

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1974)
Heft: 1698

Artikel: Thoughts on christmas
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689441>

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A POET ON TRIAL IN BASLE

The inquisition never reached Switzerland but the Basle Penal Court was recently called to try a case with strong Middle Ages flavour.

A young poet, Frank Geerk, 28, was accused of publishing a blasphemous poem in *Poesi, Zeitschrift für Literatur*, a review which he edits and hands out to a selected public of 500 subscribers, and another in *Prothese*, a similar publication. The two poems, which we translate below, are "The Pastoral Epistle" and "Juergen Bartsch celebrates Christmas". They were picked out by the irate editor of a free advertiser with a circulation of 250,000 in the Basle area. This editor printed Geerk's two incriminating poems calling on his readers to bring the poet to court for insulting the Christian faith and flaunting the freedom of belief. As it happened, there was no response from the readers and it was a Christian Socialist National Councillor, Mr. Albin Breitenmoser, who instituted proceedings against the young poet.

It should be noted that the churches did not react at all to the case, and that the editor of the advertiser was already well known for his religious conservatism. He had previously sued the writer Werner Duggelin for the unconventional graphics of a poster advertising a play by Horvath in a Basle theatre.

The trial came to a surprising conclusion. Geerk was acquitted but ordered to pay costs of 750 francs, and the editor was almost charged with having initiated an unwarranted case. The attorney asked for a fine of 300 francs, but the judge opted for acquittal and said that, the whole matter being a "question of interpretation," the editor could consider himself lucky to live in the 20th century. Had the affair been brought to the court in the Middle Ages, he might have been burnt at the stake!

Geerk's lawyers stressed that their client's writings had only been aimed at a very small readership and that the real culprit was the editor of the advertiser who had published these works for a very large public.

As for the accused, he said that he had never wanted to hurt Christian beliefs. Being a convinced Christian himself, he had on the contrary wished to shake Christians away from their materialism. His "Pastoral Epistle" was an attack on the modern man's inordinate attachment to the motor car while his "Juergen Bartsch" (named after a German convicted of child murder) was inspired by the scene of a crowd of Christmas shoppers in Basle stepping on a picture, which was lying on the pavement, of a starving Biafran child.

The poem "Pastoral Epistle" runs something like this:

Should you return, Lord Jesus,
We would tie you to the bridge of a
motorway without ceremony.
We would scrub your body to whiteness
with parsley,

We would hoot till your ears came to
burst,

We would cut off your ears and your
hairs for the benefit of relic
collectors.

Sure of being excused, we will pump your
blood in our engine and take leave
with humble gratitude.

Our translation of "Juergen Bartsch
celebrates Christmas" would be as
follows:

He said to himself: today a child will be
born — when so many of them are
already running around sadly.

That is why he caught a lost child by the
neck, roughly,

And in the lovely scent of a candle
covered him with kisses and peeled
him like a hard-boiled egg.

He had the feeling that it was Christmas
as he cut him up like a Christmas
turkey,

Just like Juergen Bartsch when he said to
the Judge:

My motives were love for my fellow men,
believe me, and I was happier than
you, Sir.

One knew then that he was telling the
truth.

The distinguished French paper *Le Monde* took the story up and asked a Protestant poet, Pastor Kurt Marti, what he thought of these pieces.

"These are not Geerk's best poems," said Pastor Marti, "but they take the Gospel's 'Ecce Homo' seriously in reducing the historical distance separating us from Christ. The first text actualises the crucifixion by a symbol — the bridge on the motorway — which is far more significant of our society than the cross. We should not forget that Jesus was also accused of blasphemy, and this should prevent us, Christians, from ever starting proceedings of this kind."

THOUGHTS ON CHRISTMAS

by a Non-Theologian

To me, the simple story of the Birth of Christ is one of the basic facts of my Faith. To me, one either believes or does not. In the first case the person would be a Christian and in the second a non-Christian. This of course is not to imply that the latter could not be a good person, nor for that matter that the former would necessarily be a good person. But the fact remains that Christ's birth must be believed for anyone to be a Christian, and that, by his birth, the Son of God came to this Earth.

There is so much "fog" emanating from learned theologians these days that to the ordinary layman it is difficult to know where it is all leading. Personally I believe that all this questioning of the narratives in the Book can only undermine the faith of those who perhaps have not such strong beliefs as some others. If they see, read and hear people of the Church and theological scholars questioning almost every accepted concept, what is the average person to think. Does he or she keep a steadfast faith as written in the Bible or quest some alternative answers. I think that quite a number of people give up the struggle and just lead ordinary decent lives, but exclude the Church (no matter of what denomination) altogether, except for the occasional visit on festival occasions and suchlike and even then they go for the wrong reasons, they like the music, get an emotional uplift and so on. It is strange really that churches are normally, even in these days, packed with people at the midnight services on Christmas Eve. I am convinced in my own mind that the poor

attendances at the normal Sunday Services can be placed to quite a large degree at the door of the questioners and their failure to provide any answers.

I am not advocating a blind faith in everything the Church says, but rather a faith in the original concepts; these have lasted for some 1,974 years and cannot be cast lightly aside.

I am a firm believer in the fact that everyone is an individual and should firmly hold on to individual ideas of the Birth of Christ himself and also of God. God to me is not just "something out there", he is a firm, but loving Father, one to whom I can take my troubles in the sure knowledge that he will hear me and help me. So if I look on God as my Heavenly Father, does it not follow that I can look on Christ as my Heavenly Brother?

As I see it, the message of Christmas is that God saw fit to send his Son on to this Earth that men might be saved from their own bedevilment, that they might have a Faith to which they could cling in spite of all the trials and tribulations of the world. Many, over the centuries, have tried to stamp out this faith, others have abused the love of God and carried out shameful deeds in His name, but still the simple faith remains.

Let all men recover and rediscover this faith, love one another and not try to solve all the ills of this world without God's help, I am sure they are not likely to succeed.

A very Happy and Joyous
Christmas to Everyone.

H.J.T.