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Gebhard Frei (1905-1967)

Great Swiss

Bringing light into the dark shadows

THERE was a saying about him: "Even if he met the devil in person, he would manage to say a good word about him!"

Not every Swiss would follow him that far. But so it was with Pestalozzi 200 years ago, when he brought the light of sound reason into the field of education after he had discovered it in his own heart.

Now, this light of reason has become so strong that people are blinded by it, education is disorientated and everywhere one hears people complain, "We do not know any more what to believe and what to do. Where are we going to?"

Strong lights produce strong shadows. Gebhard Frei stood in the light and dared to look into the depth of the shadows in his own heart. He spent his life examining the dark and sinister facts of life, and giving people the hope and courage to cope with it.

He exercised a great influence far over the boundaries of Switzerland. From his writings, his talks and especially from his personality there radiated such a loving kindness and a clarity of mind that nearly everybody felt protected, understood and accepted, even if he talked about magic and sinister activities and the dark shadows of the human heart.

He stood in the light and everything in him was alive with

the message: "Have no fear!"

Like Jean Gebser and C.G. Jung, he faced the dark clouds of our times, stepped right into them and came back with a radiant smile, sometimes even with a laugh that came right from his very depth.

Born in Lichtensteig (SG) on March 24, 1905, he entered the Missionary Society of Bethlehem in Immensee (SZ) in 1926, was ordained a priest in 1931 and graduated as doctor of philosophy in Innsbruck in 1933.

Instead of being sent to China as a missionary, which was his great wish, he was appointed to join the team of professors in the seminary to train the missionaries of the future, first in Wolhusen (LU) then in Schöneck, near Beckenried (NW), where he remained an inspiring teacher until he died on October 27, 1967.

The Teacher

The seminary was small, unassuming and without a great name of a university, and the number of students was rather small. I was one of them, and often felt sorry that we had so little recognition in the world of academics and of science. But what teachers we were privileged to enjoy in Professor Frei and with his colleagues!

He brought the bone-dry

system of scholastic philosophy to life as if it were a matter of the heart. It seemed to quiver in his fingertips, and his deep understanding of literature, the arts and culture made us see and grasp the signs of our times, its problems and the great questions to be answered.

His open mind and warmth of heart encouraged us to see and face ourselves, together with our shadows.

He abhorred the common picture of a missionary, who went around casing for "souls" to be converted as if all others but themselves were "pagans". He wanted us to see and to appreciate the great things God had worked among all nations, and to understand the deep impact the world religions had and still exercised within the human heart.

He introduced comparative religion, Yoga and Zen Buddhism, magic rituals and their meaning into his schedule, and opened to us the insight into the great mythologies, the dreams and visions of past cultures through the psychology of Jung. And that was in the 1940s, when it was still tabu.

"Look at the facts, never mind the theories, and see things as they really are", he used to say, and encouraged us to develop a critical mind and an open heart together with a deep reverence

for all religions and loyalty for our own church.

For over 30 years, together with his colleagues, he influenced and trained the missionaries of the future who are now working in Japan, Taiwan, Zimbabwe and South America.

The Man of Science

His quick and curious mind was not satisfied with things that others found. He began research on things shunned by the scientists, the secrets of the human heart. It was the facts that fascinated him and the deep concern for the crisis in which the Christian churches found themselves that drove him on.

He clearly saw that scientific progress and perfection in technology had intoxicated people and had made them immune and insensitive to the message of the gospel. This left the human heart an easy prey to all kind of fears and sinister irrationalities, of superstition and occultism.

He often mentioned an old saying of Friedrich Rückert: *Faith finding shut its proper way climbs as superstition through the window.*

If the gods are chased away They reappear as ghosts and shadow.

So he made the lonely journey to meet and examine the faith

dressed up as superstition and to look into the face of ghosts and shadows.

He became an expert in all questions of parapsychology, of spiritualistic and magic phenomena and of the depth-psychology of Freud, Adler and Jung.

He examined spooks in far-off farms, apparitions in sinister circles, experiments in laboratories of scientists, and everywhere he found pointers towards the mystical tradition of the church, the Christian faith and the secret and discreet workings of divine reality.

Far from being credulous, he kept collecting and examining facts. He went a long way to reach an intelligent answer, to call the sinister "ghost" by its true name and to break its spell and its destructive power.

Not many dared to follow him. He even earned the ridicule and scorn of some renowned theologians who abhorred "his hobby in dabbling with sinister powers and his fishing in dark, troubled waters".

Some laughed him off as a fringe theologian and many of his friends and colleagues felt sorry for him, tried to excuse and to protect him, but he remained undisturbed.

With his small briefcase one saw him go to the bus station, then to the boat to Brunnen or Lucerne. From there he went by train wherever his presence was needed, be it to conduct an exorcism, to relieve a troubled farmer from his worries, to give advice to study groups, conduct seminars in Yoga and Zen meditation or to give a lecture in

the Goetheanum in Dornach to anthroposophs or theosophs.

Most people wondered why this little, stout priest with his friendly smile had such a thorough knowledge even of their most guarded secrets, and why he always succeeded in throwing the light of sound reason into the darkness of their minds.

Of course, most did not know of his deep life of prayer and meditation and his constant union with God, but one could sense it, though he seldom talked about it. It was too natural for him.

Professor Frei was one of the

The Priest

To be a priest was by far his most important activity and the main aspect of his personality.

Differences of race or creed he quickly saw, accepted and tried to understand, and so he became, from the very beginning of his work, a great advocate for the ecumenical movement. It did not simply mean for him co-operation with the Protestants. His view was much larger. He aimed at an ecumenism with all world religions.

In all his publications – there were over 450 – from scientific papers, forewords for books, down to simple introductions in

By Fr Paul Bossard

first theologians to recognise and appreciate the work of Carl Gustav Jung, and became his friend. They were a challenge to each other. Jung presented the facts of his research and urged the theologian to rethink his position and Frei prompted the psychologist to formulate his findings in such a way that misunderstandings were greatly reduced.

When the Dominican theologian Fr Victor White introduced Jung's psychology to the churches in England through his book "God and the Unconscious", Jung wrote the foreword and Frei, in an appendix, gave a well thought out appreciation and interpretation of Jung's work.

The three of them shared the criticisms, which would have been too much for one to take.

popular magazines into the new way of thinking, there was never anything that could offend a religious conviction. On the contrary, they all aimed at bringing them together. But he never tried to play down the differences in thinking, since faith was for him mainly a matter of the heart. God is too great a mystery and too sacred to be looked at from only one point of view.

Gebhard Frei's correspondence was enormous. The postman at the seminary used to say that he gave him more work than all other together. Over 30,000 letters are on record.

There was little time to be spent in the peaceful surroundings of the seminary. He assisted parish priests in the confessional and in the pulpit, conducted retreats and conferences

with youth groups and societies.

His friends were worried that he worked too much, and nobody could understand why he seldom seemed to be tired. Perhaps his mind was too quick and too strong that it tended to overrule the body until it could not follow any more.

He had his limitations like all do, but they were slightly different from ours. And from his deep religious life he drew a strength full of inspiration of which we have little knowledge.

Like many other students – since none of the professors had a secretary – I, too, offered him my help as a typist, and I remember well his charismatic intuition. More than once it happened that I struggled with a problem and wished I could ask him but did not dare because he was too busy.

Suddenly there was a knock at my door. Professor Frei came in with some papers and asked whether he could have five copies as it was very urgent. Hammering away on my machine in order to assist him, I found in them the answer to my problem.

I told him once, and asked him why he knew. He laughed and said: "I did not!" And then he added after a moment's silence: "There are things we cannot understand. There is a higher economy that guides us. This is a fact. Be grateful and make no theories about it. They only spoil it."

It is a fact that his influence is still alive, and I come across it constantly here in England. As I enjoyed his guidance over 35 years ago, I still enjoy it 15 years after his death – and try to make no theories about it.