



Liturgical Civility, Upward Mobility, and American Modernity

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Zwingli may have gotten a leg up on Luther at Marburg in 1529. Arguing that bread and wine cannot be anything other than bread and wine, that they can only symbolize something more, Zwingli had sided with western modernity. His point of view would come to prevail imaginatively and experientially if not doctrinally in the modern West. In the years after Marburg, a world emerged in which Luther's insistence that bread could also be body would become an anachronistic medievalism. The finite—in a daily, practical sense—would no longer be capable of comprehending more than itself. Lost forever after Marburg, as Erich Heller has put it, is the “unity of word and deed, of picture and thing, of the bread and the glorified body. Body will become merely body, and symbol merely symbol.”¹ The consequences of this for Christian worship would, of course, be enormous. And they were seen more clearly than anywhere else in that most modern of nations, America, where inheritors of a Zwinglian sacramental theology established themselves first as a religious majority and later as a dominant minority. In America, more thoroughly than in Europe, old ways of worshiping were repudiated and new patterns designed to take their place.

The result was an informal liturgical consensus animated by nativist impulses and the theology of American Evangelicalism. In America a cerebral and visceral anti-Catholicism fixed on the cultus seemed to spring from the deepest sources of the national character. An episode from colonial history is illustrative. Two of the delegates to the Continental Congress of 1774, John Adams and George Washington, took a day off from their deliberations to visit some of the churches of Philadelphia, among them a Roman Catholic chapel. Fascinated and revolted by what he saw, Adams wrote to his wife:

This afternoon's entertainment was to me most awful and affecting; the poor wretches fingering their beads, chanting Latin, not a word of which

¹Erich Heller, “The Hazard of Modern Poetry,” *The Disinherited Mind* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975) 266.

they understood....The dress of the priest was rich white lace....The altar piece was very rich, little images and crucifixes about; wax candles lighted up. But how shall I describe the picture of our Saviour in a frame of marble over the altar, at full length, upon the cross in the agonies, and the blood dropping and streaming from his wounds!

Here is everything which can lay hold of the eye, ear, and imagination—

everything which can charm and bewitch the simple and the ignorant. I wonder how Luther ever broke the spell.²

Alien, sacerdotal, and physical, Roman Catholic usage offended Protestant sensibilities. An intentional counter to this bewitching spectacle and its pseudo-Protestant imitations, Evangelical worship presented itself as American, popular, and spiritual. “The truth,” a defender of the Evangelical consensus wrote, “is spiritual.” Or in what was an arrestingly modern and American metaphor: “The stream of spiritual electricity passes directly from the Holy Spirit through the truth regardless of all other media.”³ The words of worship and the material elements of the sacraments are all that is necessary, and they serve as husks to be discarded as the truth is spiritually apprehended.

Liturgical practice conformed to the theology of spiritual worship. Worship was radically pruned to rid it of Romish and physical elements—images, objects, vesture, gesture, and music—since spiritual truth requires little clothing. Unadorned churches or meeting houses sheltered divine services; liturgies and the liturgical calendar were abandoned; and vestments were discarded. Absolution was rejected, and the sacraments were minimized liturgically as much as they had been transformed theologically. The anxious bench and the “New Measures” emphasized that revival was the first fruit of spiritual worship. Fortified by the experience of repeated revival this way of worshiping cut across formidable confessional, denominational geographical and ethnic boundaries. It was powerful enough to overtake even some of the ecclesiastical progeny of Zwingli’s opponent at Marburg, the New Lutherans of the eastern states.

In light of this, it was something of a shock in the mid-nineteenth century when large numbers of newly arriving Protestants appeared to remain under the spell Luther was supposed to have broken centuries before. These German and Scandinavian Old Lutherans practiced a suspiciously Catholic-looking religion that plainly marked them off from their neighbors. The transplanting of these customs startled even so ecumenical and cosmopolitan an observer as Philip Schaff who remarked with some surprise that the Old Lutherans “have a more or less complete liturgical service, even with crucifixes and candles burning in day-time; and in all such matters they cleave to the historical tradition.”⁴ Among these unreconstructed Lutherans were some Norwegians who brought with them a distinctive liturgical ethos. Considered chronologically, the developing liturgical tradition of this group of Lutherans reflects some aspects of their

²Quoted from *Documents of American Catholic History*, ed. John T. Ellis (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1962) 132.

³Samuel Simon Schmucker, *Discourse on the Spiritual Worship of God, Its Nature, Auxiliaries, and Impediments* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Miller & Burlock, 1861) 27 and 28.

⁴Philip Schaff, *America: A Sketch of Its Political, Social, and Religious Character*, trans. and ed. Perry Miller (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1961) 158.

adjustment to America and, perhaps something about the meaning of that adjustment for their religion.

I. THE NORWEGIAN ETHOS

After the earliest years of worship whenever people and space could be found together, the Norwegians developed a recognizable style of church architecture and design for America. Simple, rectangular frame structures, painted white, with clear glass windows, and with steeple and bell where possible were the rule.⁵ A pattern carried from Norway and modified to fit new circumstances determined the design of the interior.⁶ Against the liturgical east wall a painted wooden reredos framed a large painted or sculpted representation of Jesus. Among favorite themes for the paintings were the baptism of Jesus, Jesus teaching or preaching, the Good Shepherd, Jesus knocking at the door, the Garden of Gethsemane, the Lord's Supper, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, or the Ascension. If not by a painting, the reredos was most often dominated by a copy of the Christ sculpted for the Cathedral of Our Lady in Copenhagen by Bertel Thorvaldsen. A wooden altar on a raised platform rested directly against the reredos. Surrounding a footspace was a half-round communion railing known as the "altar-circle." A raised pulpit was placed slightly in front of the altar circle on one side and a font on the other. Parishioners occupied simple benches or chairs.

In settled congregations, preparation for the Lord's Supper began on Saturday when those intending to receive the sacrament visited the pastor's house or the church to declare their intention and have it registered, to make confession of their sin, to receive pastoral counsel, and to be absolved. The obdurate might be placed under church discipline and excommunicated. Usually these preparations culminated in a confessional service during which each penitent knelt at the altar circle to receive absolution with the laying on of hands.⁷ To conduct this service the pastor wore a loosely fitting black cassock with skirt almost to the floor. Around the ordinary winged collar was tied a tightly fluted white ruff raised at the back by a narrow, stiffly padded black stole worn around the neck and falling the length of the cassock. For the parish communion the next day a white gown fastened at the neck, full in the sleeve, and covering the entire cassock was added, and sometimes over this was worn a chasuble cut in the fiddleback style, usually of dark red velvet ornamented in gold. Both front

⁵See Robert C. Ostergren, "The Immigrant Church as a Symbol of Community and Place in the Upper Midwest," *Great Plains Quarterly* 1 (1981) 225-238, for commentary on the architectural tradition.

⁶Remembered Norwegian patterns are illustrated in Carl Fr. Wisløff, *Norske Kirkehistorie 1* (Oslo: Lutherstiftelsen, 1966) 480; Andreas Aarflot, *Norske Kirkehistorie 2* (Oslo: Lutherstiftelsen, 1967) 45, 340, 380; and in E. Clifford Nelson and Eugene L. Fevold, *The Lutheran Church Among Norwegian-Americans* (2 vols.; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1960) 1.12-13. American patterns are illustrated in E. Clifford Nelson, *Ibid.*, 2.28-29, and in *Norsk Lutherske Menigheter 1843-1916*, ed. O. M. Norlie (2 vols.; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1918) passim.

⁷This practice was not universally or uniformly observed in Norway or America and was subject to frequent criticism. For an account of its introduction in America, see H. A. Preus, *Syv Foredrag over de kirkelige forholde blandt de norske i Amerika* (Christiania: Jac. Dybwad, 1867) 36-40.

and back panels were usually decorated with an incarnational device: a cross, a crucifix, a chalice, or a monstrance-like sunburst.⁸

A worshiper entering the church on Sunday morning would see the altar freshly covered with a white cloth; chalice, flagon, paten, and ciborium prepared; and two otherwise unused altar candles burning. Where their use was customary, white gown and chasuble were placed on the altar for the pastor's vesting. Entering, the men and women separated, the men to sit on the right

and the women on the left. During the final tolling of the bell the pastor appeared at the altar to begin the celebration of the Norwegian *højmesse* or “high mass;” he was assisted at prayers by a lay official of the congregation, the *klokker*, who usually also served as precentor (*kirkesanger* or *forsanger*) and led the congregational singing.⁹ The hymns, prayers, lessons, sermon, and blessing prescribed for the *højmesse* might be followed by a baptismal service or catechization before the celebration of the Lord’s Supper itself.¹⁰

Where they were used, the pastor vested in white gown and chasuble before beginning the liturgy of the Supper. With preliminary portions of the liturgy concluded and the congregation or apart of it kneeling at the altar circle, the pastor chanted or recited the Words of Institution, taking each of the vessels into his hand in turn. During the distribution and the singing of the *Agnus Dei*, the men and women of the congregation went to the altar together, the men on the right and the women on the left. The sacramental wine was distributed from the chalice and the bread administered *per orem*. Table by table, communicants were dismissed with a blessing administered by the celebrant with chalice in hand. The service concluded with hymns, prayers, and a benediction with the sign of the cross.

With adjustments made for circumstances imposed by the American West—scattered congregations and overworked pastors, the difficulty of imposing church discipline, early adaptation to American Protestant ways, pressure from Norwegian pietists, the exercise of newly discovered congregational autonomy, limited financial and esthetic resources—the liturgical ethos of the churchly Norwegian Lutherans in the earliest generations of the settlement represented a generally consistent and faithful reproduction of Norwegian church ways (*kirkeskikke*). America, however, was more puzzled than impressed by this faithfulness. Arriving in the Midwest between cresting waves of American nativism, the Norwegians were met with curiosity and hostile murmurings. Their ecclesiastical ways looked suspiciously Romish and arcane to their Yankee neighbors. The imposition of church discipline occasioned rumblings about “popery” and the Lutheran church as a “menace to freedom,” and liturgical practices cor-

⁸Cassock, black stole, ruff, and white gown are illustrated in Carl Fr. Wisløff, *Norske Kirkehistorie 3* (Oslo: Lutherstiftelsen, 1971) 371 & 73. For the chasuble, see A. Aarflot, *Norske Kirkenhistorie 2*, 100-107.

⁹For more on the untranslatable title and influential office of the *klokker*, see J. Magnus Rohne, *Norwegian American Lutheranism Up to 1872* (New York: Macmillan, 1926) 80-83.

¹⁰Discussion of the liturgical texts is beyond the scope of this piece. For a comprehensive treatment, see Helge Faehn, *Høymessen igår og idag: Liturgiens struktur og vækst; Vår høymesse fra reformasjonen til idag* (2nd ed.; Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1968). A brief, but incisive history of the texts and their use in Norway is in Einar Molland, *Norges Kirkehistorie i det 19de Århundre* (2 vols.; Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk, 1979) 2. 85-95. A compact discussion of the history of the texts in America and a synoptic table comparing rites are in E. Clifford Nelson, *The Lutheran Church*, 2. 22-128 and 342-43.

roborated American suspicions.¹¹ At liturgical odds with their neighbors, the indisputably Protestant and vigorously anti-Roman Catholic Norwegian Lutherans were in some danger of becoming objects of American nativism.

An American journalist observing the dedication of a church in Northfield, Minnesota, reported on the Norwegian ways:

The singing was in the choral style, all singing the same part; not...as we Yankees

sing. The house was filled with melody, but the pieces being generally quite lengthy, it became monotonous.

The introductory exercises were...in an unknown tongue to us, each of the ministers taking their parts assigned. The bishop was in full robed canonicals, but the ministers wore only the round plaited ruffles, pictures like which we have seen in books as far back as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries....

After two of the ministers had done their parts, Bishop Muus advanced from his seat to the front of the altar somewhat after the manner of the Catholic priests at their altars in the progress of their services. Intoning he did among other things the significance whereof was unknown to us, the singers of the audience either in response or in chorus joining in the singing.

Since the service was to last another two hours, the reporter left early, with a question on his mind.

Here the question arises, having compassed the stormy ocean and come to this land of the free and home of the brave, is it the best thing to do to perpetuate the manner of their fathers in this regard....Is it not better to become full blown Americans in the manner of worship?

Outrageous customs, one among others especially, made the answer plain.

The way our Scandinavian brethren are seated in church is more Jewish than Christian. The sexes are kept apart as if they were afraid of each other, or that the “powers that be” were afraid for them. This is un-American.¹²

A liturgical anomaly—Romish, ethnic, and almost all that John Adams had feared—had arrived in the heart of Protestant America.

II. HYPHENATION

Even before the reunion of churchly and pietist Norwegians in the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America in 1917 and the administration of shock treatment during World War I, the anomaly had begun to respond to therapy. At war’s end, the Norwegians were well on their way liturgically to becoming Norwegian-Americans. The most obvious index of the change was a transition to the

¹¹Cf. E. C. Nelson and E. L. Fevold, *The Lutheran Church*, 1. 110 and 113.

¹²Quoted from *Rice County Journal* (November 17, 1881) in Eugene E. Simpson, *A History of the Saint Olaf Choir* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1921) 19-20. The “Bishop Muus” to which the writer refers is Bernt Julius Muus. Muus was not, however, a bishop. Since there is no evidence in this period of Norwegian-American use of the customary Norwegian episcopal vestments (scapular, gold pectoral cross, and cope in addition to cassock, ruff, and white gown), the “full robed canonicals” may have been the white gown or the white gown and chasuble together over cassock and ruff. The chasuble Muus customarily used is preserved in the archives of Saint Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota.

use of English as a liturgical language; by 1930 Norwegian was on its way to extinction in that

capacity.¹³ The nature as well as the fact of the transition was significant. The ecclesiastical language of the Norwegian-Americans was remarkably resistant to corruption by English loan-words and syntax, but not impervious to translation; translation could subvert what usage could not corrupt. Important words and the reality carried in them were, in fact, recoined in favor of American Protestant norms. *Prest*, literally “priest,” the customary and canonical designation of the Norwegian Lutheran clergyman, was translated into English as “pastor” or “minister,” and the honorific “Reverend” was increasingly heard in conversation and used on paper. The *højmesse* became not the obviously cognate “high mass,” but the “Altar Service” or the “Holy Communion.” The clergy did not *messe* or “sing mass,” but “intoned” the service; “chant” as a possible translation seems also to have been avoided. The inherited language was aligned in translation to point usage toward American Protestantism and away from Roman Catholicism. The translation intimated the shape of more concrete adjustments.

There were some innovations in architecture and design in the decades before and after 1917. Some congregations were able to build larger and more elaborate churches, and these were usually in the imitative Gothic styles preferred by their neighbors. Provision was increasingly made for organ and choir, usually placed somewhere in front of the church rather than in a traditional rear gallery. American flags appeared prominently in many churches and patterns for pictorial glass, lecterns, and multiplied paraments—all rare in Norway—were borrowed from neighboring Christians. The Norwegian use of red altar vestments for festivals and black for penitential seasons endured in some places but was abandoned in others for colors familiar in America. In most places interior designs continued to focus on altar and reredos with incarnational symbol. Jesus continued to appear over the altar and dominate the church.

The separate confessional service preceding the celebration of the Lord’s Supper fell into disuse. In some quarters it came to be regarded as time consuming and impractical; in other circles the pronouncement of absolution with the laying on of hands was considered crypto-Roman. In some congregations the confessional service was incorporated into the sacramental liturgy, and in others it devolved into a *pro forma* registration with the pastor. A corporate confession and conditional absolution with the imposition of hands during the Altar Service eventually came to prevail.

There were other liturgical changes. The Norwegian cassock and ruff slowly disappeared to be replaced by the loose black gown favored by some American Protestants or by a combination of gown or cassock with a white surplice. Although this combination was introduced to the church by pastors of the eastern district who had become acquainted with its use among the Episcopal clergy, the use of tippet or stole over the surplice was not immediately borrowed nor was the clerical collar common during the decades immediately before and after 1917.¹⁴ The white gown and chasuble almost vanished,

¹³See E. C. Nelson, *The Lutheran Church*, 2. 242-253.

¹⁴See J. M. Rohne, *Norwegian American Lutheranism*, 85, and Johannes Halvorsen, “Den norske synode,” *Norske Lutherske Menigheter*, 2. 695.

although they continued to be used in some isolated places.¹⁵ In this period men and women began to sit together in the same pews, while *klokker* and precentor slowly gave up places preempted by choir and organ. Clerical chanting declined until in many places there was none at

all, or only the collect of the day was chanted. The rubrics did not call for an offering, but the realities of church life in America had begun to make this a regular part of the church service. The liturgy of the Lord's Supper itself remained largely unchanged, although in some congregations an innovation appeared in the form of individual cups for the communion, a practice borrowed from neighboring Americans.

Henry Ford and the flivver effected one more change in liturgical ethos. The Norwegians had brought with them from the parishes of their native fjords and valleys a tradition of gathering in the churchyard—sometimes during the liturgical service—for visiting and business. More opportunities in America for sociability and Sunday driving, to the satisfaction of the clergy, made this less necessary. A pleased pastor reported on the change in decorum: “As a rule people now all go into the church at the beginning of service and stay there until its end, whereas earlier quite a few would sit outdoors and do business or make plans.”¹⁶ Manners were improving.

By the time the Great Depression slashed through the fabric of American life, America had made its mark on the liturgical customs of the Norwegian-American Lutherans. When they emerged as Americans out of the Depression and World War II they would complete the accommodation.

III. THE AMERICAN ETHOS

When, after the dismal years of depression and a frenetic several years of war, it finally became possible in the 1950s for the congregations of what was now called The Evangelical Lutheran Church to build new churches and remodel older ones on a large scale, architectural preferences had changed, and Norwegian models were largely forgotten.¹⁷ Spare, theoretically functional design prevailed in many new churches, and similar architectural impulses informed unnumbered remodeling projects. In the new architectural dispensation Jesus did not appear over the altar. Bare brass crosses appeared in some older churches, and in radically remodeled and newer churches a large, slender wooden cross was often fixed to a flat east wall. (An *ex post facto*, allegorical explanation—utterly at odds with Lutheran thought—appeared in the oral tradition to legitimate and explain this popular departure. “Lutherans,” the explanation of the crosses went, “do not worship the incarnate, dying Jesus as Roman Catholics with their crucifixes do, but rather worship the resurrected Christ.”) In other respects the new churches were built according to a contemporary style preferred in common with other Lutherans and many other Protestants.¹⁸ Altars

¹⁵See Arthur Carl Piepkorn, *The Survival of the Historic Vestments in the Lutheran Church after 1555* (2nd ed.; Saint Louis: School for Graduate Studies, Concordia Seminary, 1958) 101.

¹⁶J. Halvorsen, “Den norske Synode,” 695.

¹⁷The chronological division is not, of course, perfectly sharp. Some of the patterns described here can be found earlier.

¹⁸For a survey of architectural trends, see Arlis J. Ehlen, “Contemporary Church Architecture in the Lutheran Church of America,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 28 (1957) 161-173.

were simplified in design and altar circles were usually abandoned for straight altar railings placed somewhat farther from the altar than had previously been the custom. Choirs and American flags usually retained their places in the front of the church. Lecterns were common and, along with altars and pulpits, were usually covered in matching paraments in a scheme of

colors borrowed from liturgical neighbors; the Norwegian red and black had been abandoned. Visual art became scarcer and increasingly abstract rather than pictorial. Calligraphic symbols—circles or triangles for the Trinity, for example—were now more likely to be found in the new churches than a portrayal of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Clerical vestments were completed in this era by the common addition of the clerical collar and the almost universal use of the stole in seasonal colors over the surplice. Rare, the black gown continued to be used in some places.

A worshiper entering the church was now likely to be met by an usher with a carefully prepared “bulletin” detailing the order of service and shown to a seat. The service began in some places with the appearance of “acolytes” vested in cassock and cotta who had been pressed into service for the lighting of candles, which were now often multiplied by lights added to the customary two altar candles. This rite completed, the service continued, where architecture and congregational preference permitted it, with a procession of choir and clergy during the singing of a hymn. Choirs were now customarily vested in colorful loose gowns with yokes of contrasting colors. The liturgy followed the traditional textual sequence with some changes dictated by evolving usage. The gathering of the weekly offering assumed an elaborate and stereotypical ritual form involving considerable choreography, often accompanied by “special music” or an “anthem” by choir or soloist, and concluding with a “presentation hymn” during an elevation of the plates before the altar at the hands of the liturgist.

For the celebration of the Lord’s Supper itself, trays filled with individual cups almost entirely displaced the chalice, which now served a largely ornamental function. In some places the sacramental bread was placed in the hand rather than the mouth. A portion of the congregation no longer knelt at the altar railing during the Words of Institution, and the altar guests did not freely crowd the aisles to take turns at the railing. Ushers generally regulated the now more decorous approach to the railing. Approaching the altar, each communicant customarily deposited a “registration” card with an usher, a final remnant of the declaration of intention and confessional service of an earlier era. As they had come to begin, services now often ended with the singing of a hymn during the processional departure of clergy, assistants, and choir.

IV. LITURGICAL CIVILITY, UPWARD MOBILITY, AND AMERICAN MODERNITY

If liturgical civility, upward mobility, and American modernity had not fully cured the anomaly, they had exacted change and accommodation in a consistent pattern from the Norwegian Lutherans and their inheritors.

Liturgical civility dictated pruning.¹⁹ What appeared to their American Protestant neighbors as unnecessarily corporeal and “unspiritual” elements usually had the added disadvantage of conjuring up images of Roman Catholicism. Embarrassing, these and other things betraying ethnicity and the social status of immigrants were discarded as acculturation and assimilation proceeded. The mass vestments with their monkish look and incarnational art, the chanting with its echoes of Roman superstition, the private confession of sin, and the personal absolution imparted through speech and touch together vanished quickly. Paraphrastic, emphatically Protestantizing translation occurred as soon as the use of English became necessary. Ethnic and

antique, the Norwegian cassock and ruff died a slow death. An impolite, unsanitary form of communion at the altar circle gradually disappeared. The sometimes officious and cacophonous *klokker* was removed from his place as the years passed. And finally, Jesus was taken down from his place over the altar.

As the Norwegians shed their old habits, a sense of upward mobility suggested that they borrow new ones from their neighbors. Churches were remodeled and constructed according to styles preferred in common with mainline Protestants. Bare crosses fixed to empty east walls looked out over the new churches. The offices of usher and “acolyte” were imported from other traditions to perform newly necessary liturgical tasks. Vestments for clergy, acolytes, and musicians were usually copied from patterns found among Episcopalians and other Protestants. Men and women learned to sit together in church, and better manners were observed. Rather than sitting through their sometimes lengthy chorales, these Lutherans learned to stand up and sing some of the same shorter and brisker songs their neighbors did. Money was gathered after an ecumenical American pattern with increasing solemnity and musical accompaniment. A politer, tidier, and more private form of receiving the sacrament came to prevail. And the sociability of Sunday morning invariably came to an end with a genial handshake from the pastor at the church door. To turn H. Richard Niebuhr’s phrase inside out, what was imported into the Norwegian-American liturgical ethos was the social result of denominationalism.

If the old pastoral dictum *lex orandi est lex credendi* can be extended to say that all of what happens on Sunday morning—all of what is said and heard and done and seen and shared—informs what is believed by those who take part, it remains to ask what had become of the faith and piety of the Norwegian-American Lutherans in the civilized, sociable, and “spiritual” liturgical ethos of American modernity. Sidney Mead tells that he stopped giving a lecture called “Lutheranism—Protestantism’s Secret Weapon in the United States” when, studying the results of a sociological self-portrait of American Lutheranism, he discovered that Lutherans like most American Christians have an immense capacity “to hold at the same time two contrary views, each rooted in age old antagonistic theological positions.”²⁰ Three out of four Lutherans, Mead learned, found it possible to believe that all good roads lead to God and simultaneously to believe that faith in Jesus Christ is absolutely indispensable to salvation.

¹⁹The notion of civility is borrowed from John Murray Cuddihy, but adapted for use here. See especially his *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste* (New York: Seabury, 1978).

²⁰Sidney Mead, “An Address to Lutherans,” *The Springfielder* 37 (1973) 8-9.

Could the developing liturgical ethos of Norwegian-American Lutheranism have opened the possibility of another massive contradiction? Could it have reawakened the old antagonisms of Marburg among its people?

Although the Norwegians brought with them no devotion to the notion *finitum capax infiniti* as an abstract principle, they did come to America with the conviction and the experience that the truth is something to be heard and spoken and sung; that it can be seen and touched and tasted. They also brought with them the conviction and the experience that images, objects, vesture, gesture, and music are not the truth in the way body and blood are, but that these things can reflect and portray and teach the truth. In America conviction and liturgical experience came apart. To be sure, the Norwegian Lutherans remained convinced of the old truths. Sunday after

Sunday, congregations confessed belief in the resurrection of the body, and at the altar railing pastors reiterated to each communicant a doctrinal formula designed to reinforce the corporeality of truth: “This is the true body of Christ.” At the same time doctrine and liturgical ethos had gone their separate ways. In particular, what was projected into visual art and then seen with the eyes was divorced from what was spoken with the mouth and heard with the ears. Could the faithful remain unaffected by this separation of conviction and experience, of confession and vision? Suppressing incarnational elements of the liturgical ethos and simultaneously acquiring a profane sight by which to navigate in the everyday world of American modernity where symbols are merely symbols, what were these Lutherans actually seeing in church? Is it possible that communicants may have remained convinced of the Lutheran doctrine of the real presence, but learned like many of their American neighbors to “see” the sacrament as symbol in Zwinglian fashion?

The question invites others. Between inherited doctrine and developing experience, did room remain for a real presence to intrude on these modern Americans? And how finally did they see Jesus? The shaping of the liturgical tradition and other hints intimate that they may have learned to see something other than what their doctrine said they saw.²¹ If the questions can be answered at all, they cannot be resolved without extensive excavation in the piety and belief of the generations. An apparent capacity for contradiction and the history of the liturgical ethos suggest that they are questions worth asking. Inheritors of other traditions may want to make the same inquiries. It is at least possible that America has gotten its pound of flesh from some of its Christians.

To raise these questions is not, of course, to suggest rummaging in attics to find a liturgical practice for the present. It will not work to drag out the old furniture, dress up in the old clothes, play the old tunes, sing the old songs, and dance the old steps. That has been tried—with dubious results. Beyond illuminating the past, perhaps these questions only invite pondering the possibility of a liturgics as authentically evangelical as it is appropriately American, modern, and neighborly.

²¹The same study to which Mead referred found that, while the heart of Lutheran piety remains set on Jesus, contemporary American Lutherans lean toward a docetic Christology separating the two natures of Christ and underemphasizing his human nature. See Merton Strommen *et al.*, *A Study of Generations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972) 114-118.