Spirit of Franz Bibfeldt alive—altho he never was

By James Robinson
Religion Editor

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"To Franz Bibfeldt—a great scholar—theologian," wrote Mayor Daley on his autographed picture.

"TO FRANZ Bibfeldt—May we put the universal principles of religion into politics and enjoy true peace among all men" was the greeting from Ed Hanrahan.

A Roman Pucinski beamed forth from a picture autographed by the former congressman: "To Franz Bibfeldt who is an inspiration to all of us."

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BUT A LETTER in the showcase of Bibfeldt memorabilia tells of their failure to bring the pontiff into the hoax.

"I do not feel we could ask the Pope to become involved at this time," read a letter signed by someone [whose name had been blocked out] "to protect the innocent" in the Chicago Archdiocesan Office of the Chancellor.

The hoax began when Dr. Marty was a student at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis in the late 1940s.

"TODAY, it has snowballed into a monumental spoof on theologians worldwide who oftentimes take themselves far too seriously," Dr. Marty said.

This week, the theological spoof led to the award of an honorary Franz Bibfeldt degree to Robert M. Grant, New Testament scholar, and a professor at the school, at a Wednesday student-faculty luncheon.

"Bob's whole quest is to say it simply," said Dr. Marty, explaining why Prof. Grant received this year's award. "He's a very erudite man but he gets upset with the jargon, pomposity, and the gobbledegook of some theologians."

Dr. Marty said he doesn't like to refer to the Bibfeldt spoof as a hoax because it has never been meant in a "cruel way. We use him very mildly, gently, to satirize the whole theological system. There's really no malice in it."

It started when a classmate of Dr. Marty's devised a false footnote citing Franz Bibfeldt in a term paper at Concordia Seminary. The student received an "A" on the paper.

LATER, DR. MARTY, as one of the editors of the seminary magazine, wrote a book review of the imaginary theologian's book, "The Relieved Paradox."

The 1951 review sent several professors scurrying to the library for a copy of the Bibfeldt book and one reportedly even quoted seriously from Bibfeldt in a lecture.

The perpetrators of the Bibfeldt hoax then furthered it by conspiring with the seminary librarian to put catalog cards in the library files; but, of course, the books were always checked out.

When the hoax was discovered, Dr. Marty and friends were called to the seminary president's office for reprisals. Dr. Marty lost his special student assignment to London because he allegedly lacked maturity.

INSTEAD, Dr. Marty was given a church assignment in Chicago where he promptly began graduate theological training leading to his eventual appointment at the University of Chicago.

For that reason, Dr. Marty said, "I say that Bibfeldt had more influence on me than any other theologian."

Referring to the days when the hoax began, Dr. Marty said: "In that decade, our problem was a restrictive, formal theological system. Bibfeldt was intended to take the formality out of the system and soften it."

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University honors theologian, calendar critic, owner of invisible dog

CHICAGO — Controversial theologian Franz Bibfeldt, whose contention that one year is missing from history and whose treatise on pastoral care for the dead have spawned arguments among biblical scholars for years, was honored Wednesday at a luncheon-lecture at the University of Chicago.

Throughout Bibfeldt’s 45-year career, fellow theologians and students have frequently cited and disagreed on his scholarship. But over the years, he has been much more warmly accepted by secular celebrities such as the late Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley, Chairman Mao Tse-tung, former President Jimmy Carter and former Playboy Playmate of the Year Sharon Clark. Their kind words, along with photos of Daley and Clark, are in a glass display case at the University of Chicago Divinity School, where Wednesday’s Bibfeldt lecture, “A Faith for Franz,” was held.

“We’ve got a huge crowd, more than a hundred, signed up,” said graduate student Michael Allocca, who was cooking bratwurst, sauerkraut, borscht and apple strudel to serve with beer at the affair. But no matter how long they kept the strudel hot, the beer cold and the borscht somewhere in between, Bibfeldt couldn’t join the festivities. There are two mitigating circumstances that assured his absence.

First, Bibfeldt’s early work has left him calendar-impaired. In his doctoral dissertation on “The Problems of the Year Zero,” he could find no evidence of the year between 1 B.C. and 1 A.D. The absence of that year, his apologists say, continues to throw him off schedule to this day.

And, second, Bibfeldt doesn’t exist. He was created as a fictitious footnote on a term paper at Concordia Seminary in 1947 by a student classmate of Martin Marty. The student got an A on the paper, and Marty got a brainstorm for a spoof.

With the help of classmates when he was a student, fellow pastors when he became a minister, and fellow faculty members and students when he became a professor at the divinity school, Marty has kept the Bibfeldt legend and hoax going strong.

Bibfeldt has been listed among credits on television programs, in catalogs of a few select bookstores and as the owner of an “invisible wire-haired terrier” registered with the American Kennel Club. When a group of lawyers convened at a Best Western in Cincinnati a few years back, the motel marquee welcomed Franz Bibfeldt.

And then there are the letters, such as those in the display case. Daley autographed his, “To Franz Bibfeldt — great and esteemed theologian.” Clark did not overly commit herself, signing her bikini-clad full torso photo simply, “To Franz Bibfeldt, Best wishes.” Carter, apparently wise to the joke, wrote that he had met Bibfeldt at the White House when the theologian politely declined the Congressional Medal of Honor.
The gospel according to ‘Franz Bibfeldt’: A divine inspiration

By Clarence Petersen

S HORTLY BEFORE noon, an unusually long line had formed outside the dining room in Swift Hall, the building that houses the University of Chicago Divinity School, and on this day last week held the 1983 Franz Bibfeldt Festival, a satire that has evolved over more than 30 years.

In the adjoining foyer, visitors inspected a glass-topped case containing tributes to Bibfeldt from the late Mayor Richard J. Daley, from Ald. Roman Pucinski and from Playboy’s 1971 Playmate of the Year.

There, too, were displayed learned tracts on Bibfeldtian theology and other memorabilia, including what purports to be the May 1, 1978, issue of Newsweek, its cover story headlined “The Pastoral Theology of Franz Bibfeldt.” Few Newsweek subscribers, to say nothing of Newsweek editors, will recall that issue of the magazine, but no recent University of Chicago divinity student is likely to forget it.

NEARLY THE ENTIRE divinity school faculty and student body turned out last week to pay homage to Bibfeldt and hence to the principle that it is one thing to make fun of religion, quite another to make fun of theologians.

An imaginary theologian, Bibfeldt has become a kind of patron saint of divinity scholars, one of whom, the university’s Dr. Martin E; Marty, was present at the creation (the creation of Bibfeldt, that is) and even as an undergraduate at Concordia (Lutheran) Seminary, St. Paul, Minn., became a Bibfeldt apostle.

Though little is known of Bibfeldt outside theological circles, Prof. Jerald Brauer of the divinity school (and chairman of the Bibfeldt Foundation) has introduced Bibfeldtian theology to such internationally known philosophers as Paul Tillich, Joseph Sittler, Karl Barth and Cardinal Leo-Josef Suenens, none of whom is believed to have been unduly impressed.

Theologian Jaroslav Pelikan, the author of “From Luther to Kierkegaard,” once announced his intention to write a sequel called “From Kierkegaard to Bibfeldt.” Somehow he never got around to it.

BIBFELDT FIRST came to light in the late 1940s

Continued on page 5
The world according to Bibfeldt:

Continued from first Tempo page

at Concordia. The library there was locked on Sundays and several students, including Marty, protested by turning in papers with fake footnotes. A student named Robert Clausen, the first to cite Bibfeldt, received an “A” on his paper.

Marty has no idea where Clausen is today, but in the summer after his invention of Bibfeldt, both young men worked in Sioux City, la., loading 300-pound cakes of ice into the railroad refrigerator cars. Hard work.

“Clausen hated the job,” says Marty. “I didn’t mind it. So I pumped him for Bibfeldt lore to amuse him so he wouldn’t mind it so much.”

By the fall of 1961, the Bibfeldt legend had expanded well beyond the original footnote and the ice house. Distinguished theologians had been invited to participate in the hoax, and many had obliged by quoting Bibfeldt.


The librarians were in on it, too,” says Marty. “We catalogued Bibfeldt’s works, but the books were always checked out and all the members of the club were on a fake waiting list so the faculty couldn’t get at them. Whenever somebody started to catch on, we would get him into it.”

WHEN THE MYTH finally exploded, Marty caught the flak.

“The day before Christmas I published a review of a Bibfeldt book called ‘The Relieved Paradox,’ translated by ‘Clausen’ and published by ‘Howard Press in London’: Howard was Clausen’s middle name. I reviewed the book as a satire.

“At that time Bibfeldt was devoted to what we called ‘Wwwhht’ theology, which a professor used when he got into trouble. The professor might give a mechanical dictation view of the inspiration of the Bible, but he wasn’t supposed to do that. So at the last minute he would say, ‘Wwwhht—but we do not teach mechanical dictation theory.’”

Unfortunately, a Concordia professor had tried to get hold of the Bibfeldt book but couldn’t find it, and the administration demanded an explanation. The upshot was that Marty, who was to have been sent to London after graduation, was deemed “too irresponsible and immature” to represent Lutheranism in England.

Instead he was sent to assist at the Grace Lutheran Church in River Forest, Ill., a church that has written into its call that the assistant must work on a doctoral program. Marty enrolled at the University of Chicago, where he eventually joined the faculty.

Theology born of divine inspiration

“SO IN A literal sense,” he says, “I have been more influenced by Bibfeldt than by any existing theologian.”

At Chicago, the Bibfeldt legend continued to grow. Harper and Row has even asked Marty to write a biography. More important, Bibfeldt’s approach to theology, says Marty, “underwent a fundamental shift in the 1960s when we thought theologians were working too hard to be relevant to everything.”

Abandoning “Wwwhht” theology, Bibfeldt now embraced relevance with a crusader’s zeal. As a contemporary theologian able to respond to everything, to adapt to anything, to come to terms with anything and everything, Bibfeldt’s motto became, “Respondo Ergo Sum” — I respond, therefore I am.

To Kierkegaard’s tract “Either/Or,” Bibfeldt replied with “Both/And.” After it was negatively reviewed, he wrote a still more provocative tract called “EitherOr and/or Both/And.” The epigraph of Bibfeldt’s popular book “The Crooked Way” reads, “God grades on a curve.”

The shift to relevancy came naturally to Bibfeldt, whose family cost of arms, says Marty, “shows the god Protheus, who could change shape daily, rampant on a weather vane, and the Spanish proverb ‘I dance to the tune that is played.’”

IN 1972, THE students at Chicago wanted a formal presentation, and Marty obliged with a 14-page paper entitled “Franz Bibfeldt: Theologian for the 1970s,” which explained, among other things, why Bibfeldt was not likely to be present.

Bibfeldt had done his doctoral thesis on “The Problem of the Year Zero,” having become disturbed that chronologers recognize no year between 1 B.C. and A.D. 1.

“The man who wanted to reconcile all subjects and make things come out right,” said Marty, “did not believe it fair to move the calendar two years when really only one had passed. Ever since, Bibfeldt has tended to show up one year early or one year late for everything.”

Succeeding Bibfeldt scholars, sometimes students, sometimes faculty members, have ascended to the Franz Bibfeldt stool (which is something like an endowed chair, only smaller, as are the proceeds from the endowment, $28,951) before lecturing on such arcane topics as “The Quest for the Historical Bibfeldt” and “The Breakdown of Consciousness and the Origins of the Quadrilateral Mind.” In the latter, Robin W. Loven of the faculty explained psychologically and physiologically how Bibfeldt was able to hold two contradictory opinions in perfect unity.

THIS YEAR’S Bibfeldt lecturer was Glenn Holland, a second-year student in the Ph.D. program and a former television comedy writer, who addressed a topic of particular relevance: “Alternative Careers for the Ph.D.”

Holland urged the assembled scholars to consider opportunities in show business, noting that “Paul Tillich himself” had appeared “as a walk-on character in a Bibfeldt version of ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’ to explain Stanley Kowalski’s existential alienation from God to a skeptical Blanche DuBois.”

Addressing the question of clerical ambition, Holland quoted Bibfeldt’s admonition, “Remember, no matter what wealth may come to you, it is easier for a rich man to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a camel to... than it is for a camel to.”

The festival ended with Marty narrating a show of blank slides, an appropriate medium for a review of the life and significance of Franz Bibfeldt.

“We’ll close as all slide shows close,” said Marty, “with a beautiful view of the sun in the west, as Bibfeldt sinks again into 364 days and 23 hours of well-deserved obscurity.”
Dear Marty:

It must be news when a relative of Bibfeldt surfaces and so I felt it important to share the news with the Curator of the Bibfeldt collection.

What the article doesn't say is that Carberry may be the American Airlines Professor of Psychoceramics just as Bibfeldt was the Bangor and Maine Professor of Para-doxtology. They have that in common along with their elusiveness.

It might gladden your heart to know that the followers of Bibfeldtiana live, though sometimes one wonders how well when so far from the Center of the intellectual universe--between 53rd and 60th Street in Chicago.

My best to you and Elsa and, of course, a fond hello to Franz.

Cordially,

Austin, Texas
12 March 1975
Never on Hand

Ghost Professor Lives Busy Life

By KEN FRANCKLING

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (UPI)—When students and faculty gathered last Dec. 13 to discuss Professor Josiah S. Carberry's latest invention, the researcher didn't appear. He wasn't expected. He has never shown up for a lecture, including his own. Carberry, described as a world traveler, hasn't been seen at Brown in the 46 years that he has been professor of psychoceramics. The explanation is that he is "always traveling."

CARBERRY was born at the Ivy League campus in 1929 when a young faculty member spotted the glass cover unlocked on the official bulletin board and put up this notice:

"On Thursday evening at 8 o'clock in Sayles Hall, J. S. Carberry will give a lecture on Archaic Greek Architectural Revetments in Connection With Ionian Phonology."

When now-retired Latin professor Ben C. Clough spotted the notice as a hoax, he didn't take it down. Instead he inserted the word "not" between "will" and "give." The whimsy has continued ever since.

TREATISES under the distinguished Carberry name have appeared in numerous journals and the scholar, with the help of faculty members and alumni, keeps up steady correspondence concerning his travels.

His latest research mission brought another invention: a rectangular camera lens which makes more efficient use of negative space and won't roll off tables.

IN YEARS past, Carberry suggested a messenger service be created under his name "for picking up remarks that would otherwise be uncalled for." On a trip to Cape Cod, he invented steel sails for boats.

The Archives at the John Hay Library preserves letters, postcards and clippings that document the latest Carberry exploits. One letter, from the Japan Astronautical Society, replies to a Carberry query about its future plans to explore the moon, reserving 80 lunar acres so Carberry can build a university there.

THE SOCIETY thought psychoceramics meant "molding of the minds." Carberry half-cohorts, as the spoof experts are called, say it means "cracked pots."

Carberry's travels have been reported from Mozambique, Zurich, Alaska, Rome, Springfield, Mass., and the Middle East. His wife, Laura, and daughters, Patricia and Lois, also are globetrotters.

One postcard sent by Lois from the Hotel Statler in Boston had the caption "1,300 rooms and bath." On the back was written, "The bath gets terribly crowded."

On June 6, 1966, Brown awarded J. S. Carberry a bona fide masters degree. It was awarded in absentia because the professor, of course, was traveling at the time.

Every Friday the 13th is "Carberry Day" at Brown. Pottery jugs are placed around the campus for student contributions to the Carberry Book Fund, which currently contains more than $2,400.

Librarian Charles Church well says it is used to purchase books "of which Professor Carberry might or might not approve."
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The hoax began when Dr. Marty was a student at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis.

Robert M. Grant, honorary Franz Bibfeldt degree to Robert M. Grant, New Testament scholar, and a professor at the school, at a Wednesday student-faculty luncheon.

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The 1961 review sent several professors scurrying to the library for a copy of the Bibfeldt book and one reportedly even quoted seriously from Bibfeldt in a lecture.

The perpetrators of the Bibfeldt hoax then furthered it by conspiring with the seminary librarian to put catalog cards in the library files; but, of course, the books were always checked out.

When the hoax was discovered, Dr. Marty and friends were called to the seminary president's office for reprimands. Dr. Marty lost his special student assignment to London because he allegedly lacked maturity.

Instead, Dr. Marty was given a church assignment in Chicago where he promptly began graduate theological training leading to his eventual appointment at the University of Chicago.

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Spirit of Franz Bibfeldt, kind iconoclast, lives here

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"Who else is so distinguished? But don't say I said that."

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I have always thought that being a Christian can be fun. Thank you.

Kenneth P. Donce
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Nearly the entire divinity school faculty and student body turned out last week to pay homage to Bibfeldt and hence to the principle that it is one thing to make fun of religion, quite another to make fun of theologians.

An imaginary theologian, Bibfeldt has become a kind of patron saint of divinity scholars, one of whom, the university's Dr. Martin E. Marty, was present at the creation [the creation of Bibfeldt, that is] and even as an undergraduate at Concordia (Lutheran) Seminary, St. Paul, Minn., became a Bibfeldt apostle.

Though little is known of Bibfeldt outside theological circles, Prof. Jerald Brauer of the divinity school [and chairman of the Bibfeldt Foundation] has introduced Bibfeldtian theology to such internationally known philosophers as Paul Tillich, Joseph Sittler, Karl Barth and Cardinal Leo-Josef Suenens, none of whom is believed to have been unduly impressed.

Theologian Jaroslav Pelikan, the author of "From Luther to Kierkegaard," once announced his intention to write a sequel called "From Kierkegaard to Bibfeldt." Somehow he never got around to it.

BIBFELDT FIRST came to light in the late 1940s

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The world according to Bibfeldt:

Continued from first Tempo page

at Concordia. The library there was locked on Sundays and several students, including Marty, protected by turning in papers with false footnotes. A student named Robert Clausen, the first to cite Bibfeldt, received an "A" on his paper.

Marty has no idea where Clausen is today, but in the summer after his invention of Bibfeldt, both young men worked in Sioux City, Ia., loading 300-pound casks of ice into the railroad refrigerator cars. Hard work.

"Clausen hated the job," says Marty. "I didn't mind it. So I pumped him for Bibfeldt lore to amuse him so he wouldn't mind it so much."

By the fall of 1951, the Bibfeldt legend had expanded well beyond the original footnote and the ice house. Distinguished theologians had been invited to participate in the hoax, and many had obliged by quoting Bibfeldt.


"The librarians were in on it, too," says Marty. "We catalogued Bibfeldt's books, but the books were always checked out and all the members of the club were on a fake waiting list so the faculty couldn't get at them. Whenever somebody started to catch on, we would get him into it."

WHEN THE MYTH finally exploded, Marty caught the flak.

The day before Christmas I published a review of a Bibfeldt book called 'The Relieved Paradox,' translated by 'Canon R. Clausen' and published by 'Howard Press in London'; Howard was Clausen's middle name. I reviewed the book as a satire.

"At that time Bibfeldt was devoted to what we called 'Wwwwhhh' theology, which a professor used when he got into trouble. The professor might give a mechanical dictation view of the inspiration of the Bible, but he wasn't supposed to do that. So at the last minute he would say, 'Wwwwwhhh—but we do not teach mechanical dictation theory.'"

Unfortunately, a Concordia professor had tried to get hold of the Bibfeldt book but couldn't find it, and the administration demanded an explanation. The worst shot was that Marty, who was to have been sent to London after graduation, was deemed "too irresponsible and immature" to represent Lutheranism in England.

Instead he was sent to assist at the Grace Lutheran Church in River Forest, Ill., a church that has written into its call that the assistant must work on a doctoral program. Marty enrolled at the University of Chicago, where he eventually joined the faculty.

Theology born of divine inspiration

"SO-IN A literal sense," he says. "I have been more influenced by Bibfeldt than by any existing theologian."

At Chicago, the Bibfeldt legend continued to grow [Harper and Row has even asked Marty to write his biography]. More important, Bibfeldt's approach to theology, says Marty, underwent a fundamental shift in the 1960s when we thought theologians were working too hard not to be relevant to everything.

Abandoning "Wwwwhhh" theology, Bibfeldt now embraced relevancy with a crusader's zeal. As a contemporary theologian able to respond to everything, to adapt to anything, to come to terms with anything and everything, Bibfeldt's motto became, 'Responso Ergo Sum.' I respond, therefore I am.

To Kierkegaard's tract "Either/Or," Bibfeldt replied with "Both/And." After it was negatively reviewed, he wrote a still more responsive tract called "Either/Or and/or Both/And." The epigraph of Bibfeldt's popular book "The Crooked Way" reads, "God graces on a curve."

The shift to relevancy came naturally to Bibfeldt, whose family coat of arms, says Marty "shows the god Proteus, who could change shape daily, rampant on a weather vane, and the Spanish proverb 'I dance to the tune that is played.'"

IN 1972, THE students at Chicago wanted a formal presentation, and Marty obliged with a 14-page paper entitled "Franz Bibfeldt: Theologian for the 1970s," which explained, among other things, why Bibfeldt was not likely to be present.

Bibfeldt had done his doctoral thesis on "The Problem of the Year Zero," having become disturbed that chronologists recognize no year between 1 B.C. and A.D. 1.

The man who wanted to reconcile all subjects and believe it fair to move the calendar two years when really only one had passed. Ever since, Bibfeldt has tended to show up one year early or one year late for everything."

Succeeding Bibfeldt scholars, sometimes students, sometimes faculty members, have ascended to the Franz Bibfeldt stool (which is something like an endowed chair, only smaller, as are the proceeds from the endowment, $29,951) before lecturing on such arcane topics as "The Quest for the Historical Bible," and "The Breakdown of Consciousness and the Origins of the Quadrilateral Mind." In the latter, Robin W. Loven of the faculty explained psychologically and physiologically how Bibfeldt was able to hold two contradictory opinions in perfect unity.

THIS YEAR'S Bibfeldt lecturer was Glenn Holland, a second-year student in the Ph.D. program and a former television comedy writer, who addressed a topic of particular relevance: "Alternative Careers for the Ph.D."

Holland urged the assembled scholars to consider opportunities in show business, noting that "Paul Tillich himself" had appeared "as a walk-on character in a Bibfeldt version of 'A Streetcar Named Desire' to explain Stanley Kowalski's existential alienation from God to a skeptical Margot DuBois."

Addressing the question of clerical ambition, Holland quoted Bibfeldt's admonition, "Remember, no matter what wealth may come to you, it is easier for a rich man to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a camel to... than it is for a camel to..."

The festival ended with Marty narrating a show of blank slides, an appropriate medium for a review of the life and significance of Franz Bibfeldt.

"We'll close as all slide shows close," said Marty, "with a beautiful view of the sun in the west, as Bibfeldt sinks again into 364 days and 23 hours of well-deserved
Hail to Franz! UC honors theologian who never was

By James H. Bowman
Daily News Religion Writer

The University of Chicago Divinity School honored one of its best-loved and least-known theologians Wednesday in the annual day of appreciation for Franz Bibfeldt.

Students and faculty, including Dean Joseph Kitigawa and Associate Dean Martin E. Marty, who teaches in the dark-paneled Common Room of Swift Hall to proclaim Bibfeldt’s praises.

Instigator of the little-known doctrine of the “weakness of God” and promoter of the “laughing” theology, Bibfeldt was hailed by student speakers for his adaptability and relevance.

“He was a theology of ‘desiring to please,’” said one of a half dozen speakers who trooped to the common podium in the after-

A COPY OF FORMER presidential aide Charles Colson’s book “Born Again,” which tells Colson’s post-Watergate conversion to Christianity, was given to a student in Bibfeldt’s honor.

It carried an inscription to the recipient said to be written by Colson himself, complete with reference to Bibfeldt.

One in the Swift Hall foyer, a display cabinet was filled with Bibfeldt memorabilia, including signed photographs of Mayor Richard J. Daley, former Vice President Hubert Humphrey, Sen. Charles Percy and former Georgia Gov. Lester Maddox.

All were inscribed to Bibfeldt. So was a picture of the 1971 Playmate of the Year.

There was a letter from a Catholic chancery official dated October 1971, saying Pope Paul VI would be unable to come to this year’s Bibfeldt celebration.

There was a wire from a church publisher saying he was interested in a Bibfeldt book—all the way back in 1961.

THERE WAS EVERYTHING to Wednesday’s festivities but Franz Bibfeldt, who wasn’t there. He wasn’t anywhere, in fact, and never was.

Bibfeldt is a creature of a divinity student’s imagination, born in 1947. That student was Martin E. Marty—who is a dean and teaches at the University of Chicago Divinity School and has written many books on church history.

The Rev. Dr. Marty created Bibfeldt as a hoax meant to confound the theologian who dared to take himself too seriously.

He was caught a few times in the trap of his own making Wednesday as students told how Bibfeldt would have praised Dr. Marty’s recent book “Pro and Con of Religious America” for its yes-and-no spirit.

But most of the talk centered on Bibfeldt’s contributions to theological lore:

• He adjusted the sermon on the Mount to fit the American ethos, making it “Blessed are the happy who have everything, because they won’t need to be comforted” and “Blessed are the impeccably dressed, because they will look nice when they see God.”

• He adapted P. T. Barnum’s “A sucker is born every minute,” adding, “But one is born again every half-minute.”

• He had Jesus saying in the sermon on the Mount, “I’m Jesus Christ and you’re not.”

Biographically speaking, Bibfeldt was “born in a Volkswagen trunk of a fundamentalist Protestant bishop-father and a Roman Catholic mother with Pentecostal leanings,” and in his youth he “sowed wild oats during the week and prayed on Sunday for crop failure,” according to speakers.
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Franz Bibfeldt: A theologian for everyone

One of the most significant Lutheran theologians of modern times is Professor Franz Bibfeldt. And yet there is so very little known about him. Very few people have ever seen him. And it's not that he's not well-known. He is frequently referred to, his theology is as elusive as it is profound. The problem is that very early in his career he became fascinated with the truth that there was no year between 1 B.C. and 1 A.D. And so he spent a lot of time on what he called "the problem of the year 0." The result is that he frequently is a year early or a year late for events. He participated in the Bicentennial in 1874 and was a year late for the "God is Dead" controversy.

His theological elusiveness appears to result from the theological positions he takes. He seems perfectly capable of holding two contradictory positions at the same time. In response to Soren Kierkegaard's great book entitled "Either/Or," Franz Bibfeldt produced a volume of his systematic theology entitled "Both/And." However, when he was criticized for not taking a firm stand, he produced volume two entitled "Either/Or And/Or Both/And." When Karl Barth, in response to Emil Brunner, produced one of the great tracts of the 20th century entitled "Wein!" (No!), Franz Bibfeldt, to mediate the conflict and to be relevant produced a treatise entitled "Viellicht!" (Perhaps).

Perhaps the two most notable characteristics of Franz Bibfeldt are his tendency always to take a compromising position on issues and his strong desire to be relevant. In the area of pastoral theology he became interested in the non-directive client centered therapy of Carl Rogers. Adapting Rogers' approach to his own unique views he wrote a book entitled, "I Hear What You're Saying But I Just Don't Care." That book resulted in the Bibfeldt movement in pastoral care theology frequently called "self-centered therapy."

In recent years, as theologians and churchmen are focusing on oppressed and minority groups who need support, such as the poor, women, the aging, gays and various races, Bibfeldt, to remain relevant, also has focused attention on a group which he regards more neglected and forgotten than any other — the dead. He has become concerned about the problem of hoping discrimination for the dead. They're mostly confined to low, one room, dark chambers in ghettosized sections of town. Bibfeldt has steered the controversy about determining the time of death — whether heartbeat or brain waves ought to be determining factors. He has developed a process for determining when a person is dead. The evidence should take several forms: 1) Sighting. Does a person look dead? If the evidence is positive you should go to step 2) Physical Evidence. Is there a pulse, a heartbeat, brainwaves; does it lunch disappear? If the evidence here is negative you go to step 3) Physical contact. If the first two steps are done adequately, you may get by with a not so close encounter of the third kind.

Bibfeldt has tackled other issues concerning the dead. He has produced treatises on the issue of the ordination of the dead. And he recognizes that it may be a "touche" issue and one that could very well split the Episcopal Church (the Lutheran Church doesn't have to worry as much since it's already split). He has a large volume out on all of the related topics which have to do with death and ministry to the dead entitled, "Growing churches are dying." Bibfeldt's concern for the dead has been picked up throughout the Christian body. There is now an evangelical movement called the "died again" movement.

There are scoffers who claim that Franz Bibfeldt doesn't really exist — that he's just the figment of someone's imagination or a legendary creation to serve some as yet undetermined purpose. It must be admitted that his elusiveness does help to fuel the scoffers' claim. However, there is evidence for his existence. Many seminaries around the world annually celebrate a Franz Bibfeldt festival. The student association at the University of Chicago Divinity School is named after him. Charles Percy of Illinois has suggested that he be invited to give the opening prayer for the Senate on some April 1st. And, at a recent celebration of a Franz Bibfeldt festival in Chicago, the Johann Mueller University at Schweinfurt sent the following wire: "We send fraternal greetings on the day which honors the great theologian, humanitarian, patriot, Bon vivant and connoisseur of liverwurst and Liebfraumilch. One of the high moments for our university was the three months Professor Bibfeldt spent here as a student before the unfortunate circumstances concerning Professor Klotzenstein's wife. May all of you continue in that great tradition which makes Franz Bibfeldt's theology more relevant than life itself." That ought to be proof.

Perhaps Franz Bibfeldt is best known for his aphorisms, those short phrases or sentences that cause one to pause. Some of his most repeated are easy to remember. "Pragmatism is all right as long as it works.

"The church like a mighty army marches forward by continually sidestepping."

"The Lord loves a cheerful giver, but he also accepteth money from a grouch."

There are Franz Bibfeldt scholars and researchers throughout the world. Those in Colorado and elsewhere who will regularly be providing the results of their research in this section will, by and large, do it anonymously, out of a sense of modesty that obviously cannot be regarded as fake. They do request that anyone having any information, factual or rumorous, about Franz Bibfeldt please contact the editor of this newspaper who has promised to forward it to them. You also can remain anonymous.