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BQ 662 – No. 44/2020

In memoriam et in laudem Alfred Neufeld (1955–2020)

A Mennonite and Evangelical visionary thinker and bridge builder – Obituary by Thomas Schirmmacher

(Bonn, 17.09.2020) One day before my 60th birthday, my first doctoral student—my friend, companion and spiritual role model Prof. Dr. Alfred Neufeld from Paraguay—died on June 24, 2020 in a hospital in Münster, Germany, surrounded by his family. He had previously been diagnosed with cancer in 2012, but was considered cancer-free and went on to achieve significant milestones in his global work before the disease caught up with him again in November 2019.



This is how we remember him © private

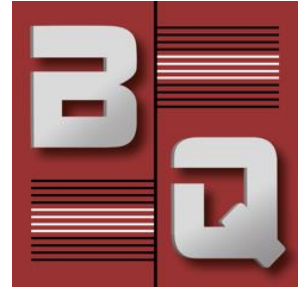
Gran Chaco

Alfred was born on July 23, 1955 in the Gran Chaco region of Paraguay. In 1926 and 1930–1932, Mennonites of German origin who spoke Low German had emigrated to this huge, bushy savanna landscape in the heart of South America. The first wave of Mennonites came from Canada; the second wave had fled the Soviet Union, coming first to Germany for a brief stopover and then moving on. They had begun agriculture in two “colonies,” called Menno and Fernheim (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fernheim_Colony), in the undeveloped Chaco and in a neighborhood near some of the natives. Alfred was born in village No. 5 of Fernheim, as the ninth of ten children. In Filadelfia, the heart of Fernheim (and now the capital of the Boquerón department), he completed a two-year teacher training course and then worked for two years as a primary school teacher among the indigenous

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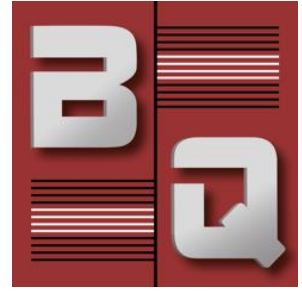
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Paraguayans in Yalve Sanga. (For more information about the indigenous tribes, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boquerón_department#Demographics.)

It would be impossible to understand Alfred's later global life and work without this early history of a double connection with minorities—that is, both Mennonites and indigenous peoples—and this experience was especially significant for my history with Alfred, since I suggested to him to make it the subject of his dissertation. Alfred completed his doctorate from 1992 to 1994 at my own alma mater, the Freie Evangelische Theologische Akademie Basel, now STH Basel. During those years I was teaching mission and religious studies and later ethics at the school. One reason why Alfred came to Basel was the better medical services for his son Christoph, who had been born deaf. In connection with the topic of his dissertation, he then also studied ethnology, economic policy and Latin American literature at the University of Basel at the same time. To me, missiology was unthinkable without ethnology or related knowledge, and Alfred followed in this path.

One of the first books we published through our Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft publishing house (“Culture and Science Publishing”) in 1993, *Die alttestamentlichen Grundlagen der Missionstheologie* (The Old Testament Foundations of Mission Theology; 1994, 2nd edition 2009), arose from a seminar paper Alfred with me in July 1993. I presenting a summary of this work in the appendix below, by reproducing my original foreword.



Alfred Neufeld (center) receiving his doctorate in Geneva on December 1, 1994. Doctoral supervisor Thomas Schirmacher is above him; at right is principal Samuel Külling, above right, Hans-Georg Wünc, supporter of the doctoral candidate. All others in the photo belonged to the STH teaching staff
© Thomas Schirmacher

I was deeply impressed by the fact that Alfred could find the physical strength to complete his enormous achievements and retain a high commitment to others as well. Due to his very strong myopia, he had to have the pages of each book and article enlarged so that he could read them. Later, the onset of the computer age aided him in this process. His tireless wife became an indispensable support, as he had to dictate most of the texts.

Alfred received his doctorate on December 1, 1994, in Geneva at the Seminarium Theologiae Liberum Genevae, the then doctoral department of the STH, today located directly in Basel as an integral part of STH. It was not only my first doctorate supervision,

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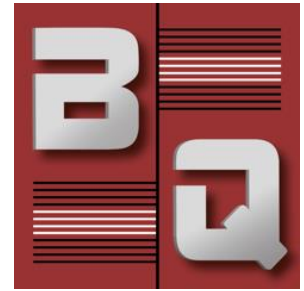
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but also the first doctoral candidate at STH Basel. In an unforgettable discussion, Alfred brilliantly defended his work to professors who, without exception, had no idea of how to teach biblical theology in a non-Western culture, and who partly suspected Alfred of wanting to soften the standards of the great councils of Christianity through his criticism of the Mennonite mission in Paraguay. Alfred, however, rightly insisted that the native peoples of Paraguay and all peoples of the world should develop their theology directly from the Bible, not by way of learning two thousand years of church history in a foreign language, which presupposes knowledge of Greek and Latin, along with either German or English. How can one expect other peoples to develop their faith in God in that way?

Alfred's dissertation was published in 1994 under the title *Fatalism as a Problem of Mission Theology The Contextualization of the Gospel in a Culture of Fatalistic Thinking: The Example of Paraguay* (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 1994. 557 pp.). I introduce this work in the appendix.

Switzerland

Let's stay in Switzerland for a moment. Alfred had completed his Bachelor studies at the Free Evangelical Theological Academy of Basel, now STH Basel, from 1977 to 1980. At the same time, he was youth pastor in the local Spanish church. In 1982, he received his Master of Divinity from the Fresno Mennonite Biblical Seminary, California. During the years 1992–1994 he returned to Basel for his doctoral studies and was also pastor of the Mennonite church Basel-Holee during this time. Alfred taught as a guest lecturer at the Theological Seminary of Bienenberg (Liestal, Switzerland) in 1993, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2008. Every time he visited Switzerland, he also toured Germany, especially visiting various Mennonite congregations and learning from their work.

Evangelicals Together: Protestant University and Evangelical Alliance

Alfred consistently showed Mennonite and Evangelical Christians in Paraguay the way by strategically establishing common socially relevant structures. He was an absolutely convinced Mennonite, but he intentionally sought out a Reformed doctoral supervisor (me). This led to many long and fruitful conversations, so I am qualified to appreciate his broad-minded tendencies. But in addition, he brought together at one table the different wings of Mennonites in Paraguay (and later in Latin America and worldwide), but also a broad spectrum of evangelical Christians.

The Evangelical Alliance of Paraguay and the Evangelical Alliance of Latin America would probably not exist without him. The national Alliance wrote in its obituary, "We honor the person who in life was the founder and promoter of the Association of Evangelical Churches of Paraguay (ASIEP), also a founding member of the Latin Evangelical Alliance and a member of the International Council of the World Evangelical Alliance, Prof. Dr. Alfred Neufeld. ... He was a tireless fighter for unity not only in his country but also in the whole Latin world."

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The World Evangelical Alliance wrote, “During his ministry he made a very significant contribution to evangelical unity both in his country, as the founder and promoter of the Association of Evangelical Churches of Paraguay, and in his continent as a founding member of the Latin Evangelical Alliance and then globally as a member of the International Council of the World Evangelical Alliance from 2008 to 2016.”

In this last role, Alfred worked closely with me at the WEA. I am particularly grateful that, as one who spoke German, English and Spanish, he made sure that the world of Romanic languages in the Global South became an integral part of the WEA.

Most significant for Christian unity in Paraguay, beyond the theological education in which he was active throughout his life, was his role in helping to found the *Universidad Evangélica del Paraguay* in Asunción, the capital of Paraguay, in 2005. Since that date he was president of the school's board of directors and also served in various administrative positions: Dean of the Faculty of Theology from 2005 to 2008 (after having been Rector of its predecessor school from 1998 to 2004) and then Dean of the Faculty of Education from 2009. In 2012, he became Rector of the entire university and remained so until his death, although he went on leave in January 2020. He led the university in making an increasing commitment to all of Paraguayan society, which I hope that many other countries, especially in Latin America, will view as a model.

A Global Mennonite

Commissioned by the Mennonite World Conference (MWC), Alfred Neufeld wrote a book on Anabaptists' and Mennonites' *Shared Convictions*, which was published in English in 2007 and in German in 2008. This work shows that he had become the leading theologian for Mennonites worldwide, who do not lack top theologians. He also wrote the history of the MWC, titled *Becoming a Global Communion*, and seven other books in addition to his dissertation.

Alfred played an important role within the MWC, initially as a member of its General Council. He was one of the visionaries who inspired the creation of a new structure within the MWC with four central commissions, namely Peace, Diakonia, Mission, and Faith and Life, with the last of these being in a sense the Mennonites' theological commission, marked by the typically Mennonite and Evangelical emphasis on translating one's confession of faith into daily life. The MWC structure that Alfred had initially proposed was implemented from 2008 onward, and Alfred served as the first chair of the MWC Faith and Life Commission from 2008 to 2018, most recently as chairman of the commission for the MWC project “Renewal 2027.”

In an ecumenical context, he served as co-chair of the Trilateral Dialogue commission on baptism with representatives from the MWC, the Lutheran World Federation, and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

John D. Roth, who was director of the MWC Faith and Life Commission during much of Alfred's time as chair, recalled, “Alfred was an extraordinary leader. With boundless energy, he joined his deep love of Scripture, hymns, theology, and church history, with

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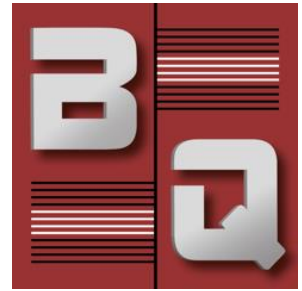
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an equally deep love for the church and the world. The global Anabaptist-Mennonite church has lost a great statesman.” The worldwide community of Evangelicals can only agree.

A Summary of Fatalism as a Mission-Theological Problem (written in 1994)

Alfred Neufeld, Fatalism as a Mission-Theological Problem: The Contextualisation of the Gospel in a Culture of Fatalistic Thinking: The Example of Paraguay. 1994. 557 pp.

In chapters 1 and 2 of this book, Neufeld substantiates his view of “critical contextualization”, i.e., of the biblical revelation becoming indigenous in a culture under constant scrutiny of, inviolable divine revelation. In this way, Neufeld sets himself apart from theologians who deny any possibility of contextualization, as well as from dialectical and ecumenical trends that can easily lead to syncretism.

In chapter 3, Neufeld asks how leading Evangelicals represent and assess the Christianization of Latin America. At the end, he summarizes in particular the points at which Latin American popular Catholicism differs from the biblical teaching on and the image of Christ.

In chapter 4, the history of the Christianization of Paraguay is specifically presented and the syncretism that arose from it is examined. For Neufeld, however, syncretism is not the result of too much contextualization, but of a lack of critical contextualization.

In chapter 5, Neufeld defines fatalism as the assumption of an unchangeable, unswayable and impersonal fate. In chapter 6, he identifies such fatalism in the history and present forms of Paraguayan culture. To this end, he examines the most common sayings, novels, and scientific representations observed in Paraguayan culture.

In chapter 7, Neufeld considers the roots of this fatalistic culture of Paraguay to be the natives' prior religious views, the Spanish Catholicism of the conquerors (strongly influenced by Islam), the vicious circle of poverty, and the tragic and disappointing history of the country.



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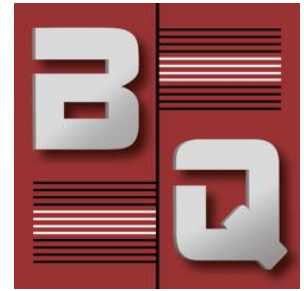
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In chapter 8, Neufeld begins to work out the biblical message in the face of fatalism. To this end, he first examines the history of theology since the Reformation, namely Calvin, Luther, the Anabaptists, Barth, Bonhoeffer and Guardini. In chapter 9, Neufeld then describes how Latin American liberation theology responds to fatalism. He considers the answer to be counterproductive, because liberation theology—contrary to Scripture—explains only the deficient status of the ruling structures. For the ordinary citizen, this approach only reinforces fatalistic thinking, since changing these structures seems futile.

In chapter 10, Neufeld presents a biblical answer directly from the biblical texts themselves. In the first part, he refutes the view that the Old Testament (e.g., the Book of Ecclesiastes) or the New Testament generally (e.g., in its conception of destiny) teaches or at least accepts fatalism. He then unfolds seven basic elements of biblical thought all of which help to overcome fatalism. Biblical thinking, he says, is (1) characterized by God's loving sovereignty, (2) Torah thinking, (3) covenant thinking, (4) teleological thinking, (5) conversion thinking, (6) cooperation thinking, and (7) two-aeon thinking.

Preface to The Old Testament Foundations of Mission Theology (written in 1994)

Alfred Neufeld, *The Old Testament Foundations of Mission Theology*. Bonn: Culture and Science Publishing, 1994; 2nd edition, Bonn and Nürnberg: VKW & VTR, 2009. 100 pp.

The present paper was written in July 1993 at the Seminarium Theologiae Liberum Genevae in Geneva, the doctoral department of the State-Independent Theological University of Basel (STH Basel; formerly FETA), as a “home study following the doctoral examination.” Whereas in Germany the doctoral thesis is submitted first and then the doctoral examinations are taken, at the Geneva Seminary—as is also customary in the Benelux countries—the oral doctoral examinations are taken first and only after that the work on the doctoral thesis commences. After passing the doctoral examination (which Alfred completed with the highest possible grade), the doctoral candidate must, as in the Benelux countries, prove once again in a temporary thesis that he is capable of writing a comprehensive scientific paper. I believe this procedure is superior to the German system, since the candidate first proves in the doctoral examination that he has mastered a subject, then in a home thesis that he is capable of writing a scientific paper, and only then does he begin to specialize in his research topic for the actual doctoral thesis.

“Alfred Neufeld was born and raised as a Mennonite of German origin in Paraguay. He studied theology at the STH Basel and at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno, California. For a long time, he was the director of the seminary where the Mennonites of German origin in Paraguay train their pastors, a task to which he will return after completing his doctorate. His dissertation, which is currently being written,

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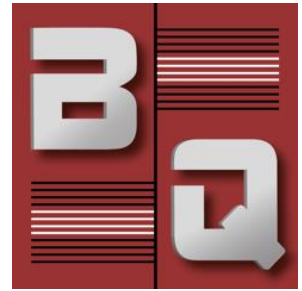
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deals with fatalism as a missiological problem, with a special emphasis on Paraguay and Latin America (published in the same series).”

“The Old Testament Foundations of Mission Theology seeks to clarify already by its title that every mission theology must be taken from the whole Bible and cannot be limited to cherished texts from the New Testament only. This perspective is not intended to devalue the New Testament. Rather, the aim is to bring the biblical-exegetical justification of mission back into focus and to make it clear that the whole Bible is a mission-oriented book. God is the Creator and Lord of all nations and has revealed His Word so that His salvation will be known to all peoples.”

Downloads and Links:

- **Photo 1:** This is how we remember him © private
- **Photo 2:** Alfred Neufeld (center) receiving his doctorate in Geneva on December 1, 1994. Doctoral supervisor Thomas Schirrmacher is above him; at right is principal Samuel Külling, above right, Hans-Georg Wünc, supporter of the doctoral candidate. All others in the photo belonged to the STH teaching staff © Thomas Schirrmacher
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International Information Centre for Religious Freedom Germany e.V. (IIRF-D) (Tübingen)
www.iirf-d.de

Martin Bucer Seminary (Bonn, Linz, Zürich, Prague, Tirana, São Paulo, Helsinki, Istanbul, Delhi)
www.bucer.org

missiotop – Evangelical Forum for Missions, Cultures and Religions (German Evangelical Alliance)
www.missiotop.org

Office of Intrafaith and Interfaith Relations of the World Evangelical Alliance

Theological Commission of the European Evangelical Alliance
www.europeanea.org

Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance
www.worldevangelicals.org/tc/

UN Bonn liaison for inter-religious concerns of WEA

WEA Sustainability Center
www.wea-sc.org

World Evangelical Alliance – Office Bonn

SOS World (Brussels)
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Bonner Querschnitte Bonn Profiles – Press Reports

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