



The Lutheran Venture and the American Experiment

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Martin Luther was a boy of nine laboring at conjugations and declensions when Christopher Columbus landed in America in 1492. When the Saxon abecedarian learned of the momentous event is not known, but whenever it was the news seems not to have interested him very much. Luther's published works, a treasury of comment on everything under the sun, barely mention America. In 1522 he twice took passing note of newly discovered islands and lands, remarking on their existence as an occasion to extend the gospel; a more certain mention appears in his *Computation of the Years of the World* of 1541 in which he speaks of "a new disease, the French disease, otherwise known as the Spanish disease, which was brought to Europe, so it is said, from the newly discovered islands in the East. One of the great signs before the Last Day!"¹ For the young Luther, it appears, America was a faraway place that prompted passing thoughts about evangelism, while to the old professor mention of lands across the sea occasioned no more than grumblings about disease and the end times.² America, it seems, never really caught his imagination or captured his attention.

¹The early references from 1522 occur in Luther's *Kirchenpostille* and a sermon of that year. See WA 10/1/1.21-22 and WA 10/3.139. The annotation from the *Supputatio annorum mundi* of 1541 appears in WA 53.169. The translation is from an editorial note appended to Luther's *Lectures on Genesis*, trans. George V. Schick in *Luther's Works*, vol. 1 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958) 207, note 52.

²Luther's reference may be to syphilis, the growth of which on both sides of the Atlantic following Columbus' voyages is now seen to be the result of complex interactions in both directions. Cf. Geoffrey Cowley, "The Great Disease Migration," *Newsweek* (Columbus Special Issue, Fall/Winter 1991) 54-56.

I. LUTHER AND THE MODERN ERA

Luther nevertheless played a significant role in the history of the Americas. The great fortress of El Moro, guarding the harbor of San Juan, Puerto Rico, bears over its entrance the crest of the Hapsburgs, against whom Luther once stood. The carving is silent testimony to the power of the hispanic legacy in the Americas and to unintended results of the reformation, among them its effect on Catholic renewal in Spain. In part a response to the rise of Protestantism, modern Spanish Catholicism emerged precisely at the moment Spain was leaving its ineradicable mark on the new world. Transplanted by conquistadors and religious, militant Spanish Catholicism became a critical factor in the evolution of a South American culture vastly different from that of North America and played an important part in a history that would result in the presence of a large hispanic population in what is now the United States.

Perhaps more significant for the history of North America, however, was Luther's role as a mentor to the culture of the modern west. Scholars, of course, have argued endlessly the

question of Luther's role in the making of modernity, with Wilhelm Dilthey and Ernst Troeltsch setting the terms of debate for the twentieth century.³ Dilthey saw Luther as a bearer of the spirit of the renaissance and a harbinger of the modern era. Troeltsch, on the other hand, thought Luther responsible for extending the middle ages by two more centuries. As Troeltsch saw it, Calvin and the sectarian reformers rather than Luther broke the path toward the future. Yet even Troeltsch conceded that Luther had helped create modern western culture, even if unaware of what he was about.

Historians in every camp agree, however, that the Lutheran reformation broke the hold of the Roman Catholic Church on both faith and life in the west. It released a significant part of Europe's population from obedience to the Roman hierarchy, it reduced permanently the role of church and clergy in the shaping of western culture, and it opened questions about authority never again to be closed. In so doing, the reformation helped to usher in an era of religious pluralism in which individuals would understand themselves to be the arbiters of truth according to the dictates of conscience. Unthinkable as it would have been to Luther and theologically objectionable as it may be to modern Lutherans, a line runs from Luther through Kant to the modern western understanding of the individual as self-legislating. A more specifically theological impulse appears with Luther, develops among the pietists, and culminates in the assertion of Søren Kierkegaard through his pseudonym, Johannes Climacus: "Truth is subjectivity."⁴ While this statement would likely have scandalized Luther, he might also have been able to recognize its lineage from his own lines in the *Large Catechism*: "The trust and the

³For an accessible introduction to Dilthey's position see "The Interpretation and Analysis of Man in the 15th and 16th Centuries" in *The Reformation: Basic Interpretations*, ed. Lewis W. Spitz (Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath, 1972) 11-24. A compact statement of Troeltsch's views appears in *Protestantism and Progress: The Significance of Protestantism for the Rise of the Modern World*, Fortress Texts in Modern Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986). Fine essays in Heiko A. Oberman, ed., *Luther and the Dawn of the Modern Era: Papers for the Fourth International Congress for Luther Research* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), are a sample of the continuing debate.

⁴This is a principal theme of Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, tr. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University, 1941).

faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol."⁵ Luther, in other words, anticipates the modern sense that truth is fully known only when it is appropriated. Luther also foresaw the pitfalls of rampant subjectivism in its spiritual form. In arguing that God can be known only by faith, he vigorously asserted that any attempt on the part of faith to summon or create its own object results in idolatry.

Lutheran theological thought also had direct effects on the pursuit of natural science. In pressing nominalist theological traditions toward radical conclusions, Lutheran theology widened the gulf between Creator and creature, between God's unknowable will and humankind's definite knowledge of the world. Confined to the secular as the only realm of certain knowing but increasingly certain in their knowledge of that world, western intellectuals after Luther happily exercised a new freedom in investigating the natural in general and the human in particular. In time they would give both spheres a wholly secular explanation.

Modern politics, specifically in the form of liberal democracy, depends on that secular interpretation of human affairs. This notion of politics originates with Niccolò Machiavelli, but

was unwittingly advanced as well by his contemporaries, the Protestant reformers. John Calvin more than Martin Luther, to be sure, anticipates key characteristics of representative democracy as it would emerge in Europe and North America. Luther, further, was a monarchist and essentially conservative in his politics all his life, but the question of the reformers and modern politics is more complex than these indisputable truisms allow. Calvinism, on the other hand, was in certain respects a retreat from the Lutheran vision of the future, a recidivist Protestantism in which structure and obedience to stated norm were reintroduced as essential to Christian faith.⁶ Calvin's treatment of heretics, epitomized in the proceedings that led to the burning of Michael Servetus, is emblematic of this reversion. Republican as they may have been, the politics of Calvin's Geneva were, in fact, designed to enforce standards of obedience and faith, and in his city, heretics were put to death by the civil authorities with the blessing of the church. To use H. Richard Niebuhr's now happily dated metaphor, Geneva was the Moscow of its day.⁷

Luther took a different position. His awareness of the nominalist tradition, which emphasized the contingency of the structures of human life, had given him a sense for the conventional character of positive law in both church and state. Influenced by nominalism and relying as well on the older Augustinian tradition, he developed the often-contested notion of the two kingdoms; this device in turn led him to make very sharp distinctions which point toward fundamental assumptions of modern secular politics. In a way not unlike later theoreticians of natural right, Luther saw politics as an enterprise designed to order the behavior of innately uncivil human beings. The Christian prince he thought a rare bird, and he prescribed a strictly limited view of government for both people and princes. Civil

⁵*The Large Catechism*, part I, par. 2 in *The Book of Concord*, ed. and tr. Theodore G. Tappert et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 365.

⁶See Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University, 1980) 372-280.

⁷*The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959) 42.

authority, he argued, does not rightly extend to matters of belief and conviction which are to be governed by conscience alone.⁸

As to heresy and its punishment, Luther early in his career broke with the inherited position. In the Constantinian tradition, the prince was responsible not merely for the earthly welfare of citizens but for their eternal happiness as well. For this reason heresy had been considered a capital crime. Luther thought otherwise. "Heresy," he said in a programmatic early treatise on politics, "can never be restrained by force. One will have to tackle the problem in some other way, for heresy must be opposed and dealt with otherwise than with the sword."⁹ In this Luther clearly anticipates a key element of modern politics. His views on heresy and the body politic also suggest a dawning awareness of the profoundly secular wisdom of modern politics, which recognizes religion as a source of violence and clerical zealotry. More definitely than Calvin, in fact, Luther points the way toward the strictly circumscribed, secular view of politics that now dominates the modern west as whole. To note that Luther retreated to a conventionally Constantinian position with regard to the punishment of heretics in conflict with the enthusiasts and during the peasants' revolt is to comment on the reformer's judgment rather than to deny that he articulated an idea which lived on in spite of his own inconstant adherence to it.¹⁰

If the subordination of all conventional authority to the dictates of conscience, an emancipated natural science, and a secular politics are among the critical determinants of modernity, Luther is indisputably among the precursors of the modern era, and in some respects among its pioneers. Is it possible, then, that Luther could also point us toward a form of Christian faith and life fitted to the modern moment? Might Lutherans in the United States of America, in spite of their curious history, now be in a position to explore answers to that question?

II. LUTHERANISM IN THE UNITED STATES

The history of the Lutheran tradition suggests a negative answer to both questions. Luther himself, while revolutionary in theology, was often unreflectively conservative in practice and not always enamored of the results of the reformation he set in motion. Under pressure, he retreated at crucial points from his own theological and practical proposals, and a retrograde tendency repeatedly made itself felt as Lutheranism took shape after his death. In the earliest years, the consignment of the reformation to the princes and the resulting caesaropapism, the emergence of consistorial polities, the rise of Lutheran clericalism, and the assignment of the Luther's theological legacy to Melancthon assured the formation of a conservative institutional Lutheranism in Europe. Neither the later pietist movement nor eighteenth-century rationalism was able permanently to reshape the

⁸*Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, tr. J. J. Schindel and rev. Walther I. Brandt in *Luther's Works*, vol. 45 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1962) 104-118.

⁹*Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁰See Heinrich Bornkamm, "Das Problem der Toleranz im 16 Jahrhundert," in *Der Jahrhundert der Reformation—Gestalten und Kräfte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1961) 72. See also "Preface" to the *Small Catechism*, par. 12 in *The Book of Concord*, 339 in which Luther commends banishment for the obdurate.

tradition in its durable, institutional dimensions.¹¹ In the early nineteenth century, the rise of Lutheran confessionalism, the recrudescence of the pietist spirit, and the emergence of monarchist, high-church Lutheranism in the wake of the French Revolution once again reinforced the retrospective character of Lutheran faith and institutional life, giving it a sometimes explicitly anti-modern character.¹² The liberal, critical Lutheranism that later emerged in the universities was fairly restricted in its appeal and in time thoroughly discredited by its association with the culture that culminated in the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II and its disgraceful end. After another period of preoccupation with the theology of the reformation and a necessary reckoning with the horrors of National Socialism, Lutheran life and thought in Europe quickly drifted into the uncertain pluralism and antiquarian ecumenism of the present.

Lutheranism in the United States took a different course, but produced similar results. From the moment they began to organize themselves into congregations up to the time of World War II, American Lutherans diverted vast energies to finding and gathering immigrants and their children into the churches. Throughout these years, this effort kept them short of resources and preoccupied with urgent tasks. When the colonial pietism spread west and transformed itself into a version of the evangelicalism of the ante-bellum period, some thinkers took up the task of elaborating a version of the Lutheran tradition they thought appropriate to the American context. Their efforts were, however, largely abandoned when a tide of immigration and conservative

confessionalism washed over the Lutheran churches following the Civil War. This conservatism was succeeded in its turn by the complex Lutheran denominationalism of the twentieth century and the confusions of recent years. Taken together, the task of gathering immigrants, the effects of a confessional Lutheranism in its nineteenth-century form, and twentieth-century preoccupation with denominational organization and merger have until fairly recent decades kept Lutherans wrapped up in intramural affairs and often, although not always, somewhat insulated from their social context. For Lutherans, America remains an invitation yet to be accepted.

What would happen if Lutherans were to accept the invitation? Is it possible that a religious tradition which had so much to do with the creation of the modern era may be especially equipped to pursue mission in that context? Could it be that the United States of America, a nation self-consciously conceived in the modern spirit, may offer possibilities to Lutherans that they have yet to explore? There is, of course, precedent for raising such questions. Unbiased consideration of Samuel Simon Schmucker's legacy is hard to come by, but it was his project to ask questions of this sort, however satisfactory or unsatisfactory his answers may have been. The scholarship of J. W. Richard, Milton Valentine, Abdel Ross Wentz, and a

¹¹Emanuel Hirsch has contended that Philipp Jakob Spener was the first German church theologian to do justice to subjectivity and individuality. See *Geschichte der Neueren Evangelischen Theologie in Zusammenhang mit den allgemeinen Bewegungen des europäischen Denkens*, 5 vols. (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1949-1954) 2.119. Johannes Wallman proposes that in this matter Spener is, via Johann Gerhard, Luther's lineal descendant. See *Der Theologie Begriff bei Johann Gerhard und Georg Calixt*, Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 30 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1961).

¹²On the retrospective character of Lutheranism at this point, see Walter Sundberg, "Ecumenism and the Conflict Over Modernity," *Lutheran Quarterly* 4 (1990) 383-403.

number of other thinkers associated with the same intellectual tradition is still rich with suggestions yet to be considered.¹³ Wentz, of course, is particularly important as the author of a once widely read textbook in American Lutheran history. The historians who wrote the volume which replaced Wentz's work intentionally turned from his engagement with the American context in favor of what they thought a more balanced view of American Lutheran history. They took it as their project to see American Lutheran history as "a natural outgrowth of the immigrant's cargo of European influence and his acculturation to the new North American environment."¹⁴ It might be argued that they succeeded well in accomplishing the first task they set themselves, but that the very history they were studying kept them from finishing the second.

If only to point out avenues of further research in history and to mark possibilities for a strategy of mission for later exploration, I want briefly to suggest that the Lutheran venture and the American experiment are well suited to each other. To try this out, I want to look briefly at the three aspects of the modern situation mentioned above and with these in mind see what resources the Lutheran tradition may offer for the pursuit of mission in the contemporary United States.

1. *Faith alone*. It is often said that modernity has made faith desperately difficult. The story is the familiar one of faith falling before Philistine science and philosophy: Darwinism, historical-criticism of the Scripture, natural scientific positivism, materialism, post-modernism. The parade of reputedly hostile "-isms" grows longer with each decade, reinforcing the sense that

the maturation of the modern world has resulted in the systematic destruction of foundations which have supported the Christian faith for centuries.

Further, the evolution of modern politics, a wholly secular affair if ever there were one, has destroyed all but the last vestiges of western Christian culture, Christendom. Christian hegemony over western culture has vanished, leaving its priests and votaries to cluck mournfully about in the rubble and tend their empty temples. Even the voluntary moral consensus once created and sustained by Christians in the United States is now under sustained attack and appears unlikely to prevail even in its elemental commitments to, for example, heterosexual monogamy. Christendom in Europe is long gone, and the sun appears to have set some time ago on the righteous empire of American evangelicalism as well.

As troubling as all this is, Lutherans might make of this a moment for faith. Modernity, in fact, may be the best thing ever to happen to Christianity. Perhaps the modern moment has offered Christians a time to allow faith to be truly faith, resting on the living God alone. Another way to say this is that the modern moment requires the *fides explicita* and spiritual maturity envisioned for all Christians by the Protestant reformers. It was the realization of this that caused Dietrich Bonhoeffer to say to a friend during a fatal passage through a modern nightmare:

¹³On this tradition see the Fall 1981 *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* which gathers together a number of studies under the theme "Openness to the World: Gettysburg's Tradition of Service for 165 Years."

¹⁴E. Clifford Nelson, "Editor's Preface," in *The Lutherans in North America*, ed. E. Clifford Nelson, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) viii.

I wrote to you before about the various emergency exits that have been contrived; and we ought to add to them the *salto mortale* [death-leap] back into the Middle Ages. But the principle of the Middle Ages is heteronomy in the form of clericalism; a return to that can only be a counsel of despair, and it would be at the cost of intellectual honesty. It is a dream that reminds one of the song, *O wüsst ich doch den Weg zurück, den weiten Weg ins Kinderland* ["Oh if only I knew the way back, the long way back to the land of childhood."]¹⁵ There is no such way.

In this situation Luther may find his true voice and a real hearing among Christians for the first time. Christian faith was for him a simple matter, and he couched it in terms that modern westerners who understand themselves to be thinking, willing subjects can appropriate fairly easily. In his attempt to articulate a biblical understanding of faith, Luther pointed the way toward a break with the fatalistic, morally reciprocal understanding of the cosmos perfected by Christian intellectuals during the middle ages. At the same time, he intentionally discarded the notion of God as force acting upon the human being as object. The church of the middle ages had understood faith as an action performed by the believer on the basis of natural or imparted knowledge and completed with a sacramental infusion of divine love. It was further understood that this would express itself in a *fides implicita*, a faith submitting itself to the teaching of the church. Arguing that faith is ultimately the trust of the human heart in the goodness of God, Luther struck hard at this inherited conception of faith.

This is not to say that the reformer adopted a Pelagian view of faith or that he took a purchase on a solipsism which amounts to a faith in one's faith. He regularly declares faith to be

a gift and insists that it is based on a promise external to the believer. Luther did, however, abandon any notion of God acting as force on human beings as mere objects. Instead he conceived of faith as the happy meeting of two living subjects, God and the believer. Luther also spoke of a felt, conscious response to the favor of God as intrinsic to the reality of faith. “You yourself must decide; your neck is at stake,” he put it in a postil meant for wide lay readership. “If you do not feel it, you do not have faith, but the word merely hangs in your ears and floats on your tongue as foam lies on the waters.”¹⁶

In at least two respects this understanding of Christian faith seems to have been written explicitly for moderns. First, Luther is adamant that faith can rest only in God. Authentic Christian faith cannot fasten itself to any other than God; only God can bear the responsibility of such faith. If faith is reposed elsewhere the result is to create an idol that will shatter under improperly imposed weight. This notion of faith permits and even requires Christians to abandon their ingrained habit of placing faith where it does not belong: in fossil evidence for the creation, the verbal inspiration of Scripture, pronouncements of the church, the structures of Christian society, theological formulation, ministerial office, cultic acts, etc. It is modernity’s gift to Christians to render these idolatries intellectually untenable. Second, Luther’s exposition of God as living subject seeking out other living subjects, human believers, is written as if for moderns. While declaring faith a gift, Luther at the same invites Christian believers to thinking, willing, deciding, acting faith.

¹⁵Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1967) 196.

¹⁶WA 10/1/2.335.

Demanding and bracing at once, it seems a notion of faith made for the moderns. As a friend of mine likes to say, it will preach.

2. *Emancipated science.* If Luther’s theology resulted in an intensification of the nominalist distinction between the empirical certainty of our knowledge of the natural world and the contingency of what we can know about God, then the Lutheran tradition may be well positioned to allow learning and faith each a claim to its proper sphere. This is to suggest that Lutherans can learn from their theological tradition that authentic faith, conceived as the trust of the human heart in the goodness of God’s heart, has nothing to fear from any real learning. If they can summon the will for it, Lutherans are in a position simply to walk away from the caricature of faith as obscurantist by definition. From its beginnings in a newly founded university pledged to modern methods in theology and the other arts and sciences, the Lutheran tradition at its healthiest has been hospitable to learning. Where it has retreated from this it has been untrue to itself.

The Lutheran commitment to liberal education in the United States exemplifies this tradition of hospitality to untrammelled learning. Beginning early in the nineteenth century, Lutherans founded a multitude of liberal arts colleges related to the churches in a variety of ways. All of them were in one way or another conceived on the basis of the assumption that faith has nothing to lose and much to gain by the pursuit of what is good and true and beautiful. It is all the more telling that in several Lutheran traditions, this liberal education, rather than a strictly pre-theological course under the supervision of the clergy, was taken to be prerequisite for ministerial

service. It is also not accidental that nearly all of these schools were co-educational from the beginning, indicating a devotion among Lutherans to learning for its own sake for both men and women, for the sake of the world as well as of the church.¹⁷

The courage required by the Lutheran tradition at this point is enormous. As Lutherans are persistently prone to place their faith in the penultimate, they are also tempted to put their learning to poor use in the defense of such misplaced faith. The efforts of many to defend the plenary, verbal inspiration of Scripture and scriptural inerrancy are a well-known instance of such, but by no means the only one. Another example is the vast expenditure of intellectual effort now underway to legitimate the introduction into the Lutheran churches of notions of church, ministry, and magisterium perfected in the early middle ages and permeated with magic as the church coopted the occult culture of Europe for its own purposes.¹⁸

If American Lutherans can sustain and expand their historical sense that faith and learning have nothing to lose and much to gain from one another, it seems to

¹⁷The history of these institutions is both instructive and inspiring. For a brief introduction, see Richard W. Solberg, *Lutheran Higher Education in North America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985).

¹⁸On the church's cooption of magic and the medieval understanding of the Christian ministry, see Valerie I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1991). This syncretist tendency did not, however, begin in the middle ages. Hans von Campenhausen has argued that notions of succession, tradition, and authoritative teaching associated with the Christian ministry in the second century had their origins in the gnostic movement and the circles of mystery religion. Von Campenhausen suggests that in this moment the church experienced an anxiety over its status as a minority and internal division like that often characteristic of the modern Church. See *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*, tr. J. A. Baker (Stanford: Stanford University, 1953) 149-177.

me that they will be better positioned than they might otherwise be to tackle the question of mission the future. In this role their colleges, if they can retain their sense of engagement with contemporary intellectual life and the work of God in the world, may serve them exceedingly well. If not, other means will have to be found to secure leisure and a venue for Lutheran intellectual life.

3. *Modern politics.* The conservative character of the Lutheran tradition is due in large part to Luther's decision to entrust the reformation to the princes. It was a fateful move that resulted in the establishment of territorial churches, an arrangement that survives to the present over large stretches of Europe. In perpetuating the pattern of establishment, the early Lutherans guaranteed that the reformation would remain unfinished in practical terms, a tangled mass of precedent and tradition more or less informed by evangelical theology. The result has been that the modern Lutheran tradition is a volatile combination of a radical theology contained by a practice which has become more rather than less conservative with the centuries.

In light of this history, the United States has offered Lutherans a unique challenge. The United States was and still is an opportunity for Lutherans to start over and realize the purposes of the reformers. Two factors are particularly important here. First, the law of the land forbids establishment and thus excludes the formation of any but an informal, pluralistic Christendom. Second, in the United States Lutherans have had no tradition and precedent to inherit. They have, therefore, been in a position to take up suggestions issued by Luther and the other reformers but never acted on in Europe. That Lutherans have to this point largely ignored America's invitation

to pursue the reformation in ways the European context has not permitted does not indicate that they cannot do so in the future.

An often uncritical acceptance of nineteenth-century confessional theology and the twentieth-century preoccupation with denominational affairs, mergers, and an increasingly retrospective ecumenism has severely limited the American Lutheran imagination up to this point, but the fact remains that America did not require this of its Lutherans. It left them free to choose this path and still leaves them free to pursue new alternatives in theology and Christian life at any moment. Should they choose to do so, they will find revolutionary suggestions in Luther.

Three examples can suffice for the moment. In the neglected fourth great treatise of 1520, *On the Papacy at Rome*, Luther notes that churches rightly assume forms appropriate to their contexts and that they do not need to be united under a visible headship.¹⁹ In the case of the United States, this may suggest fairly small, diverse, voluntary communities of believers, variously ordered in leadership and structure, and loosely yoked together by their common faith in the gospel in a “functional catholicity,” to use Winthrop Hudson’s spacious concept.²⁰

Second, Luther’s well known preface to the *Deutsche Messe* suggests the

¹⁹*On the Papacy in Rome, Against the Most Celebrated Romanist in Leipzig*, tr. Eric W. and Ruth C. Gritsch in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 39 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).

²⁰Winthrop S. Hudson and John Corrigan, *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life*, 5th ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1992) 83.

importance of developing folk traditions in worship.²¹ A fundamental purpose of Luther’s reformation was, in fact, to recast the Christian tradition as a whole into the vernacular for the sake of faith among the peoples of the world. Is it possible then that the *Lutheran Book of Worship* represented a wrong turn for American Lutherans? Did it lead the American Lutheran imagination astray, into arcane and antique ways? If it did, the American Lutheran churches are free to revise or abandon it at will.

Third, Luther’s diverse utterances on ministry and the order of the church suggest that Lutherans are freer than they know to elaborate forms of ministry and order that will serve the church effectively in diverse times and places. (Indeed, discordant notes in Luther suggest that Lutherans may even permit themselves internal pluralism in these matters!) Lutheran traditionalism at this point often amounts to a case of historicism based on surprisingly short, poor memory. Precisely because they had to, because they had nothing to inherit, the nineteenth-century architects of Lutheran denominational traditions in the United States developed both an economical understanding of the theology of the public ministry and varieties of polities that were both faithful to Lutheran norms and appropriate to the context. These builders, in fact, may have been wiser than those who have more recently committed two of the large Lutheran churches to models of corporate denominationalism which served well in the first half of the twentieth century but have probably outlived themselves. Current discussion of ministry in the American Lutheran churches will be a crucial test of their ability to be faithful to their norms and responsible to the context in which they find themselves.

There is yet another way in which the Lutheran tradition is apt for the modern context. Restricting the role of government as he did in his early programmatic treatise *On Secular*

Authority and insistently assigning magisterial authority in the church to the word of God alone, Luther rehearsed the church for its coming engagement with modern politics. His political model was based on the received political wisdom of the day, but was informed by his close study of the clash of councils with the papacy and tempered by his radical eschatology. Confessional deconstructionists have sometimes dismissed Luther's eschatology as a naive and weary apocalypticism, but it was, in fact, intrinsic to his theology and a constant spur to his relentlessly critical discrimination in judging all things of this world. Similarly, while his understanding of citizenship was influenced by medieval asceticism, the dynamic of his theology points forward to the secularizing of politics and toward the rational, conscientious exercise of citizenship by individuals trained in the home and prepared in the church for the free exercise of civic duty, informed in this by reflection on the Christian faith but without the formal restraint of ecclesiastical tutelage or the assumption of "immaturity," as Kant put it.²² In this the Lutheran tradition can contribute to an ennobling understanding of

²¹See *The German Mass and Order of Service*, tr. Augustus Steimle and rev. Ulrich S. Leupold in *Luther's Works*, vol. 53 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) 61-69.

²²See "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'" in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss and tr. H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1970) 54-60.

citizenship for Christians living under liberal democratic regimes.²³ It also implies a very restricted role for clergy as clergy and for the church in its various public assemblies with regard to political matters which do not impinge directly and explicitly on its confession of faith or tempt it to idolatry. Luther, like authors of the constitution of the United States, knew that politics and religion would have everything to do with one another while time lasts. In that knowledge both the reformer and the American founders took care to articulate carefully the relationship of church and civil authority, religious faith and political thought. Their conclusions were in some respects dramatically different, but at certain crucial points congruent. Were American Lutherans to attend to the thought of both the political sages who wrote their constitution and their theological mentor, they might find themselves surprisingly at home in both their church and the body politic of which, under the providence of God, they are also members.

Would Luther recognize himself in any of this? Perhaps not. It is intentionally an exercise in the drawing out of implications. On further consideration, however, it occurs that Luther might not have been surprised after all. He knew that he was aboard a gospel carrying him toward a future he could not fully discern. Had he given a second thought to the newly discovered islands and lands he mentioned in 1522, he might well have imagined a Christianity suited to their inhabitants in a distant future. He might also have believed that if the poor old world were made to last that long, Christ would be there with his gospel in the vernacular.

²³On the dignity of rational, secular politics defined over against both the classical and traditional Christian understandings of politics, see Thomas L. Pangle, *The Ennobling of Democracy: The Challenge of the Postmodern Era* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1992).