Word & World
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Has the World Devoured the Word in American Lutheranism?

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Preface: It has been some years since I have written in criticism of the ELCA. After the schism it seemed best to turn toward the future by focusing my attention on the new church, the North American Lutheran Church, to which I was loyal. Keep the bitterness of the split to a minimum. Maintain friendships across church lines. But since I have been asked to write about the dialectic involved in relating the Word to the World, I cannot help but ponder how it has worked out in American Lutheranism in my lifetime. I am still surprised and appalled by what has happened to the Lutheran church into which I was baptized, nurtured by Word and Sacrament, and called to be a Christian teacher. So I offer the following as my understanding of the painful history which those of us of a certain age have experienced.

When the first issue of *Dialog* appeared in the winter of 1962 I was happily engaged as a student in the dialogue between Word and World at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. The new dialogical fields had just been offered to students who wanted to engage theology with psychology (Religion and Personality), with literature (Religion and Art), with the history of religions (History of

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Religions), or with society (Ethics and Society). There was quite a divide between those students who were caught up in the regnant liberal theology (process, experiential) and those from classic Protestant traditions who chose Barth, Niebuhr, or Bonhoeffer to represent the theological side of the dialogue. The latter party thought the former tailored the Word too much to the World of contemporary philosophy. The intensity of debate between those two parties in both the faculty and the student body was something to behold. I have never experienced such intellectual excitement since.

The engagement of Word and World in those dialogical fields was not just theoretical. The early 1960s (which were really a prelude to the real 1960s, which were from 1965–1975) were typified by an activist period that might be called "liberal idealism." American society was energized by the civil rights movement, the effort to end poverty, and the rebuilding of the cities through the community organization movement. The call to end poverty by Michael Harrington in his *The Other America* was nearly irresistible. Mainstream American churches and their theological schools were caught up in this idealism.

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I must admit that I was caught up in the enthusiasm. My doctoral advisor, Gibson Winter, had written two seminal books—*The Suburban Captivity of the Churches* and *New Creation as Metropolis*—and the other professor in my chosen field of ethics and society, Al Pitcher, was an inveterate activist in all three movements listed above. It was a bracing time for thinking and acting.

We students in the Divinity School were already going in the direction that Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson insisted on in their new journal, *Dialog*. In that first issue they declared their independence from the stodgy and wooden theology they had encountered in their Luther Seminary days. They wanted to take on the great Europeans—Barth, Bonhoeffer, Bultmann, the young Pannenberg, and Scandinavians like Aulén and Nygren. They also wanted to distance themselves from the cozy fusion of Americanism and Christianity that Will Herberg had so well analyzed in *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*. The American churches and their theological professors were all too encumbered by that fusion and the brash new editors wanted their journal to be critical of it. They wanted the Word to be articulated in a new theological language that would wrestle prophetically with an all-too-settled 1950s World.

I took precisely that tack when I began teaching in 1965 at the Rock Island campus of the new Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC). My "liberal idealist" enthusiasm was persuasive to the students—a majority of the senior class wanted to go into urban ministry!—and I was offered a permanent position in

Church and Society when I was supposed to have been a temporary replacement for the main teacher in Christian ethics, Frank Sherman. LSTC, which opened in Chicago in the fall of 1967, was the epitome of the new Lutheran dialogue between Word and World that the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) had willed into existence. We began our exciting new venture in a neighborhood that hosted a half-dozen theological schools and in a city that was caught up in all the movements of that heady time. We had huge new entering classes drawn from the cream of the crop of students who came from the Lutheran churches at their apex in terms of numbers and confidence. A large faculty melded from predecessor seminaries put together a new curriculum for a new day for the church. Now Carl Braaten, of *Dialog* fame, was one of our colleagues. We began writing for the journal, which by now had caused quite a stir and was read by many pastors.

We at LSTC of course thought we were the vanguard in the dialogue between church and world, as the LCA had meant us to be. We looked upon seminaries such as Luther as pitifully mired in an ethnic past even though they had enrollments larger than ours. The seminary's journal, *Word & World,* was still off in the future. The really adventuresome students from Valparaiso and St. Olaf came our way.

Then a strange thing happened on the way to the forum. The real 1960s occurred and "liberal idealism" disappeared. The civil rights movement became Black Power. The Viet Nam War brought forth antiwar movements of various degrees of radicalism. Revolutionary student groups organized. Assassinations of major figures—Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy—added an apocalyptic hue to the time. Political upheavals dramatically changed the traditional parties. The community organization movement split churches and communities. The beginnings of the feminist, gay liberation, and multiculturalist movements emerged. They generated their own liberationist theologies that accompanied those of the blacks (black theology) and the "wretched of the earth" (liberation theology). It became much more difficult for me to relate the Word to that revolutionary World. Indeed, I couldn't, and redefined my views in a more traditional vein.

These movements exercised a sharp criticism of America. The myth of American innocence was replaced by the myth of American guilt. They also cast great suspicion on all inherited thought patterns and conventional practices. The Marxist notion that those that hold power create oppressive ideologies to control the powerless was applied across the board. The "hermeneutic of suspicion" became the intellectual elite's most dominant instrument for understanding the world by the end of the 1960s, though it took time to work its way through the institutions of American life.

Further, high levels of individualism in their utilitarian and expressive sort, fashioned by widespread affluence in a context of freedom, made the transmission of religious traditions more difficult. The Imperial Self emerged with a vengeance. These individualisms—encouraged by the suspicion of conventional morality—also

disrupted the settled culture of the postwar 1950s that had lent coherence to American life as well as strong support for its institutions, especially the church.

These two forces—one intellectual and one practical—brought forth a lot of expansive freedom and opportunity for those blocked out of society, but they also had corrosive effects on its guidance system (meanings and values) that had drawn so heavily on the Judeo-Christian tradition. Since then we've been on the path toward increased pluralism, conflict, and polarization in society. The church has experienced significant losses in numbers and influence. It is not coincidental that the first issue of *Word & World* in 1981 was devoted to evangelism. Losses were beginning to become quite visible. The party was over.

Within the church, the dialogue between Word and World was changed forever by that turbulent era. The World exerted great pressure on the Word. The hermeneutic of suspicion and its attendant liberationist motifs slowly began to work their way through the churches and their institutions. Aggressive feminism and gay liberation were especially influential. But multiculturalism, antiracism, and anti-imperialism played out their agendas too. They slowly became the real nonnegotiables in mainstream church life, later joined by militant environmentalism. (One recent graduate from one of our Eastern seminaries said it was far more dangerous to deny global warming than the doctrine of the Trinity.)

In the LCA they appeared very early—in comparison to the larger society—as the effort to increase "inclusivity" and "diversity." Including voices "from the margins" was the positive way to overcome the hegemony of the white, heterosexual males who had dominated—and distorted—theology and church life. By the time of the formation of the ELCA "inclusivity" was the "god-word," as one researcher put it, that trumped every other consideration. Quotas became the instrument to insure inclusivity in the new church. Bishops and theologians were viewed suspiciously (they were mostly white males at that point) and were marginalized from the real decision-making processes of the church.

Over time these strategies produced a plethora of interest groups and a thousand individual voices but few that were really authoritative.[1] Right when it was already difficult to transmit the Christian tradition to a new generation, this diffusion of authority undermined the confidence and unity of the church. Soon after the beginning of the ELCA the three independent journals—*The Lutheran Quarterly, The Lutheran Forum, Dialog*—acted upon the growing unease within the church by organizing the "Called to Faithfulness" conferences at St. Olaf College. Enormous crowds gathered to hear various sorts of alarms. A short time after those gatherings Paul Hinlicky quipped that the three independent

[1]In the LCA and the ALC there had been authoritative theologians who informally provided steady theological guidance to the churches to keep them on course. In the LCA they were George Forell and William Lazareth; in the ALC Kent Knutson and Gerhard Forde. When the ELCA was organized such informal authorities were cut away. The torch should have been passed to the likes of Braaten, Jenson, and Forde, but the new organizational structure of the ELCA inhibited such a move. Besides, all three exercised sharp criticism of the ELCA, further insuring they would not have the kind of influence exercised by the earlier "court theologians."

journals kept the ELCA from becoming the United Church of Christ (UCC) overnight.

But it was to little avail. The juggernaut—fueled by ideologies from the World—slowly ground its way forward.[2] By the end of its first decade of life, the ELCA had moved toward requiring ordination in the "episcopal succession," which alienated thousands of Lutherans. Ordination with Episcopal cachet was much to be desired since they were one step ahead of us in the march to "progressive Christianity." At roughly the same time came the refusal to engage in "pioneer evangelism," i.e., bringing the Gospel to those who had never heard it. This direct denial of the Great Commission in favor of "accompaniment" was driven by anticolonial and anti-imperialist ideologies that claimed that pioneer evangelism would inevitably be tainted by cultural imperialism. The number of missionaries who actually preached the Gospel plummeted.

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Feminist pressures continued to alter all worship materials, first in *With One Voice* and then in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, the latter even resorting to a wholesale translation of the Psalms to avoid masculine pronouns for God. Hymns were altered or eliminated for their "militaristic" allusions. Prayers addressed to "our Father" were few but the "gerund God" was often supplicated: loving God, caring God, nurturing God, etc. Feminist influence was also able to impede any advocacy efforts to limit abortion. The pro-life movement was not on the ELCA's agenda, to say the least. One could argue that was its most serious moral failing.

The most formidable segment of the cultural revolution that emerged from the 1960s was that of sexual liberation. The age-old Christian teaching that sexual relations were the seal of the covenant of marriage and therefore confined to that estate came under great pressure. The ELCA was never able to bring itself to affirm something as simple as: "True love waits." Central to sexual liberation has been its insistence that we moderns should be free from the Christian teaching that sexual love is appropriate to form—sexual relations are taboo between beings too dissimilar (bestiality), too close in sanguinity (incest), too distant in age (pederasty), and

[2]Accommodation to the World was also evident in the institutions of the church. Social service agencies slowly lost their religious identities and substance. Many even abjured "Lutheran" in their names. Likewise, many of the ELCA-related colleges have slowly relinquished a publicly relevant role for the Christian vision and ethos in their lives. There is scarcely a whiff of such relevance in the Northeastern ELCA colleges; there is more likely to be hostility toward the public expression of Christian faith and morals. The Midwestern colleges assume they will always be "Lutheran" even though they keep no count of the diminishing number of Lutheran faculty they have.

too similar (homosexuality). Lately the movement has reached its endpoint—persons should be able to construct their sexual identities free from their biological makeup (transgenderism). In a society so committed to expressive individualism these "liberations" from biblical limits seem unstoppable.

I certainly admit that my account of the interaction of Word and World in the ELCA is not the only one. The seminary that sponsors this journal is replete with a faculty who have either accepted the ELCA's accommodation of the Word to the World or who believe its faults are not grievous enough to warrant their departure.

Indeed, the acceptance of homosexual sex was unstoppable in the ELCA, though it took many years of agitation to reach victory.[3] And then, surprise of surprises, that acceptance quickly morphed into the acceptance of gay marriage in both church and society. With a male bishop married to another man, there is no going back for the ELCA. Practice will dictate teaching. The Christian consensus about marriage being a lifelong covenant of love and fidelity between two complementary beings oriented toward procreation has been shattered forever. The ELCA has departed from a crucial orthodox Christian teaching.[4] It is the sectarian body, not the two that have gathered over a thousand churches into the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ and the North American Lutheran Church. I was active in helping start the latter body and presently serve on its Commission for Theology and Doctrine. We are trying to keep the World from devouring the Word, though there is no guarantee of success.[5]

I certainly admit that my account of the interaction of Word and World in the ELCA is not the only one. The seminary that sponsors this journal is replete with a faculty who have either accepted the ELCA's accommodation of the Word to the World—to them it is a proper and necessary one—or who believe its faults

[3]After many attempts victory was won in the 2009 Assembly of the ELCA. The resistors—those who thought they were standing on the Word—lost on all three major initiatives: the ordination of partnered gays, the blessing of gay unions, and the hapless Social Statement on Sexuality. The latter's accumulation of 666 votes—one more than needed, seemed appropriate. When the trifecta was completed I felt a strange feeling of liberation. After years of fighting a rearguard action against what we thought was the World reshaping the Word in the ELCA, I no longer felt that I needed to fight. Defeat was sweet. It gave a chance for a new beginning, which finally took shape first in the founding of CORE (Coalition for Reform) and then the North American Lutheran Church in 2010.

[4]Perhaps just as egregious as the move itself was the fact that it was done without compelling biblical and theological arguments in a church that prided itself in taking the Bible and Lutheran theology seriously. The ELCA still theoretically recognizes a variety of biblical and theological opinions on these sexuality matters, which is in itself a huge change in Christian teaching. In actuality, the most liberal one is the only one tolerated beyond the parish level, though a few dissenters might get by if they too are "pacified."

[5]I have written nothing about the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod in this essay. While it is more reliable in "keeping the faith," it has something of the opposite problem from the ELCA. While the ELCA is constantly tugged toward "progressive" liberal Protestantism, the LCMS is constantly pressured—or harassed—by the fundamentalism of those who hold the Brief Statement as the Sword of Damocles over the church. That leads to constant fighting and fear. Were I currently applying for a teaching position in the seminaries of either body, I would have little chance of being employed by them. I'm glad to have been born when I was.

are not grievous enough to warrant their departure. There are perhaps others who would like to depart but who don't for various reasons, some compelling and others not so much. One could say the same thing about most ELCA pastors and congregations. Even those who disagree strongly with the ELCA's trajectory have for the most part been "pacified," i.e., they avoid the "hot-button" issues that will bring tension and division to their parishes. The ELCA dearly wishes that all parishes would proceed as if nothing serious has happened. But in the long run the elites will win out: the seminaries will bow completely to the new teachings and most graduates will accept them. The few traditionalist seminarians will keep quiet and try to survive in "pacified" parishes. Bishops will place them only if they are quiet. Parishes will slowly bend in the prescribed direction.

Though the precipitous decline in membership of the ELCA has many causes—all religious communities are having a hard time making their way in the chilly new antireligious climate in America, it is certainly true that the trajectory it has taken has led to the departure of hundreds of congregations and thousands of Lutheran Christians. Many of those who departed risked much in doing so, and tend to be intense and serious believers. But the new Lutheran bodies will flourish and grow only if zeal for the Gospel—the whole Trinitarian faith—leads to committed evangelism at home and abroad. The faith will have to have children. Meanwhile, they will try to go forward without letting the World redefine the Word. ✠

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