

# REFORMATION FAITH AND AMERICAN PRAGMATISM

## I.

What is it about Martin Luther that interested William James? What is it about William James that interested Dietrich Bonhoeffer? Is what interested the pragmatist James in Luther the same thing which interested the Lutheran Bonhoeffer in the pragmatist James? In Bonhoeffer's discovery of James, during his stay at Union Seminary during 1930-31, was the Lutheran Reformation somehow meeting itself coming back, and in James' earlier discovery of Luther had the Reformation somehow come into its own in America in a way it seldom has amongst American Lutherans? I think so, though with important qualifications.

Or consider a subtler, perhaps fortuitous comparison: the more philosophically finished pragmatist, John Dewey, during his years at the University of Michigan came under the influence of the Scottish preacher-author, George MacDonald, himself an interpreter of Luther. Is what interested Dewey in MacDonald akin to what interested MacDonald in Martin Luther, inspiring him to translate the Reformer's hymns into English? This latter relationship between American pragmatism and the Lutheran Reformation, DeweyMacDonald-Luther, may be too tenuous to yield anything more than provocative guesses. But the earlier comparison, James-Luther-Bonhoeffer-James, for all the admitted ambivalence between the principals, does suggest points of telling resemblance (whether or not of historical continuity) seldom told in studies of pragmatism or of the Reformation. The border between these two historic movements, traditionally quite closed, might just be reopened for profitable trade.

It is no secret that James' acquaintance with Luther, as reflected in his Gifford Lectures on The Varieties of Religious Experience and elsewhere, was often superficial and impressionistic. Faith, James' chief preoccupation with Luther, meant more to Luther than the Gelassenheit which James traces from late medieval mysticism to Wesley as a cure of the "sick soul." Similarly, Bonhoeffer's studies in American pragmatism, though he claimed to have read "almost the entire philosophical work of William James....Dewey, Perry, Russell," did not extend to the real source of American pragmatism in C. S. Peirce. If they had, he would have known that his own strictures against James' overly immanentist, individualistic criteria of truth had been anticipated by Peirce in the name of a genuine pragmatism.

All the same, what does emerge both in James' identifying with Luther and in Bonhoeffer's identifying with James is the profound nexus between faith and practical consequence. The wonder for James was that precisely as Luther's believers were relieved of moralistic fixation with their duty were their moral energies released for public action. Bonhoeffer likewise came to prize in James, but then retrospectively also in Luther, that faith itself finds verification in ethical-political "usefulness." So much so that, as Bonhoeffer came to see, truth which does not conform to analysis of concrete results is also not truth "before God." But that suggestion recalls similar accents in Luther, especially the "political" Luther in the years after 1530 who was compelled to attend the link between faith and its fateful fallout for its confessors—biographically not unlike the martyrological awareness of Bonhoeffer and the tragic sense in James.

For all three, faith is inseparable, also as truth, from its consequences, and the more public the consequences the more accountable the faith. However, both for American pragmatism and for the Reformation that was not only an answer but the onset of

a whole new problem. How each movement addressed the problem might be of help to the heirs of both. At that I hope to try my hand, welcoming every encouragement.

## **II.**

The project, as I envision it, would divide into two parts. Whether or not they would eventually constitute sequential halves in an outline, they do represent discrete components, distinguishable in method and in the ambitiousness of their claims. The first task is to tell the story of the James-Luther-Bonhoeffer-James acquaintanceship as plausibly as the evidence allows. Second, I hope to venture five hypotheses, and test them, about significant points of resemblance between these three figures.

### **Part One. A Historic Trialogue: How Credible Was It?**

1. How James' citations from Luther function in James and how in Luther
2. How Bonhoeffer's impressions of James, pro and con, hold up under investigation of the original
3. Recent secondary (sometimes disparate) interpretations of the sources:  
On James: Richard Bernstein, J.S. Bixler, R.B. Perry, Richard Rorty, John E. Smith  
On Bonhoeffer: Ernst Feil, Martin Marty, Tiemo Rainer Peters, Paul Van Buren  
On Luther: Mark Edwards, Hjalmar Junghans, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Eike Wolgast

## Part Two. Five Hypotheses

1. James' critique of philosophical foundationalism finds rough but real analogies in Bonhoeffer's critique of idealism and Luther's critique of scholasticism.

2. If as an alternative to foundationalism these three thinkers had recourse to "faith" (much as they differed over the meaning of faith) none of them saw such recourse as a flight from "experience"—a term which figured prominently in the writings of all three, also in their descriptions of faith.

3. Moreover, so intimately was faith related to historical consequences that, however transcendent the object of faith, its verification was still—or perhaps for that very reason—decidedly consequentialist, even when the consequences suggested theological adjustments (as with James' finite deity and Luther's and Bonhoeffer's hypothetical atheism), or when verification had to be extended indefinitely/eschatologically, though still always in the public domain.

4. If philosophical idealism, as it has been said, tried to "continue Protestantism by other means," then James' and Bonhoeffer's ambivalence toward idealism may reflect a similar ambivalence they held toward a version of Protestantism which in other respects had been very formative for them: New England Calvinism in the case of James, Barthianism in the case of Bonhoeffer.

5. James' concept of a "genuine option" as being "living, forced and momentous" accords with Bonhoeffer's martyrological concept of status confessionis and Luther's concept of coram Deo, essential conditions for religious—but then also ethical—knowing.

The above project—for which I have done only preliminary reading

and note-taking, no writing—is clearly ambitious enough to require full time work for the entire academic year 1987-88, especially for one who writes nowhere nearly so fluently as James and Bonhoeffer and Luther did. Of the two parts of the project outlined above, Part One should be manageable within the first quarter and Part Two would consume the balance. Securing a whole year's leave from my teaching duties would not be the problem. Securing income to support that leave would be. Bluntly put, whatever income I may anticipate will determine the length of my writing-leave. I have no "grants for tenure during the three years preceding the proposed NEH tenure," only a partial (five month) sabbatical in 1984. For this project I have not approached nor been approached by a publisher.

### **III.**

What follows is a brief bibliographical sample, and then only of secondary sources. The relevant primary sources constitute a library by themselves, especially when they include the writers' personal correspondence, as they must in the case of James (1920 edition by his brother Henry) and Bonhoeffer (Eberhard Bethge's edition, Widerstand und Ergebung, 1959). So vast is the primary material in Luther that I am hoping to restrict myself mostly to those sources—Latin and German original in the Weimarer Ausgabe—which James and Bonhoeffer and other Luther interpreters invoke.

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Paul M. Van Buren, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel (1963)

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On James:

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William Dean, American Religious Empiricism (1986)

John Dewey, "Development of American Pragmatism," in D.S. Robinson (ed.) Anthology of Recent Philosophy (1929)

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\_\_\_\_\_ (ed.), Martin Luthers Leben und Werk, 1526-1546, two volumes (1983)

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Eike Wolgast, Die Wittenberger Theologie und die Politik der evangelischen Staende (1977)

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