc.). Where this happens, we enter into the justice of God's economy ... No one must be in want. A new quality of life arises.*

As has often been mentioned in the analysis of the communist credentials of the early church as depicted in the Acts of the Apostles texts, this “first” experiment in “Christian Communism” was a communism of consumption, but not of production. As Karl Kautsky argued in *The Foundations of Christianity*:

*The communism to which primitive Christianity aspired, in accord with the conditions of its period, was a communism of the means of consumption, a communism of sharing them and eating them in common. ... The communalism it aimed at could not*

*go beyond common consumption of the victuals thus obtained, a communism of housekeeping, a family community.*<sup>3</sup>

The question which has been posed is: what happened after the members of this first church had shared all their possessions with each other? What did they have to live on? Whatever the answer may have been to this question, it is relatively clear that the move out of the usual system of employment and ownership required an answer to that most fundamental of questions: what do we have to live on?

The question of financial income was important from the beginnings of the community. The experience of unemployment in Kornwestheim (a rail worker city); the tension between the demands of work life and desire for more commitment to the community; and the desire to integrate needy people into the life of the developing community led to the vision of a work which would support the community financially, which would allow people without work and with different abilities to be integrated into a meaningful work process, and all this as an alternative to the capitalist system which generates poverty and violence.

After forty years, this has led to a community in which the means of production and the generated income are shared between the members of the community; where no-one has a personal bank account or personal assets, and where our manufacture of wooden play equipment for kindergarten and school children has begun to support us financially. In the last five years we have begun to employ people to work in our workshop, which has led to new questions: for example: How much money do we want to make with our business? What does it mean to be an employer? Are we returning to the system that we wanted to leave in the first place?

### ***The Body of Christ...***

The last text to be discussed is not a single text but the image of the Christian community as the "Body of Christ", particularly as this image appears in the letters of Paul. Here is an excerpt from Paul's letter to the Romans:

*For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. (Rom 12:4-5)*

And Paul to the Corinthians:

*For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. (1 Cor 12:12)*

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Kautsky (1908) *Der Ursprung des Christentums*. ("The Foundations of Christianity"). Published in English: Russell and Russell, 1953. Translated: Henry F. Mins.

It is clear that capitalism has thrived upon a culture which – ideologically at least – has held the individual to be the fundamental social unit. When I lived in Australia there was an advertising slogan for a financial institution which ran: "National Mutual tailored superannuation plans: For the most important person in the world . . . you". The ideology of individualism, clearly expressed in this slogan, is deeply rooted in public discourse, legislation, education – indeed in our individual psychological makeup. It stands in the way of radical political, economic and social change. When the self-fulfillment of the individual is the measure of all things, we have religion in another form.

The image of the Christian community as a body - indeed the “Body *of Christ*” - has the potential to breakthrough through the ideology of individualism. Here we can understand community as a location where we bring our political bodies into the body politic. But it is more than that. The trick here is not just to understand the church community as a tightly-knit collection of individuals, but to give the collective body enough weight that it breaks through the ideology of individualism without creating a system which crushes its members.

This image – the Body of Christ – whatever Paul may have meant by it, has been appropriated by the Basisgemeinde and is experienced in the daily life of the community.

A further aspect of the “Body of Christ” in the theology of Gerhard Weber could be called a materialist turn. Whereas Slavoj Žižek imagines the “Holy Spirit” as the “personality” of the Christian community, as the “community of believers itself”<sup>4</sup>, Gerhard Weber imagined the collective of the Christian community as the resurrected body of Christ itself. For Weber Christ is resurrected in and as the community of believers:

*The risen body of Christ - this is the Christian community... Everything that Jesus says in the stories of the New Testament says and does, says and does the Christ present in the Christian community. When the discipleship stories say, that everything depends on that the call that goes out from Jesus, that means, in plain language, it all comes down to the call to discipleship posed by Christ present concrete community. Nowhere but in a concrete community encounters us the risen Christ - and this also means: nowhere else than by the actual people who are in a concrete community, do we encounter this risen Christ.*

This is a move away from a spiritualizing interpretation of the resurrection of Jesus, towards a materiality for which the Christian community stands. In the actual people who make up this actual “body” is the actual social, economic and political work to take place.

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What will become of the Basisgemeinde is an open question. The social conditions of the 1970s and early 80s which allowed some people to break away from the usual ways of living – study, job, marriage, career, and so on – and to experiment with other social, economic and political forms have changed. The current crisis of capitalism is not driving young people

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<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek 2009, p.32.

(or older people for that matter) to look for alternatives, but to seek their own security in an insecure system. The average age in the community is 50 years and we are not getting younger. Will there be another generation?

From the beginnings the Basisgemeinde was seen as an **experiment** in the practice of the Gospels. Whatever happens, the next phase of this experiment – the next 40 years, as it were, will be extremely interesting.

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