Anti-Americanism in German Missiology

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In the following I would like to attempt to focus on the history of a particular discipline from a new and perhaps unusual perspective. The question is whether an anti-American tendency was significant in the emergence of Protestant missiology in Germany, and if so, whether this had an effect on the understanding and methods of missionary work. I will approach the problem in four steps:

1) define the term anti-Americanism,
2) propose the application of a historical perspective of modernity,
3) compile missiological historical data,
4) discuss the feasability of a conclusive interpretation.

1) The term anti-Americanism

The frivolous catchword 'anti-Americanism' is well known in Germany from the domestic political discussions of the day. As a rule it is used there as an ideological weapon, a term of abuse, to label an opponent an enemy of the United States or in short, pro-Soviet. It was in this sense that a member of the government accused an opposition politician in 1985 of "primitive anti-Americanism", when the latter defended his party's rejection of the so-called balance of arms resolution. (1) Here the reproach of anti-Americanism must be interpreted as the denunciation in the interest of particular policies, of criticism as well as of alternative ways of thinking. The use of this reproach, however, as a political weapon only appears possible if public opinion is more or less unreservedly pro-American, and this is the case in the Federal Republic, according to opinion polls. (2) For Horst Eberhard Richter, a well-known German psychologist, this 'pro-Americanism' displays rather questionable aspects, in as much as it is not due to a genuine coming to terms with the Hitler era, but the hasty identification with the American victor-ego. In this connection the reproach of anti-Americanism is a reaction of a threatened substitute-ego with the aim of avoiding conscious recognition of fundamental alternatives. (3) In both cases the reference to "America" is neither culturally nor historically justified. The concept of alternatives or the rational, differentiated criticism of certain phenomena in the United States are in no way to be confused with anti-Americanism. For scholarly research the term makes sense only when it is used to describe the total rejection of the supposed "American nature". The Göttingen political scientist Peter Lösche defines the phenomenon of anti-Americanism as an agglomeration of prejudices about an America that does not exist. Anti-Americanism refers rather to "rumours about America" that is to a picture of America which has little to do with the country itself, but a great deal to do with the social, political and cultural problems of the projecting subject. The projection, the rumour, thus serve the stabilisation of one's own ideology. (4)
This definition permits working along historical lines. It creates the necessary distance to a front-line position on the politics of the day and opens up a perspective of historical continuity. In Germany anti-American tendencies can be traced in a cultural historical context from the pre-1848 March Revolution period to the formation of the Federal Republic. From Nikolaus Lenau and even Heinrich Heine (5) to Stefan George and his circle, not forgetting either Thomas Mann's "Reflections of an Unpolitical Man" (Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen) or Oswald Spengler's "The Decline of the West" (Untergang des Abendlandes), and further to the conservative anarchism of Ernst Jünger, anti-Americanism is evident in various degrees. It assumes in Americans a lack of refinement, sensitivity, or even depth of soul, which was finally formulated as "American civilization versus German culture". Romantic, elitist and partly anti-democratic traits were peculiar to this way of thinking, if there was not, as was the case with Thomas Mann, explicit mention of an "ancient German struggle against the spirit of the West". (6) This point of view did not of course go unchallenged. Early liberalism as well as the democratic-republican wing of the Frankfurt Parliament in 1848 expressly cited the United States and the American Constitution as a model for a unified German state. (7) Above all, in the 19th century the German Left wanted to profit from the experiences of a country which owed its existence to a revolution, which had adopted the traditions of Europe but then rejected them and was now resolutely making a new beginning. This interpretation was made use in the Weimar era by the writer and theatre critic Alfred Kerr, who is representative of many others. In the description of his travels "Yankee-Land" he attempted to capture the specific nature of American culture and the force of this new beginning. That is the origin of his wish:

"Oh, for a short time, not necessarily every individual in the Old-World but several nations in their entirety should become American, should throw off all historical ballast and rediscover the less intricate, strong, distinct line!" (8)

What have the revolutionaries of 1848 or Alfred Kerr to do with German missiology? - Absolutely nothing, and that is where the problem begins. Missiology began in Germany in a systematic form during the closing decade of the last century. In a cultural historical context it formed part of the trend which fought against the ideas of the West. Therein lies already the possibility of anti-American tendencies.

2) Missiology in the light of the history of modernity

Research into missionary history and missiology serve among other things to legitimize present-day perspectives. The picture of the past which we allow to emerge is related to our understanding of the present as it concerns us. Because interests and positions are so varied there are also different representations of the history of missionary work and research into it. This would only be a matter for complaint if the plurality of constitutional factors, which form part of our reality, where also ignored. The actual ambiguity of historical reality can and must in the end be