



Among North American Lutherans: Some Observations

TORLEIV AUSTAD

Menighetsfakultetet, Oslo, Norway

To understand what is going on within American Lutheranism today is very complicated. Of course, I am aware that such a confusing impression is not limited to consideration of Lutherans in the United States. To interpret contemporary church life is always a risky enterprise. Our short-sightedness can easily lead to distortions or accentuations from a failure to see the deeper trends which actually inform theology and church life in our time. The long and broad perspective of church history needs constantly to correct the immediate and spontaneous picture of what is happening.

These remarks on North American Lutheranism are based on observations during one year's stay at Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary (LNTS) in St. Paul. They are not the result of systematic study or research and do not represent any "objective" data or knowledge about American Lutheranism. Rather, the intent is to give a brief survey of what struck me and what made sense to me "over there."

I. MELTING POT OF LIBERTY

My first observation upon coming from Norway to Minnesota would be to note how the American society was and still is a melting pot for immigrants and cultures from many different parts of the world. The United States is a meeting place of all kinds of people. Although the Midwest is strongly influenced by Scandinavian immigrants, it is obvious that persons with that heritage are now Americanized and have shaped their own new culture. Since the great waves of nineteenth-century immigration, public life has assumed it necessary that a whole spectrum of ethnic groups should grow together and form a new nation. Politically, legally, and morally it would have been impossible to build up that new nation according to

ethnic lines. To avoid the divisions that such a segregation would foster has required the creation of a society based on elementary human rights and drawing out the practical consequences of the statement that all persons are born free and have equal rights. This statement is the "glue" in the nation's life.

The Statue of Liberty in New York harbor symbolizes the main value among Americans and what immigrants through the years have been seeking—*liberty*. Many minorities, dissidents, and oppressed persons have come to this continent for religious, social, and political reasons. Persecuted in their homelands, this new home guaranteed freedom from oppression and a chance to realize their dreams. Here they found what they were looking for, and this tradition of freedom is still alive in the United States today, so much so that personal liberty has become almost a

“holy” word to American ears. It is the pillar of their existence and often finds expression in significant opposition to too many public restrictions. Several times I heard people argue that a federal prohibition against the general sale of firearms would be a threat to liberty. I had constantly to remind myself that such persons were raised in or have chosen a society where liberty has stimulated an individualism that guaranteed even the right to choose whether or not to take care of oneself.

Such a pervasive concept of liberty has also been a decisive element in religious life and makes work for church unity a laborious task. Christians who are dissatisfied with their church denomination or even with their local congregation can establish their own church. Within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) I observed that congregations could freely compose and follow their own liturgy different from that of the church at large. Such freedom would hardly be accepted in most other Lutheran churches around the world.

Recognition of the extent to which churches are influenced by this American understanding of liberty made me eager to ask whether the Lutheran church in the United States essentially reflects the society at large in the character of its integration of cultures. Are the ethnic divisions more tenacious in social life than in religious communities, or is there still some distance between the New Testament concept of a church that transcends divisions (Gal 3:28) and the reality of organizational structures and life experience in churches and congregations in the United States? The following reflections are an effort to answer this question.

II. SERVICE-MINDED, BUT IS IT ENOUGH?

One who arrives from Scandinavia, especially one with money, senses immediately the service-minded character of the American society. People in stores and public offices are generally kind to foreigners, and there are no needs for feelings of inferiority because of speaking broken English. The society is used to caring for persons coming from abroad. It easily gives people confidence by an open, friendly, and including attitude that creates a pleasure for life. Opportunities abound for those who are able and willing to work hard to be paid for their labor, so that American society not only gives persons possibilities of becoming rich and successful, but it also honors the winners.

Since everybody is the architect of his or her own fortune, it is largely up to the individual to be a winner or a loser. Hardworking and gifted people have their chance. Poor, sick, weak or retarded persons are in a more vulnerable situation.

There are constant questions as to whether they or the unemployed or elderly can count on adequate care from the state or other public social service agencies. There are, for example, great differences between individual states regarding care for those who fall outside the “working society.” Besides public care, churches and charity organizations are doing a lot for people in trouble. As far as I could see, Lutheran congregations are trying to support people who need medical, social, and personal help. In the large cities, however, there are too many “losers” who cry for help of a different kind and who call forth a society of social classes.

III. EVANGELISM AND MISSION: A HERITAGE TO RECOVER?

It is no surprise that the first-generation immigrant churches in the United States

concentrated on taking care of their own compatriots. Because of language barriers they were not expected to engage in outreach activity. This has contributed to an understandable reluctance on the part of immigrant churches, due to ethnic background or to general life attitudes to do missionary work and evangelism in their neighborhoods. Patterns of worship, congregational life, and Christian lifestyle shaped by ethnic traditions are not easily overcome.

On the other hand those immigrants, especially those from pietist and revivalist groups in Europe, brought with them a living sense of responsibility for world mission and evangelism. In America they met new awakening movements which have further inspired them to bring the gospel to new individuals and nations. From the history of Christian mission we know that Lutherans in America have sent out many missionaries to foreign countries and that a few missionary-minded church leaders with a special call to world mission have had a great impact on the raising up of new missionaries. Yet the spirit of mission within congregations varies. My impression is that awareness of mission and the obligation to go out with the gospel is not currently a top priority concern. I did not meet many Lutherans who were preparing for mission work abroad, nor did the sermons and the teaching in the congregations pay special attention to that area of missionary activity. I wonder whether this reveals a lack of vision for mission among churchgoing people, or whether anti-American propaganda in many countries in the sixties and seventies simply quelled the missionary spirit. Sometimes I had the feeling that the slight interest in mission abroad is above all a result of a theology lacking the missionary dimension and a church structure which makes the missionary task invisible.

The impression just described does not extend to evangelism and expansion on the local level. Churches in the United States, including Lutherans, are zealous about starting up new congregations. It seems easier to take up an offering for enlargement of the parking lot around the local church than for missionary work in foreign countries. Membership in a church does not jeopardize social position or possibilities for a political career; in fact, it is quite the contrary. But when it comes to personal witness about the significance of faith in Christ, I seem to observe a more rare Christian witness among Lutherans than for instance among Baptists or Mormons. I noted further that the majority of active church people seemed come from roughly the same social class, namely, the upper middle class, and that borders between cultures and races within an average Lutheran congregation were difficult to cross. Such comments intend neither to blame Lutherans in the United States nor

to tell them how to do it better, but simply to share my observations and reflections. As a guest I was very well received in the congregations I had the privilege to visit. American Lutherans are much better than Norwegians at welcoming and including visitors and foreigners in their congregational life, but I often missed what I would call a “living” Christian witness.

In addition to attitudes toward evangelism, there are related points of American church composition and structure that also invite comparison with my home church. My comments focus on the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) which I had most opportunity to observe. The most remarkable differences between the Church of Norway and the ELCA are to be seen on four levels: (1) In spite of growing independence through the reform movement of the last twenty years, the Church of Norway is still a state and folk church. The Parliament and the King (i.e., the government) have the final decision in matters of church law and budget. As a

“free” and voluntary church, the ELCA must take care of its own constitution and finances. (2) Norwegian congregations work according to assigned territorial jurisdictions, the *parochia*, while North American congregations are free to invite members from anywhere. (3) The ELCA does not have within it the pietist-influenced, independent mission organizations such as we have in Norway. The Norwegian experience of the parallel existence of the institutions of the official church and the volunteer prayer house (*bedehus*) was not transmitted to the United States, and the pietists who arrived there gradually joined more “confessional” Lutheran groups. (4) Norwegian Lutheranism is still a more homogeneous entity than the ELCA, which derives from a number of different ethnic churches and traditions. The Church of Norway has not yet had to deal with the same assimilation processes as our sister churches in the United States, but in the near future the situation will change also in Norway.

There is no doubt that the mission organizations within the Church of Norway have concretized its sense of responsibility for mission abroad. With only four million people this country has currently about fifteen hundred Lutheran missionaries and several hundred from other Christian denominations. To envision and organize missionary work as one part of a large church structure makes that work invisible for many churchgoers. The personal appeal of responsibility for bringing the gospel to all nations is strengthened when world mission is organized so that it can be directly visible in the life of congregations.

IV. THE CHURCH ON SUNDAY MORNING

On Sunday mornings, participation in a worship service whose liturgy in its basic elements was familiar to me underscored immediately the privilege of belonging to a worldwide confessional family with a common liturgical tradition. I felt at home. Although the cultural setting was new, we were welcomed, people around us talked to us and helped us, and smiling and handshaking people at coffee made it easy to overcome differences of culture, language, and personal style. Spontaneously, I experienced a difference of emphasis between an American and a Norwegian worship service: the American service is more centered around the congregated people, while the Norwegian service has its focus upon the altar. One reason for this may be differences in church architecture. Medieval churches or even those from the nineteenth century maintain a certain distance between the pews

and the altar and worship is focused towards the altar. Many newer churches are built according to another principle which sees the church as first of all a room for the congregation to worship together so that altar and pulpit are much more integrated into a common space. Such architecture with its corresponding theology contributes to a worship style that is normally more congregation-centered.

I was surprised to see so few black persons in American Lutheran churches. Is this due to their not feeling welcomed or at home in worship services shaped by European or Lutheran heritage? Perhaps there is a kind of cultural or racial barrier between white and black, especially between Euro-Americans and Afro-Americans, that makes it difficult for them to worship within the same liturgical tradition. My observation from a few visits to black congregations is that they represent not only a different confessional setting, but also another way of worshipping. There is much more rhythmic singing with a spirit of joy than in most Lutheran churches. The whole

service seems shaped by emotions, impressions, and mobility, while fixed liturgy plays only a modest role. Sermons often underline the struggles for freedom by and for oppressed persons, for justice in the society, and for equality among all races. If we are convinced that worship is the place where the deepest Christian feelings are expressed, we cannot avoid the question whether it is possible to overcome such different worship traditions. At least for theological reasons we cannot accept the practice of continuing to worship in separate liturgical traditions.

V. MERGER: LEARNING TO LIVE TOGETHER

My family and I came to the United States only a few months after the merger of three Lutheran bodies to form the ELCA. Discussions about the merger were still going on, and several times I was asked what I thought about the rightness of the merger. My answer to such questions is not of interest here. More significant was what I heard in those questions of undercurrents in the new church itself. I soon recognized how the concerns expressed in those discussions reflected the ethnic backgrounds of the people. The effects of old traditions and ways of thinking are still there. It will take years, maybe a whole generation, to find a sense of togetherness and confidence in the new church.

Since my contacts were mostly with persons of Norwegian heritage, former members of the antecedent American Lutheran Church (ALC), my observations are not representative of the whole church. What I did hear can be summarized in one sentence: "The merger was OK, but we are anxious about the new church bureaucracy in Chicago." How is that concern to be interpreted? Mergers have been a familiar experience for Lutherans in the United States, and discussions of this last merger were generally positive in the congregations and synods. On the other hand every merger is a process of give and take. Some things are lost; but there is also hope for new inspiration and vision. This time the strains of merger seem to go deeper because of the need to blend a tradition strongly influenced by Norwegian pietist Lutheranism (ALC) with the Lutheran Church in America's (LCA) Swedish and German traditions. The differences are theological, churchly, and cultural. It would be simplistic to describe them with the terms "low church" and "high church," but we could describe the difference in perspective by saying that ALC-people think "from below," while LCA-people think "from above." If there is a bit of truth in this description, it points to the more independent and democratic

elements within the one tradition and to the more obedient, church-wide consciousness and hierarchical style of leadership in the other. To unite these traditions will take time.

Negative reaction to the newly-merged church were not very concrete, but I heard at least three voices of concern: (1) The new church leaders are mostly unknown to us, and their offices are far away from our local congregation. We lack sufficient confidence in them to muster enthusiasm for the new church. (2) The new church is expending too much money on its central bureaucracy. Although we know that the new headquarters and staff in Chicago is less expensive than the three separate ones of the merging churches, we are not happy to see such a strong "paper mill" bureaucracy in the church that is not in harmony with the independent traditions of the congregations. (3) People in the congregations continue to ask about the theological commitments of the ELCA. In spite of they way different persons focused their theological concerns, I had the feeling that some conscientious lay people fear that the new church will

gradually become too indulgent on ethical issues, for instance, by accepting practicing homosexual pastors and all kinds of remarriages. Debate on the ecumenical stance of the new church has surfaced concern about what is seen as a move in a more “high church” direction through a strengthening of relations toward full communion with churches of the Anglican tradition at the expense of continued dialogue with the Reformed Churches.

I have not been surprised or discouraged by such debate about the merger. Far from implying a split, it is a sign of life and commitment; no reaction would have been a signal of indifference, the worst thing that can happen to a church. One important condition of avoiding any departures from the new church will be for church leaders to visit congregations at an early stage and listen carefully to the voices of criticism and concern.