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A Reshaping of Old World Experiences in the New in Henry Melchior Muhlenberg's Ministry

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When Henry Melchior Muhlenberg arrived in North America he brought with him experiences which shaped his ministry in the New World. Muhlenberg has recorded many of these experiences in his diaries¹ and letters.² To some extent we can see in these documents how the New World reshaped these experiences. We can also see some of these experiences in the light of supplementary documents which so far have not been available and/or have remained unpublished.

Experiences in Grosshennersdorf

With this variety of sources in mind we can turn first of all to the experiences which Muhlenberg brought with him while serving as pastor in his first ministerial charge in Grosshennersdorf in Upper Lusatia in Germany (1739–1741). Although G.A. Francke³ in Halle had originally designated Muhlenberg to serve as missionary in East India, for a number of reasons this plan did not materialize. Consequently, Francke urged Muhlenberg to accept a call to Grosshennersdorf as deacon and inspector.⁴ As inspector there Muhlenberg had oversight over four departments or divisions of an educational institution. The institution had facilities for the care of disabled persons and a school. The school had a department for the education of the children of the nobility, another for poor boys and another for orphans.

In June 1992 I received a photocopy of a document located in the archives in Grosshennersdorf which consists of the minutes of a meeting held in Grosshennersdorf on 29 January 1741. Essentially, these minutes agree with what Muhlenberg has reported regarding his responsibilities as administrator and

teacher in the divisions of the school. The minutes supplement Muhlenberg's report in two relatively minor respects. They make it explicit that he had oversight over approximately seven faculty and staff members. They also show that he had the responsibility of seeing that the curriculum in each of the school's divisions was followed. This experience in administration and teaching is reflected in Muhlenberg's concern with providing school buildings in the congregations which had called him where instruction of young people could take place.⁵

But Muhlenberg was not only called as inspector of the school in Grosshennersdorf but also as deacon. Here deacon does not refer to being a member of a church council or to one commissioned to carry out eleemosynary duties. The designation of deacon refers to one who is assistant or associate pastor. Whose assistant or associate was Muhlenberg? Who was the senior pastor? In his diary Muhlenberg does not tell us.

The minutes of the previously mentioned 29 January 1741 meeting, however, provide an answer to our question. These minutes contain a listing of those present at that meeting. The first person listed as present is *Hoch fryherrl. gnaedige Herrschaft*, a reference to Baroness Henriette Sophie von Gersdorf,⁶ head of the Grosshennersdorf civil and religious community. The second person listed as present is Johann Lucas Siese, *pastor loci*,⁷ and the third name is that of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, deacon. So Johann Lucas Siese was the senior pastor and Muhlenberg was his assistant or associate. At this point it seems useless to speculate why Muhlenberg does not refer to Siese as his senior pastor in his diaries or identify his relationship to him.

On Arrival in Philadelphia

In his diary Muhlenberg has described the loneliness and helplessness he felt on his arrival in Philadelphia on 25 November 1742. With poignant brevity he noted in his diary, "I was a stranger in Philadelphia and at first did not know which way to turn."⁸ *Fremdling* is the German word translated here as "stranger". *Fremdling* conveys the feeling not only of being lonely and helpless but also of being an alien, someone who does not only not belong here but has no choice in being where he/she is. Muhlenberg was an immigrant who had left behind

his mother, three sisters and two brothers in Einbeck in the electorate of Hannover in northern Germany.⁹ He had parted from them to minister to scattered Lutherans in North America and to gather them into congregations in the diaspora.

On arrival in Philadelphia Muhlenberg said he did not know which way to turn. In one sense this is an accurate description of his situation. Someone had to show him the way to New Hannover where one of the three congregations which had called him was located. In another sense, the statement does not reflect the preparation which had been made so Muhlenberg would know where to turn on arrival in Philadelphia. In the letter he reported, "Am selben Tage dem 25 November miethete gleich eine Stube in dem Barclayischen Haus upon the second street in the sign of the Bibel..."¹⁰ At the time of Muhlenberg's arrival the Barclay House was located at the corner of Second and Mulberry Streets. I suspect that while Muhlenberg was in London, England, on his way to North America, someone told him where to stay on arrival in Philadelphia. "Under the sign of the Bible" in the Barclay House there would not be the boozing, carousing and cursing Muhlenberg found so objectionable during his later stays at inns while travelling in southeastern Pennsylvania and Jersey.

Questions Concerning Muhlenberg's Competence

Friedrich Michael Ziegenhagen¹¹ and G.A. Francke were the two persons primarily responsible for Muhlenberg's presence in British North America. Nevertheless, it is difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile Ziegenhagen's initial negative assessment of Muhlenberg's competence as pastor with his later recommendations of him to the three Pennsylvania congregations which had called him. While on his way from Grosshennersdorf to North America Muhlenberg stopped over in London, England, and stayed with Ziegenhagen as his guest. There Muhlenberg was effusive in his praise of Ziegenhagen's capacity to interpret Scripture in a striking way. Ziegenhagen, however, was less than enthusiastic about Muhlenberg's capacity to articulate his thoughts in an orderly and comprehensible fashion. He had grave misgivings concerning Muhlenberg's potential as a leader of the congregations which had called him. This discouraging assessment of Muhlenberg is contained in a letter

Ziegenhagen wrote to Francke while Muhlenberg was Ziegenhagen's guest. Written on 27 April 1742, this letter has not been included in the *Korrespondenz*. A part of this letter has been reproduced very recently in the *Lutheran Quarterly* in the original and in translation.¹² Because of the devastating evaluation of Muhlenberg's competence as pastor, the translation of the letter as it appeared in the *Lutheran Quarterly* (with a few editorial changes) is given below:

The day before yesterday in the afternoon Muhlenberg preached in the chapel [St. James] on 1 John 5:4-5. He knew of it a fortnight in advance. I heard him, but became despondent about it. I doubt whether Your Reverence has ever heard a presentation by him. It is with genuine pain that I have to inform you that I could understand almost nothing of the whole sermon because it was deficient in clarity, exposition and coherence from beginning to end. I cannot recall any experience like it. He is not only feeble but also totally incapable of communicating a clear idea of a subject to a person. Therefore, I am deeply concerned that all our hope and expenses will have been in vain because conditions in Pennsylvania will be much too hard for him.

Less than a month after writing this critical letter to Francke, Ziegenhagen wrote two letters of recommendation on behalf of Muhlenberg to the three congregations which had called him as their pastor.¹³ Both letters consist almost exclusively of admonitions to the congregations to receive Muhlenberg as their rightly called pastor and teacher who is to carry out among them the responsibilities associated with his office. The qualifications Muhlenberg has for discharging his responsibilities as pastor of the congregations are passed over in silence. This silence probably means grudging acceptance of what was now irrevocable: Muhlenberg's call and his acceptance of it to be the pastor of the three southeastern Pennsylvania congregations.

Ziegenhagen had shared his misgivings about Muhlenberg's competence as pastor with Francke, as was noted above. Whether or not a portion of Francke's letter to Muhlenberg on 23 June 1744¹⁴ is a reflection of Ziegenhagen's misgivings concerning the latter's pastoral competence cannot be established on the basis of available data. In any event, in a portion of this June letter Francke gave an extended and frank admonition to Muhlenberg regarding presentation of public discourse and sermons. Francke took cognizance of Muhlenberg's

gift to speak extemporaneously without much meditation and preparation. Personal acquaintances of Muhlenberg in Halle, so Francke said, supported him in admonishing Muhlenberg to be thorough in meditation and preparation of public discourse. As an aside it may be noted here that the absence of any sermon manuscripts in Muhlenberg's literary legacy tacitly supports the need for Francke's admonition. Outlines of sermons he preached occur frequently in Muhlenberg's diaries. References to periods of meditation in preparation for preaching are also present. However, no written text of a complete sermon is extant.

So when Muhlenberg arrived in Philadelphia on 25 November 1742 the two men who were mainly responsible for his coming to North America, Friedrich Michael Ziegenhagen and G.A. Francke, had reservations about his competence as a pastor and teacher.

Muhlenberg Rightly Called and Ordained

Notwithstanding Ziegenhagen's negative appraisal and Francke's admonition, on arrival in Philadelphia Muhlenberg came as one who had been rightly called and ordained to the office of pastor and teacher by duly constituted ecclesiastical authority. Some who came to southeastern Pennsylvania made that claim without being able to support it convincingly. Shortly after arrival in Philadelphia Muhlenberg challenged the authenticity of their claim. Most notable among those whom Muhlenberg challenged was Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700–1760), the founder of the Renewed Unity of the Brethren, now known as the Moravian Church. Muhlenberg challenged Zinzendorf's claim with extraordinary—and unbecoming—ferocity. This sharp opposition is apparent, among other things, in the frequency with which Muhlenberg has recited or referred to his confrontation with Zinzendorf.¹⁵ Aware of the challenge which the pietism of Zinzendorf and the Renewed Unity of the Brethren presented to that of Halle, Francke in all likelihood dispatched Muhlenberg to counter Zinzendorf's infiltration of Lutheran congregations.¹⁶ Muhlenberg was ultimately successful in beating back Zinzendorf's challenge because he had in his possession documents unambiguously demonstrating that he was a rightly called and ordained minister of the Lutheran Church sent to serve the three Pennsylvania Lutheran congregations.

In his autobiographical reminiscences Muhlenberg recalled his examination on 12 August 1739 by members of the Leipzig Consistory. Several days later, he said, he was ordained to the preaching office.¹⁷ In his reminiscences, however, he failed to reveal a number of fairly important historical facts related to his ordination. For example, he did not give the date of his ordination. He also failed to give the names of all those who had signed his ordination certificate. To establish these facts we have to turn to a source other than Muhlenberg's diary and correspondence. The editor of Muhlenberg's autobiography, W. Germann, said he was unable to say anything more specific concerning Muhlenberg's examination and ordination because the files, if they existed, were not available to him.¹⁸ In the intervening hundred plus years, Muhlenberg's ordination certificate has turned up and is now among the holdings of the Krauth Memorial Library of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. This certificate tells us that Muhlenberg was ordained in Leipzig on 24 August 1739. Four persons signed the ordination certificate: Andreas Wagner, Gottfried Lange, Salomon Deyling and Christian Frider[ich] Boerner. Wagner was the director of the Leipzig Consistory (1732-40), Lange was a lawyer and mayor of Leipzig and probably a member of the Leipzig Consistory, and Deyling was senior pastor of St. Nikolai Church in Leipzig and superintendent; only Boerner remains totally unknown.¹⁹

In what church in Leipzig was Muhlenberg ordained? The answer to that question has come to us by a circuitous route. Recently the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, has become a companion synod of the Lutheran Church in Saxony. In view of this relationship the Secretary of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod, Gilbert Furst, made a visit to that church and included in his visit a call at the office of the St. Nikolai Church in Leipzig where Salomon Deyling had been the senior pastor. Upon Furst's inquiry concerning the church in which Muhlenberg had been ordained, the person in charge turned to the record book for ordinations between 1734-1755. The record book yielded the following information (in translation):

In the year 1739, on Monday, 24 August, Mr. Heinrich Melchior Mühlenberger, born in Einbeck in Hannoverian lands, called as a deacon to Grosshennersdorf in Upper Lusatia, was ordained by Superintendent D. Salomon Deyling.²⁰

Thus we learn not only that Muhlenberg was ordained in St. Nikolai Church but also that the chief officiant at the ordination was Superintendent and Senior Pastor at St. Nikolai, Salomon Deyling.

Conclusion

Our discussion yields a number of insights as we evaluate the work and influence of Muhlenberg on his arrival in North America.

(1) Ziegenhagen and Francke's criticisms make it necessary for us to reevaluate references to Muhlenberg such as "patriarch", "eagle of the wilderness", and the like. Such references are illustrative of evaluations caught up in the backwaters of an idealism represented most prominently in the nineteenth century by Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) in his *Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History* (1841).

(2) Through continuing research it is possible to fill gaps in or supplement our information concerning the nature and work of Muhlenberg, thus enabling us to complete and/or revise our estimate of his failures and accomplishments.

(3) In a time when religious life in colonial Pennsylvania bordered on being chaotic, the possession of documentary evidence of having an ecclesiastically approved call and ordination proved to be invaluable in attaining the goal Muhlenberg had in mind as he sought to bring Lutherans together in congregations.

Notes

- 1 Theodore G. Tappert and John W. Doberstein (eds. and trans.), *The Journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1942–1958). Reprint by the Lutheran Historical Society of Eastern Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, and Whipporwill Publications, Evansville, Indiana, 1982, including a supplement in volume 2: Helmut T. Lehmann and John W. Kleiner (eds. and trans.), "Travel Diary of Henry [Melchior] Muhlenberg May 1–26, 1772 and July 20 - August 17, 1773," pp. 773–808. Hereinafter cited as *Journals*.
- 2 Kurt Aland (ed.), *Die Korrespondenz Heinrich Melchior Mühlenbergs*, Vol. 1 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1986). Hereinafter cited as *Korrespondenz*.
- 3 Gotthilf August Francke (1 April 1696 - 2 September 1769), only son of August Hermann Francke (1663–1727), was Director of the Halle Institutions (1727–1769) at the time when he recruited and sent Muhlenberg

to North America. He was also professor of theology in the Friedrichs University in Halle, pastor of Our Lady's Church and inspector of the Saale diocese. For more details concerning G.A. Francke who has languished in the shadow of his father, see Johann Georg Knapp, *Denkmal der schuldigen Hochachtung und Liebe gestiftet dem weiland wuerdigen Hochwuerdigen und Hochgelarten Herrn D. Gotthilf August Francken* (Halle: Buchhandlung des Waissenhauses, 1770). Bound with this volume is *Dessselb[igen] Herrn Consistorial-raths, D. Gotthilf August Franckens Lebenslauf und Verzeichnis der Schriften unsers sel[igen] Herrn Consistorialraths [G.A. Francke]*.

- 4 *Journals* 1:4.
- 5 On Muhlenberg's concern for education, see Charles Lewis Maurer, *Early Lutheran Education in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: Dorrance & Company, 1932).
- 6 The baroness owned the Grosshennersdorf estate from 1717–1741. She was an aunt of Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf. In 1741 circumstances compelled the baroness to sell her estate. For more details concerning ecclesiastical affairs in Grosshennersdorf, see W. Germann (ed.), *Heinrich Melchior Mühlenberg, Patriarch der Lutherischen Kirche Nordamerika's: Selbstbiographie, 1711–1743*, pp. 202–205. Hereinafter cited as *Selbstbiographie*.
- 7 Muhlenberg refers to Siese for the first and only time in a letter written on 7 May 1742, five months after he has left Grosshennersdorf. *Korrespondenz* 22, 23, n. 11.
- 8 *Journals* 1:65.
- 9 *Selbstbiographie* 184.
- 10 *Korrespondenz* 1:40.
- 11 Friedrich Michael Ziegenhagen (1694–1776) became pastor in Hannover following completion of his theological studies in Halle and Jena. Following the death of Anton Wilhelm Boehm he was appointed as his successor in 1722 and assumed his office as Court Preacher in the German Court Chapel in London, England. For more than fifty years he acted as middleman between Halle and the missionaries in India and the pastors in North America.
- 12 Karl-Otto Strohmidel, "Henry Melchior Muhlenberg's European Heritage," *Lutheran Quarterly* 6/1 (Spring 1992) 13 and 30, n. 41.
- 13 *Korrespondenz* 1:24–26, 26–29.
- 14 *Korrespondenz* 1:139–143.
- 15 *Journals* 1:74–82; *Korrespondenz* 1:49–55, 65–68. W.J. Mann, B.M. Schmucker and W. Germann (eds.), *Nachrichten von den vereinigten Deutschen Evangelisch-Lutherischen Gemeinen in Nord-America, absonderlich in Pennsylvanien*, Vol. 1 (Allentown, PA: Brobst, Diehl & Co., 1886) 33, n. 19, describes the differences in theological outlook between Muhlenberg and Zinzendorf.
- 16 In a letter from Grosshennersdorf to Francke, dated 8 November 1741, Muhlenberg observes that he has been informed of Zinzendorf's pres-

ence with his retinue of twenty persons in Pennsylvania. He acknowledges this presence as presenting a formidable challenge to him. Zinzen-dorf had left in the fall of 1741 for North America and returned early in 1743. *Korrespondenz* 1:11; 12, n. 7.

17 *Journals* 1:5.

18 *Selbstbiographie* 202.

19 For the information concerning Wagner, Lange and Deyling, see Christian Gotthelf Fix, *Abriss der Chursaechsischen Kirchen- und Consistorien-Verfassung...*, I/2 (Chemnitz, 1795), 3f.—Professor Helmar Junghans, Theological Faculty of the University of Leipzig, has kindly provided this bibliographical reference.

20 This information was certified 10 March 1992 by Pastor Brüsckke, pastor emeritus at St. Nikolai Church in Leipzig. The photocopy of this certification is in the Lutheran Archives Center in Philadelphia.