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Something Rotten in Denmark: Atheism in the Pulpit

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Recent developments in Denmark demonstrate the gravity of the situation. Pastor Thorkild Grosboll of the village of Taarbaek ignited a firestorm in that Scandinavian nation by declaring, "I do not believe in a [heavenly] God, in the afterlife, in the resurrection, in the Virgin Mary." Actually, by the time Grosboll's case came to international attention, he had gone on to deny virtually every major Christian doctrine. "I'm a provocateur," Grosboll acknowledged, in what can only be described as a pastoral understatement.

Denmark considers itself a Christian nation, since King Harald the Bluetooth simply declared Danes to be Christians in the year 960. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark [ECLD] is the official state church, and 85 percent of Danes are registered as church members. Nevertheless, like most state churches, the ELCD has been in decline for decades. The Danes have produced a secular culture that fits comfortably within the liberal Scandinavian tradition. According to recent statistics, less than 6 percent of Danes attend church services.

Of course, with pastors like Thorkild Grosboll, who needs secularists? In his recent book, *En Sten i Skoen* [A Stone in the Shoe], Pastor Grosboll simply states, "We do not believe in God or in God as Creator of Heaven and earth, or as Almighty, consequently nor in Jesus as his Son or the virginity of his mother, nor in his Second Coming and the resurrection from the dead." Otherwise, presumably, Grosboll is a stalwart believer? There is nothing of the Gospel left for him to deny.

This pastor has ransacked the Apostles Creed, systematically denying every major Christian doctrine and declaring himself, in essence, an atheist. He claims to believe in "something divine," but not in God. He does, however, desire to remain a pastor. The International Herald Tribune caught the essence of the situation in a sarcastic headline: "In Denmark, A Man of God, but Without that 'God' Part." That sums it up nicely.

Just in case anyone missed his heresy, Pastor Grosboll explained that "Jesus was a nice guy, who figured out what man wanted." Further, "He embodied what he believed was necessary to upgrade the human being."

As might be expected, the pastor's public denial of the faith caused an uproar. Fellow pastors and theologians demanded Grosboll's firing and removal from the ministry. His bishop, Rev. Lise-Lotte Rebel of Elsinore, acted swiftly, putting the pastor on a seven-day suspension. The bishop investigated the situation, talked to Rev. Grosboll, and then reinstated him, promising to keep tabs on the atheist pastor. Grosboll was reinstated, the bishop explained, because he had apologized for "having raised doubts about the Danish church's confession of faith" and for dealing with doctrinal issues in a reckless manner. Nevertheless, both the pastor and the bishop insist that Grosboll's questioning of doctrine could be appropriate, if conducted in an "objective and proper manner." The pastor just "pushed things too far."

Here we face the reality of liberal Christianity. The historic creeds and confessions of the church require belief in the

central doctrines of Christianity—the very doctrines that Pastor Grosboll denies. His church remains officially committed to those doctrines, even as liberal theologians and pastors have undermined their truthfulness. Pastor Grosboll just “pushed things too far” by actually denying doctrines such as the incarnation and the resurrection. And he certainly pushed things into the public by denying belief in God. But the truth is that Pastor Grosboll was probably just stating publicly what many of his peers actually believe—or disbelieve.

A survey published in *Kristelig Dagbladet*, the Danish religious newspaper, reported that 90 percent of Grosboll’s fellow pastors say that pastors must believe in God. Just turn that around, and you will see that one out of every ten Danish pastors evidently believes that pastors do not need to believe in God. I repeat: With pastors like these, who needs atheists?

And, we might add, with church leaders like the Bishop of Elsinore, the situation is not likely to improve. Pastor Grosboll’s reinstatement is an insult to Christians all over the world. Christian believers in other parts of the world are putting their lives in danger for the sake of the Gospel while Pastor Grosboll and Bishop Rebel plan how to undermine the faith in an “objective and proper manner.”

What about the church members in Taarbaek? Were they outraged upon learning of their pastor’s unbelief? Evidently not. Amazingly enough, the parish council voted unanimously to demand that their pastor continue, whether he believes in God or not. One church member explained, “Danese, we don’t talk too much about God, and Christianity is not a big force here.” Well, we should easily come to that conclusion. Church members held a mass rally to demand their pastor back—and back he came.

This has not satisfied many ELCD pastors and theologians. Over 150 pastors released a joint statement calling for Pastor Grosboll’s removal. “The situation is unsustainable,” the pastors declared, calling upon the bishop to reopen the case. They have no power to force the matter.

The case of Pastor Thorkild Grosboll reveals the virulent bacterium of unbelief that infects so much of institutional Christianity today. In far too many pulpits, pastors with convictions very similar to Thorkild Grosboll undermine Christianity’s central doctrines. Others just avoid touching any doctrines at all. The Christian gospel is reduced to a set of harmless platitudes and secular maxims.

At the same time, far too many church officials show the kind of limp leadership seen in Bishop Rebel. Serious theological error—even outright heresy and atheism—is treated as a matter of mere procedure. Pastor Grosboll did not apologize for his heresy and beg the church’s forgiveness for his unbelief. He just admitted to coloring outside the lines of a “proper” denial of the faith.

When the atheists come to take possession of Taarbaek’s village church, Pastor Grosboll should have the honor of presenting them the keys. Bishop Rebel should be there, too, to make certain that the final demise of Christianity in the village is observed “in the objective and proper manner.” This pastor and his bishop are selling the atheists rope.

