CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MEASURES TAKEN AGAINST THE SUICIDE MURDERS IN GERMANY

It was not only in Denmark that the religious basis for the suicide murders had captured the attention of the government and the public. In Prussia the role of the clerical preparation and the execution scenario for the suicide murders began to be publicly debated and were met with legal initiatives in 1769. When it came to enlightened initiatives and the rationalist battle against old prejudices, Prussia was the leading German state in the second half of the eighteenth century. The Prussian king, Frederick the Great, took a special interest in reforming the judicial system. His reign is characterized by many decrees concerning specific legal topics and by a general reform of the judicial system in the Allgemeines Landrecht (‘General State Laws of the Prussian States’), which came into force in 1794, six years after Frederick’s death.

In February 1769 the rationalist theologian Gothilf Samuel Steinbart published a booklet entitled Is it Advisable that Malefactors should be Prepared for their Death and Accompanied to their Execution by Clergymen? The booklet was written in Berlin and dedicated to the Prussian minister for justice, Baron Münchhausen. Henrik Stampe had exposed the failure of the death penalty to combat suicide murders, and Steinbart, with the same ruthless cogency, exposed the responsibility of the clergy for the suicide murders. When the religious motivation of the suicide murderer had been commented on in the Danish discussions, it had been called a ‘delusion’ and ‘fanaticism’. Steinbart, however, singled out the clerical preparation for criticism.

He started by criticizing the core element in the preparation by many pastors: the belief that the sins of the prisoner would be forgiven and that it was certain that his soul would go to Heaven if he repented and turned to God just before being executed. This was not the belief in early Christianity, he said. At that time:

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the nature of being Christian was still true honesty and the practising of all the sublime virtues of love for mankind, and no one had yet conceived the idea of believing that Heaven should be the reward for a few feelings of remorse and good thoughts, which fear had instilled in the dying.²

Steinbart described the preparation by such pastors in terms very similar to the Pietist narratives of the salvation of convicts presented in Moser’s collection (see p. 71–5). When the criminal awaiting execution had been brought to repent of his many bad deeds, then, writes Steinbart, the cleric

shows the delinquent, through a lot of Bible texts taken out of their context, that precisely such persons who find their sins gross and despicable repent them, and judging themselves unworthy of all mercy yet longing for it, are given the most wonderful promises in the Gospel.³

Now the criminal began to await Heaven with great confidence. Some pastors even urged the delinquent to die joyfully, thereby publicly bearing witness to his salvation, and—adds Steinbart—bearing witness to the praiseworthy diligence of his confessor as well.

On the day of the execution, when the crowd, in horror and pity, awaited a wretched, miserable criminal, what then did they see?

A hero steps up with a jubilant look: all the terrible preparations for the most disgraceful and horrible death do not interrupt his cheerfulness; he smiles at them and dies in triumph.⁴

The crowd was astonished, but a print told of the beautiful conversion of the executed criminal, and a ballad called on the crowd to follow his example. Shortly afterwards a pamphlet would be published in which, in the shape of a sermon, the wonder of mercy showing itself in the quick conversion of the former criminal is dealt with. Here his

² Steinbart, *Ist es rathsam*, p. 6: ‘Da man noch das Wesen des Christenthums in Wahrre Rechtschaff enheit und in die Ausübung aller erhabenen Tugenden der Menchenliebe setzte, und noch nicht darauf gefallen war, Den Himmel für die Belohnung einiger durch Furcht erweckten seufzenden Empfindungen und guten Gedanken der Sterbenden zu halten.’
