

The early history of the Evangelical Alliance and of its advocacy for religious freedom

Thomas Schirmacher¹

Die Geschichte der Evangelischen Allianz im Zeitalter des Liberalismus (1846-1879)

Gerhard Lindemann

Theologie: Forschung und Wissenschaft 24, Lit: Münster, 2011, 1064 pp., € 129.90.

This monumental work on „The History of the Evangelical Alliance in the Age of Liberalism“ treats (1) the actual history, (2) the role played by key personalities, and (3) the main focus of the Alliance’s work (especially freedom of religion and conscience, weeks of prayer, mission, publications). Lindemann regards the Alliance from its outset as the first organized form of ecumenism, as the sole true ecumenical organization which emerged from the revival in the 19th century (15). He criticizes the fact that historical depictions of modern ecumenism often begin very late and pass over the Alliance as well as a number of its earlier leading representatives as forerunners of the unity of Christians (21). On the whole, Lindemann writes from a friendly yet critical distance. As his work is unlikely to be translated into English due to its sheer volume, I would like to highlight the new insights it presents into the early engagement of the Alliance for religious freedom (in part. 141-151, 205-321, 592-645, 773-811, 858, 868-913). Never before has this been presented in such detail. Of special interest are the insights gained from the files of the ‘British Foreign and Commonwealth Office.’

Lindemann points out that the anti-Catholic tendencies and activities in Great Britain in which the Alliance has some of its roots in Great Britain were not mainly based on dogmatic differences but on its advocacy of freedom of religion and freedom of conscience, which represented the complete opposite of the Ultramontanist Catholic Church that decidedly rejected religious freedom. Consistent with this position the Alliance also raised its voice for persecuted Catholics in Protestant countries from its founding and did not support anti-Catholic governments in their actions (205).

Lindemann demonstrates that fighting against religious persecution and advocacy for religious freedom was the one outstanding topic of the Evangelical Alliance.

¹ Prof. Dr. Thomas Schirmacher, Professor for the Sociology of Religion, Timisoara, Romania, Director of IIRF, Bonn, Germany

Advocacy for the religiously persecuted were in the forefront from 1849 to 1858, as the Alliance took advantage of the fact that foreign policy became a topic of the press and of the emerging parliament in Britain (207).

An early example of advocacy was the case of the Italian Signor Giacinto Achilli (1803-1893), who converted from Catholicism to Protestantism, and who for that reason was incarcerated for life by the Roman Inquisition. In a diplomatic tug of war, which lasted almost one year and included the participation of British and French foreign ministers, the media, their newspapers, and numerous delegations, a trick by the French secured his freedom so that he could leave Rome and be handed over to England (208-223).

Matters such as these are repeatedly presented by Lindemann in minute detail. If these matters were known about at all, they had up to this point never been traced out in their individual steps. They document just how well organized, networked with governments and media, and ahead of its time this aspect of the Evangelical Alliance was.

Lindemann writes: “In their efforts for those disadvantaged due to reasons of belief, the Alliance clearly profited from increasing pluralism, above all the pluralism of British society and of the development of a broader media audience which allowed the exertion of influence by ‘pressure groups’ on the foreign policy decision process. It was soon noticed that in certain cases joint action beyond national borders appeared to promise more success, such as in the initial example of the Italian Giacinto Achilli where it was able to lead to joint governmental action. At the same time, reference to English public opinion was able to either deter states from the repression of people of other religions, end such repression, or, at least, to reduce it. It is not only through using new methods in this undertaking that the Evangelical Alliance had its part in the modernization process of Protestantism in the 19th century” (943).

For instance, the British Alliance used a position paper sent to the Prussian king opposing persecution of Baptists to achieve the return of the Baptist leader Johann Gerhard Oncken to Berlin, who had earlier been driven out (235-237). The extent of denominational generosity is also shown by the fact that there was a campaign brought to the Sultan not only for converts of Islam to Protestantism but also for the Greek Orthodox Church (300). The cause of the Nestorians was supported in Iran (610-613).

After the execution of a convert in 1853, the Alliance, in cooperation with the Turkish Alliance, activated its contacts in a considerable number of European governments until finally in 1856 Sultan Abdülmecid I – surely in connection with the complicated politics between the Ottoman Empire and western powers – issued an edict granting greater freedoms to Protestants and abolishing the death penalty for

conversion (300-319). In 1874-1875 a further large campaign was led by a delegation of the Alliance to the Turkish foreign minister, and by diplomats even all the way up to the Sultan. However, their impact has been disputed (879-902). Lindemann also reports that the czar's suspension of cases against pastors in the Baltic states was "the responsibility of the push forward by the Alliance in London" (800).

The audiences which the Alliance had before the Prussian king, for instance in 1855 in Cologne or in 1857 within the framework of the Alliance's Berlin Conference before Friedrich Wilhelm IV (286f), always revolved around freedom of religion in Germany. The same applies for conversations the secretary of the Alliance held with the German Emperor Kaiser Wilhelm I and the Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in 1875 (919).

A deputation of the Alliance before Emperor Franz Joseph I at the Hofburg and subsequent conversations with the prime minister and the minister for education and the arts in 1879 led to noticeable relief for Protestants, and in 1880 even to their legal recognition as churches as well as almost incidentally to relief for free churches in Vienna (913).

One has to consider that all this happened at a time when traditional churches were still very far from giving up their status as state churches, not to mention allowing religious freedom for all and still less demanding it. When religious freedom was demanded at that time, it was mainly by Jews, religious minorities, and atheists, not, however, from very religious representatives of the prevailing religion. The contribution the Evangelical Alliance made to religious freedom in Germany has up to this time not been acknowledged anywhere. The 1853 Homburg Conference for Religious Freedom was a landmark in the history of the Alliance and for tolerance in Germany and Europe (263-267). The central result was the rejection of any use of ecclesiastical force against separatists and the rejection of utilizing any state power by churches against others (266) as a milestone in the development of the rights of religious freedom. Furthermore, this deliberately counted not only for Christians but rather for all religions.

In 1861 a French pastor advanced a new thesis which gained more and more acceptance in the Alliance, namely that "religious freedom guarantees state order and its inherent peace" (592). Oppression of individual religious freedom, on the other hand, feeds revolution and strife and divests the state of its God-given foundation! Lindemann summarizes: "With its commitment to religious freedom, the Alliance, the Anglo-American wing of which did not content itself with mere tolerance but saw public confession of faith as a fundamental right, has also in the establishment of freedoms in countries concerned rendered a notable service and made no insignificant contribution to the development of a civil society in Europe." (943).

[See a more extensive review at www.thomasschirmmacher.net/2012/05/]