Abstract

Heinrich Varenius’ Rettung [Defence] in Vindication of Johann Arndt’s Wahres Christentum [True Christianity]

Johann Arndt’s Vier Bücher von wahrem Christentum (1605/1610) (BWC) [Four Books of True Christianity] are among the most successful and repeatedly published devotional writings of the post-reformation Lutheran period. The BWC were translated into Latin and several European languages. It was deservedly a bestseller, which influenced religious life, and devotional poetry, not only in German speaking areas but in various parts of Europe (among them Scandinavia, the Baltic countries and Russia). The BWC exercised a multi-faceted influence inside the Lutheran church and beyond, particularly in separatist Pietism and in the context of mystic spiritualism. Arndt’s BWC had both an ecclesiastical-orthodox and a heterodox impact. Soon after its publication, opinion was divided as to whether Arndt’s position placed him inside or outside Lutheran orthodoxy, and during his lifetime there were diverse disputes over how to interpret the BWC adequately.

The most extensive literary attack against Arndt’s BWC was written by the Tübingen professor of theology, Lukas Osiander the Younger (1571–1638) and was entitled Theologisches Bedencken . . . (1623). Osiander exposes the BWC as a concoction composed mainly of false doctrine of a spiritualistic-enthusiastic kind, beside some orthodox teachings. Only a year after Osiander’s philippic an extensive defence of Arndt was published: Christliche / Schriftmässige / wolgegründete Rettunge der Vier Bücher vom wahren Christenthumb . . . (1624). The author was Bernhard Varenius’ father, Heinrich Varenius (1595–1635), who was the Hitzacker chaplain of Duke August of Braunschweig-Lüneburg, and his work is not only the most extensive but also the most effective Arndt apology.

Varenius, who was familiar with the sources, points out quite correctly that the commonplace of Christ’s spiritual birth in the heart of the believer, which Osiander censured, also plays an important role with Luther and Lutheran-orthodox theologians. Thus Varenius can demonstrate that Osiander’s criticism of Arndt is much too sweeping and lacks the necessary critical interpretation. At the same time, however, it becomes clear that in his defence of Arndt Varenius does not always differentiate clearly either, especially when we look closely at the sources he used to prove Arndt’s orthodoxy. From his precipitous discovery of identical commonplaces used by both Arndt and orthodox Lutherans,
Varenius deduces Arndt's supposedly unshakable Lutheran orthodoxy. This is not always convincing, as a closer comparative analysis of the Lutheran texts that Varenius stated were identical does not confirm his claims. Nevertheless, Varenius rightly points out how the BWC should be taken ad meliorem partem: he reads Arndt through the perspective of prominent orthodox theologians and contributes a great amount of different material on orthodox Arndtianism.

In the controversy between Osiander and Varenius, it was Varenius who was the victor, because the Stuttgart consistorium criticised Osiander for not having submitted his book for censorship before publication, and when Osiander wanted to reply to Varenius in print, the consistorium refused permission.

Despite all their inadequacies, Osiander and Varenius' books make two things clear: after having read Osiander's Bedencken, nobody can deny that Arndt's BWC are not only open to a spiritualistic interpretation but that to a great extent such a reading even suggests itself. On the other hand, whoever has read Varenius will have thoroughly learned to appreciate the intricate difficulty of granting Arndt an interpretatio orthodoxa. In their very different approaches both Osiander and Varenius were right, as we can see from the way Arndt's works were discussed in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, and we find this confirmed in the research on Arndt today.

Johann Arndt's *Vier Bücher von wahrem Christentum* (1605¹/1610²) (*BWC*) gehören zu den erfolgreichsten und auflagenstärksten Erbauungsschriften

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