

A Final Note

By Paul Roberts

Editor

BUT did the Harmonists practice euthanasia?" the reader may insist on knowing. The answer is a few flatly say they didn't, Reinert says they may have, and she and others say more research is needed.

Reinert based her view on a newly discovered Harmonist paper to suggest a new interpretation of one aspect of Harmonist life. She showed no malice, and stated on page 309 (page 82 of the original), "Extensive research after discovery of the document so far did not result in any further information which confirms that euthanasia was practiced." This is why I chose to place a question mark at the end of the article's title. Her critics have been more strident in their denunciations. Arndt, in one letter, charged the magazine with libel and slander. Hilda Kring, in a letter in late May, insisted her view was "based NOT on interpretation, but on translation."

But translation — any attempt to understand the written word — almost always requires interpretation. Assuming that George Rapp wrote the document in question, everyone agrees that the author had little formal education and did not rely on textbook German; intended meanings in many of his written sermons and in his correspondence are notoriously difficult to unravel.

The first objection to Reinert's article came from James R. Whalen of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, who wrote to me that the key passage of Reinert's translation should actually read "our families...have to die a slow death." Whalen insisted the problem lay in the phrase "*ohne dass*," which he considered an old conjunction meaning "except." He said Reinert, however, had used the phrase as a preposition, which produced "a negation in the sentence which the conjunction does not: 'do not have to' vs. 'have to.'" Whalen also believed his translation to be correct because of "the grammar of the sentence and from the further context, particularly the phrase '*wo ihr dagegen*' — 'in contrast to you.'"

Reinert responded in a February 10 letter to Whalen that varying interpretations of the text are possible but that it was not fair to call hers

incorrect: "[Y]ou insist that in the given context '*ohne dass*' has to be understood as a conjunction, as it was sometimes used in the 16th and 17th century." But Reinert noted that Rapp was schooled in the second half of the 18th century. Also her interpretation was "based on a wider context than the phrase '*wo ihr dagegen*' expresses."

She has further added that she recognized "*ohne*" as a preposition meaning "without," which she says is in agreement with reference books and current understanding of 18th century German. But she said that in a translation, "except" may also be used to avoid awkward English, so she translated accordingly. Doing so, according to Reinert, requires the negative meaning of "*ohne*" to be expressed in the verb phrase, so "without our families still living together" becomes "except that our families do not live together anymore."

I think it appropriate to note that Arndt, who is recognized by all to be the central authority on the Harmonists and an expert in reading the German of the age, did not quarrel with Reinert's translation, although he did not specifically address it.

Seeking other opinions, I contacted an Archivist at the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem who has experience reading the German of the day. I supplied Dr. Vernon Nelson and his associate, Dr. Lothar Madeheim, with a photocopy of the original German document, from the archives at Old Economy. I asked them to make a translation, then to compare theirs with Reinert's. (I mailed only the translation, not the full article, in a separate envelope.) They were not told the context of the translation. I wished to see how they would translate the language — or even if they could — without any other knowledge of the issue.

Nelson called April 21 and, according to a summary of the conversation I wrote at the time, said that he and Madeheim were having difficulty with the translation. He then asked for further information — the reasons for my request — so I told him the whole story. About the key sentence in the article, regarding "do not have to die a slow death," he said that he and Madeheim were split: "He puts the 'not' in, and I don't." He then added that it might be impossible to give an accurate translation without further research and comparisons to other writings by Rapp.

Knowing the context of the issue, Nelson wrote on May 2:

It is very difficult to translate a passage out of context, where we do not have the ability to look at similar uses of phrases, words, etc., in other places. Also, the copy you sent is not as clear as it should be. Whether this is a matter of the copying process or the condition of the original I cannot say. Letters like "o," "e," and "r" begin to look the same, because the lines become too thick....

Dr. Lothar Madeheim, who worked on this matter, does not believe that the passage supports euthanasia. To "die a slower death" might not refer to physical

death at all. It could be metaphorical. However, it is impossible to interpret metaphorical language without knowing a great deal about the author and the groups referred to....A person should really know German rather well and also the groups referred to before trying to sort out the meaning of this passage.

In a follow-up call May 23 Nelson apologized for not being able to give an easy answer, saying too much interpretation was involved for a definitive translation, based on the information he had. My summary shows he and Madeheim still disagreed about the key sentence. I questioned him about "*ohne dass*," outlining the opinions about its proper use held by James Whalen and Reinert. He said, "You can definitely look at it either way. Dr. Madeheim has a view similar to the second one you've described." That was Reinert's.

Nelson said more work was needed to solve the mystery. He said the author's use of the phrase should be tracked through several documents, to establish a consistent intended meaning. "The best approach," he concluded, "is for scholars to go up to Ambridge and look at the documents themselves."

The other key area of conflict involves the herb *Gratiola Virginica*. Swetnam and Kring say the herb has been used as a pain reliever for centuries and that it would not have been used for euthanasia because the death induced would have been grisly. They cite experiments reported in 1893, some 60 years after the Harmonists compiled their list of herbs and flowers that Reinert cites. Again, no definitive answer about the uses of the herb appears possible at this time. And once again, that was the purpose of the question mark: "The Harmonists and Euthanasia?" ■