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In the Company of Fellow Nonbelievers: Liberal Theology Abandons the Faith

Thursday, July 16, 2009

“It takes one to know one,” quipped historian Eugene Genovese, then an atheist and Marxist. He was referring to liberal Protestant theologians, whom he believed to be closet atheists. As Genovese observed, “When I read much Protestant theology and religious history today, I have the warm feeling that I am in the company of fellow nonbelievers.”

Genovese’s comment rang prophetic when Gerd Lüdemann, a prominent German theologian recently declared, “I no longer describe myself as a Christian.” Currently professor of New Testament and director of the Institute of Early Christian Studies at Göttingen University in Germany, Lüdemann has provoked the faithful and denied essential Christian doctrines for many years.

With amazing directness, Lüdemann has denied the resurrection of Jesus, the virgin birth, and eventually the totality of the Gospel. Claiming to practice theology as a “scientific discipline,” Lüdemann (who taught for several years at the Vanderbilt Divinity School) has sought to debunk or discredit the Bible as an authoritative source for Christian theology.

In his influential book *Heretics* (1995), Lüdemann sought to demonstrate that the heretics were right all along, and that the Christian church had conjured a supernatural Jesus to further its own cause. In *What Really Happened to Jesus* (1995) he argued that “We can no longer take the statements about the resurrection of Jesus literally.” Lest anyone miss his point, Lüdemann continued, “So let us say quite specifically: *the tomb of Jesus was not empty but full, and his body did not disappear; but rotted away.*”

Nevertheless, Lüdemann argued that Christianity could be rescued from its naïve supernaturalism by focusing on the moral teachings of Jesus. Later, Lüdemann gave an interview to the German magazine *Evangelische Kommentare* in which he stated that the Bible’s portrayal of Jesus is a “fairy-tale world which we cannot enter.”

In that same interview he denied the sinlessness of Jesus, explaining that, if Jesus was truly human, “we must grant that he was neither sinless or without error.” The church, he argued, must give up its faith in the “risen Lord” and settle for Jesus as a mere human being, but one from which much can be learned.

In later writings Lüdemann argued that Jesus was the product of a rape, and stated clearly that he could no longer “take my stand on the Apostles’ Creed” or any other historic confession of faith. He continued, however, to teach as an official member of the theology faculty—a post which requires the certification of the Lutheran church in Germany.

Lüdemann’s theological search and destroy mission eventually ran him into a blind alley. As he told the Swiss Protestant news agency *Reformierter Pressedienst*, he has come to a new realization. “A Christian is someone who prays to Christ and believes in what is promised by Christian doctrine. So I asked myself: ‘Do I pray to Jesus? do I pray to the God of the Bible?’ And I don’t do that. Quite the reverse.”

Having come face-to-face with his unbelief, Lüdemann has now turned his guns on church bureaucrats and liberal theologians. Many church officials, Lüdemann claims, no longer believe in the creeds, but simply “interpret” the words into meaninglessness. Liberal theologians, he asserts, try to reformulate Christian doctrine into something they can believe, and still claim to be Christians. He now describes liberal theology as “contemptible.”

Looking back on the whole project of liberal theology, Lüdemann offered an amazing reflection: “I don’t think Christians know what they mean when they proclaim Jesus as Lord of the world. That is a massive claim. If you took that seriously, you would probably have to be a fundamentalist. If you can’t be a fundamentalist, then you should give up Christianity for the sake of honesty.”

Professor Lüdemann reveals much about the true state of modern liberal theology. One core doctrine after another has fallen by liberal denial—all in the name of salvaging the faith in the modern age. The game is now reaching its end stage. Having denied virtually every essential doctrine, the liberals are holding an empty bag. As Lüdemann suggests, they should give up their claim on Christianity for the sake of honesty.

Professor Lüdemann is now a formidable foe of liberal theology, but he is also one of its victims. He said that he plans to pick up his teaching career from a “post-Christian” perspective, now that he knows “what I am and what I am not.” Should his liberal colleagues attempt to remove him from the theology faculty as a “post-Christian,” Lüdemann may respond with Genovese’s quip: “It takes one to know one.”

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