

Reconsidering Lutheran Identity in an Age of Theological Pluralism and Ecumenical Challenge

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Lutheran Identity

In “an age of theological pluralism and ecumenical challenge”, what identifies Lutherans as Lutherans? Answer: the way they identify “theological pluralism and ecumenical challenge”. Isn’t that at least one telltale sign of “Lutheran identity”? Might there not be an appropriately Lutheran understanding of pluralism and ecumenism? And might not such a Lutheran understanding reflect in turn what it means nowadays to be Lutheran at all?

Putting the question that way may not be exactly what was intended by the assignment. Perhaps the intention was rather something like this: Theological pluralism is today a fact of life, a given which Lutherans for good or ill must realistically accept but about which they must then ask: How in the midst of such pluralism, threatening as it does to relativize all traditional confessional identities, can Lutherans still continue to be themselves? This version of the problem does have an advantage. It recognizes that contemporary theological pluralism is not merely the coexistence side by side of a plurality of isolated confessions, each one embraced only by its own adherents without impinging upon the confessions of others. No, pluralism today, far from a merely external arrangement of live-and-let-live, of agreeing to disagree, is more pervasive and internally related than that. The way today’s Lutheran, say, is confronted by other confessions affects the very way he regards his own confession. He is pluralistic in his attitude not only toward others but toward himself as well. However, whether such pluralistic self-understanding leads necessarily to relativism—I think it need not—is another question.

In any case, I am asking leave to interpret the assignment differently. Not: How can Lutheranism survive amidst pluralism? But rather: How can pluralism survive, perhaps also flourish, with the help of Lutheranism? Does the question in that form intimate more optimism than Lutheranism warrants? Doesn’t such self-confidence, portraying Lutherans in the heroic role of pluralism’s patron, evade the identity crises which Lutherans themselves have yet to resolve? After all, don’t they first have to restate “justification today” or law-and-gospel or *sola fide* if they hope even so much as to compete in today’s pluralism, let alone rescue it? In face of other confessional options and newer ideologies, when justification is hardly what sinners crave and divine law has been anomized and *sola*-anything sounds exclusive and intolerant, isn’t it a bit venturesome for a Lutheranism whose own commodity seems so expendable to offer now to

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subsidize the whole market? True, the offer does sound a bit audacious. But audacity might be just what pluralism needs and what Lutheranism needs too.

But doesn't prudence require something a bit more cautious? In face of the pluralistic temptations to neutralize our confessional identity, ought we not rather consolidate what is still intact and perhaps enunciate once more the non-negotiables of our faith, simply declaring "this far and no farther"? Or if that sounds too obviously defensive, as though our Lutheran identity were a rampart to hide behind and to distance us from the incursions of our brothers, mightn't we and they settle for some process of simply affirming one another? That way they try to appreciate our position and we try to reciprocate. Under the circumstances isn't that the best of both worlds? Having thus made the necessary concessions, we could still preserve our "Lutheran identity".

Why court danger by opening ourselves not only to others' affirmations but even to their criticisms, their criticisms of us? For isn't that what pluralism finally implies, mutual criticism? Why not rather discourage such criticism, in both directions, since really it is as hazardous to give criticism as it is to receive it? Above all, why encourage the very system of pluralism itself? Isn't it enough that it is there, and that we have all we can do to make the most of it? Must we come to the world's aid even for the sake of this ambiguous, unsteady creature called pluralism? How in such a rescue effort could we save our own identity, much less rediscover it? All these questions are undoubtedly serious ones and by no means merely rhetorical. To seek their answers, it is now clearer than ever, does require a measure of audacity.

From what has already been said it should be plain that in this essay I understand pluralism—social and political pluralism in general, religious and theological pluralism in particular—as a positive good, yet only potentially so. More exactly, it seems redeemable. On the other hand, if that potentiality for redemption cannot materialize, I would not pretend that pluralism has to be salvaged at all costs. I recognize too that the word "pluralism" is not universally a blessed word but in some circles is by definition pejorative.¹ Hence, I shall have to request of the reader a certain readiness to make semantic adjustments.

So much for the term "pluralism". The topic assigned to me includes also the term "ecumenism." What about that? For reasons of economy, probably also for other substantive reasons, I should like to merge the two terms. How so? Let us say that ecumenism is pluralism fulfilled. Conversely, in order for pluralism to become all that it ought it must be ecumenical. The point is not that that is all there is to ecumenism, namely to be a perfected version of pluralism. But in the present "age of ... ecumenical challenge", as the assignment phrases it, isn't this one of the foremost challenges to the ecumenical movement today, to reclaim the phenomenon of modern pluralism, religious and otherwise, or at least to let the church be an example for the rest of the world of what ecumenical pluralism might be? In the contribution Lutherans might make toward meeting that challenge they would be not only "reconsidering" but also re-asserting their "Lutheran identity". And if, into the bargain, what they accomplish thereby is only Christian, so much the better. That is also what it means to be Lutheran. Note once more the need for audacity.

¹ For example, W. Stählin, *Pluralismus, Toleranz, Christenheit* (Nürnberg: 1961), p. 146.

Contributions from the Lutheran Past

So why not sin boldly and ask point-blank: What is Lutheran about theological pluralism? Or about pluralism generally? On second thought that question may not seem so bold after all, not when we recall that modern pluralistic civilization does owe something historically—not everything, by any means, but something—to the Lutheran Reformation. Could it be, then, that *that* is the contribution which Lutheranism has to offer contemporary pluralism, namely the contribution which it has already made out of its Reformation past? Might that be our way of “reconsidering Lutheran identity” amidst this present age, to show how this age is indebted to that earlier age which was somehow more familiarly our own? That return back across the cause-and-effect bridges of modern history, treacherous as they are, is worth a try. And of course it has often been tried, not without remarkable success. Still, it is only fair to warn that even such noteworthy historical efforts at explaining modern pluralism by recourse to the Reformation might not yet be the sort of audacious Lutheran contribution we need today.

We need not credit Luther quite so enthusiastically as Karl Holl did with the origins of modern religious toleration, yet even such an otherwise loyal Troeltschian as H. Richard Niebuhr could on a point like this prefer Holl’s reading to Troeltsch’s.² One of the places where Holl was right, it seems to me, is in his demonstration that religious tolerance originated prior to and independently of religious relativism. If it did not, then of course any link from Luther to modern religious pluralism would be more tenuous than ever. Holl’s reminder is interesting: After the Enlightenment was already on its way, and with it the growth of toleration, “reason” itself was still being thought of as absolute, not relative, even by such pioneers of the Enlightenment as Lessing. Only later did this early absolutist notion of truth as an inherent given, whole and intact, become relativized. Only later, that is, did truth come to be seen instead as attainable only by progressive and unending approximations to it. Yet even such later relativism, Holl cautions, could boast of no necessary connection with tolerance but was, all too often, guilty of the grossest intolerance. In any case, he argues, it was not this gradual relativizing of truth which really decided the shift toward the toleration of religious differences.³

With that disclaimer, which is convincing enough, Holl believed he had cleared the way for tracing modern religious toleration back to its impetus in the Lutheran Reformation (a claim which is somewhat less convincing): namely, that in the history of governmental safeguards for religious pluralism Luther was the one who first broke through the millennium-long intolerance of medieval society. The impulse for that breakthrough Holl finds in Luther’s insistence that God desires no forced labor and that compulsion only produces hypocrites.⁴ True enough, we might echo, that original insistence of Luther’s upon the uncoerced nature of faith does indeed seem to have got the whole long process toward toleration off to its start, and with that the ground work for later religious pluralism. For in the sequel don’t we find writer after writer, from Jeremy Taylor a century after Luther to Karl Rahner today, employing the selfsame

² H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1951), p. 172, fn. 14.

³ Karl Holl, “Luther und das landesherrliche Kirchenregiment”, in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, Vol. I: Luther, 7th ed. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1948), pp. 367 ff.

⁴ *ibid.*

rationale as Luther's to protect religious differences?⁵ Ah, but then there comes the disquieting reminder that similar things were said already by medieval popes. Or perhaps more disquieting is the recollection which most all of these writers cited, Luther included, that faith's inherent need of freedom from compulsion is as old as the gospel itself, as Christians have always suspected. True, that does not yet refute Holl. But it does give pause.

Not that Holl imagined that that original Lutheran impulse was a sufficient cause. It gained real momentum, Holl acknowledges, only in the later English sects. Besides, not all the historical causes of toleration were religious ones and, of those that were, not all were wholesome. The seventeenth century's wars of religion, along with the onslaught of critical reason, encouraged a growing doctrinal indifference. For Holl such *Gleichgültigkeit* was not yet the same as relativism, though it did admittedly hasten the growth of religious toleration. Worse yet, the climactic cause of toleration, says Holl, lies in the self-interest of power-seeking states. They finally recognized on pragmatic grounds that a confessionally diverse society was viable politically and in fact that the suppression of dissent is civilly disruptive.⁶ Through it all, however, Holl still believed that this development toward religious pluralism originated with Luther's axiom, faith cannot be forced.

Despite the brilliant historiography of Karl Holl, a pardonable doubt still persists. The doubt need not be directed against Holl's own Lutheran partisanship or any disposition of his toward special pleading; personal commitment in a historian may be creative, not merely constricting. What does suggest caution in so complex a history as that of modern pluralism is the inherent difficulty of historical explanation, the documenting of causes and effects. That being the case, the explanatory difficulties would have been much the same even if the original "impulse" for pluralism had been located in some other feature of the Reformation, for example, in the Reformers' ecclesiology. "Eine weitere Wurzel des Pluralismus", Hans Grass suggests, "liegt im reformatorischen Kirchenbegriff."⁷ Similarly the *satis est* of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession has been proposed as a historical explanation of religious pluralism. Likewise, the pluralistic theory of modern denominationalism has been traced to "the Reformers' cautions against hallowing particular churchly forms and their acceptance of the several Protestant divisions as true churches".⁸ Wolfhart Pannenberg intimates a similar historical explanation. Pannenberg is frank to acknowledge Luther's vestigial authoritarianism and that the modern right of private judgment is, if anything, "eine ungewollte Folge der Reformation". Still, Pannenberg does see a connection with "the central idea of the Reformation", Luther's doctrine of justification. For there, the believer was related to "God's absolute truth", God in Christ, *unmittelbar* and was thus liberated "from every last bond to any human authority".⁹ Really,

⁵ Jeremy Taylor, "A Discourse of the Liberty of Prophesying", in *The Whole Works of the Rev. Jeremy Taylor* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1844) vol. II, pp., 378, 384 f., xiii, 11; xvi, 4. Karl Rahner, *Schriften zur Theologie, Vol. VI: Neuere Schriften III* (Einsiedeln, Benziger Verlag, 1965), p. 236.

⁶ Holl, loc. cit.

⁷ Hans Grass, "Der theologische Pluralismus und die Wahrheitsfrage", in *Theologie und Kritik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969), p. 77.

⁸ "Denominationalism" in Jerald C. Brauer, editor, *The Westminster Dictionary of Church History* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), p. 263.

⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Reformation zwischen gestern und morgen* (Aspekte moderner Theologie, 7), (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1969), pp. 14-20.

there is no good reason why some or all of these Reformation motifs might not have influenced decisively the pluralism of our day. But in view of the explanatory difficulties involved, it is treacherously difficult to make the case stick.

For that reason, and for another reason about to be mentioned, the best Lutheran case for religious pluralism does not seem to be the historical one, indispensable as that is. Isn't there a better alternative, at least a more daring one? That remains to be seen. Meanwhile we might take a page from what John Courtney Murray wrote about the Declaration of Vatican II, *Dignitatis Humanae*, which he himself had such a large share in writing. Notice Murray's historical reserve. He did claim, as the Declaration does too, that the modern principle of religious freedom "has roots in divine revelation", that is, in the Christian faith, also that the connection between this latter-day principle and that original revelation is "historical". But the historical details of that connection are admittedly diffuse and elusive. "Given this Christian appreciation of the value of freedom (and given also the growing secular experience of freedom as a social value and a political end)", "men would gradually come—as over the centuries they have come—to realize that man's religious life is an affair of responsible freedom." And Murray freely conceded that "both as a principle and as a legal institution, religious freedom is less than two hundred years old", and that "the First Amendment [to the Constitution of the United States] may claim the honor of having first clearly formulated the principle and established the institution."¹⁰

Such Modesty—which, I should add, characterized also Holl and the others cited earlier—is characteristic of the modern historian. But more than that, it is itself in the spirit of modern pluralism and ecumenism to give credit to others where credit is due and not to exaggerate the historical achievements of one's own tradition. All the more reason then that whatever modern pluralism owes to the Lutheran past, monumental as that may be and deserving of gratitude, we Lutherans lose nothing if we recount that past with due humility, or at least with a certain seemly restraint. Yet restraint was not what we bargained for at the beginning of this essay. There the talk was rather about audacity. How with all boldness and confidence may Lutheranism not only sustain itself in this "age of pluralism", but sustain that very pluralism? If the answer goes beyond Lutheranism's past contribution, what more is left? How audacious dare we be?

Pluralism: The Courage of Mutual Criticism

The time has come to make an admission. The word "audacity" here is strictly a pun. It is the idiom of the Enlightenment. To that age too, of course, our current religious pluralism owes much. For that reason already the Enlightenment deserves sympathetic reassessment by churchmen today, including Lutherans. *Aude*, Immanuel Kant urged the men of his age as he asked and answered: "What is enlightenment?" *Sapere aude!* Dare to reason! Have the courage to use your own minds! That is the motto of enlightenment.¹¹ The "reason" which each

¹⁰ "Declaration on Religious Freedom" in Walter M. Abbott, editor, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: The America Press, 1966), p. 689. See also John Courtney Murray, "The Issue of Church and State at Vatican Council II", *Theological Studies*, Vol. 27, December, 1966, pp. 580-606.

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, "Was ist Aufklärung?" in *Immanuel Kants Werke*, edited by Ernst Cassirer (Berlin: 1922), Vol IV. pp. 169-176.

man needed the audacity to use, “without direction from another”, was essentially his critical reason. He must dare to judge any and every authoritarianism, his own as well as others’, however hallowed by tradition or privileged by power. That Enlightenment demand for indigenous critical judgment, for each person and each community to become responsible for criticism and responsive to criticism, to diversify society’s tribunals of accountability in the free give-and-take of criticism without hindrance from unresponsive authorities—that demand both did inform and still does inform modern religious pluralism. But to meet such a demand, to be open to the evaluations from others and to share our evaluations of them, to be enlighteningly pluralistic, requires courage.

Modern man has unprecedented opportunity for criticism, both to exercise and receive it. The scientific methodologies of criticism, the etiquette for its courteous exchange, the electoral and editorial and educational and ecumenical processes for its dissemination have all been refined and extended in ways previously unimaginable. Enough so, at least, that those remaining millions who are still without its benefits have by now some inkling of what it is they have been deprived of: a share in the critical exchange and the requisite audacity. The very scope of modern criticism, both as to who may speak it and who may hear it, tends toward globality. It reads like a secular fulfillment of a vision Luther had. Thanks to the gospel, said he, the most common Christian folk would be able to evaluate critically the whole of life, including those areas which theretofore had been off-limits to them. Actually that was not a vision but rather a fact for which Luther, already then, claimed to have empirical proof (*experientia magna*). Before his own eyes Christian people were increasingly able to judge that the life-style of ordinary laborers was more God-pleasing than all monastic orders. Their new judgment thus extended to the sacrosanct authorities of their day, but also to the sacrosanct tradition of their past. All of life was now *sub iudicio nostro*—subject, as the more ambitious *Drucktext* adds, “to our certain and infallible judgment.”¹² Four centuries later it is an awesome truth that probably never before in history have so many people, present and past, name by name, been subject to the judgment of so many of us.

The very word “criticism” reflects one of the major themes surely of modern times: all the way from Shakespeare’s Iago, who is “nothing if not critical”, to Kant’s three *Critiques*, to Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s “critical” social theory, to that very method which these worthies must themselves now undergo, historical “criticism”. This terminology of criticism, which first gained currency among the French, is really rather new. Seventeenth century Englishmen were still writing “criterion” with Greek letters.¹³ But the terminology caught on fast, apparently filling a need. “Das eigentlich junge wort is schon tief eingewurzelt”, as Grimm’s *Wörterbuch* marveled. “Es is längst über die kreise des wissenschaftlichen und kunstlebens hinausgedrungen; namentlich auch im politischen leben gibt als ‘kritik’.” More than that, “wenigstens in einer redensart is es sogar schon allgemein geworden auch in nichtgelehrten kreisen. ‘Das ist unter aller kritik’ sagt man von etwas, das man als völlig wertlos oder verwerflich bezeichnen will.”¹⁴ Not only the word “criticism” but the activity it represents has by now come to be almost everyone’s and every group’s responsibility.

¹² WA 40/1, 342.

¹³ *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), Vol. II, p. 1179.

¹⁴ Jakob und Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Leipzig: Verlag von S. Hirzel, 1873), Vol. V, pp. 2335 f.

The courage of mutual criticism is basic to an effective pluralistic society. Take that courage away, and the individuals and constituent groups in society deprive one another of the approval and disapproval, the critical evaluation which they need for common correction and enrichment. Unless criticism is exchanged within groups and between them, the individuals within them are prey to their own group's tyranny, and into the vacuum between groups creeps the state or, more likely, those outcrowding monster groups of industry and technology with the state at their bidding. To forestall that takes power, yes, but courage is itself a primordial power. The state too has a share in criticism, not only to take it but also to give it, when others are silent about the rights of individuals or the common good. The state need not be the enemy of pluralism, not when it too is drawn into the critical give-and-take; but for that it needs encouragement.

Without the courage of inter- and intra-group criticism, pluralism loses its mutuality and degenerates into mere legalized difference. That is enticing to the faint-hearted. Then each is safely left to do his own thing, the ultimate ghetto. And each separated group and class and sector of society tacitly conspires: We won't criticize you if you won't criticize us, which is a sort of reverse exegesis of our Lord's "judge not and you will not be judged". Such insular pluralism assumes that power ought always be fragmentized—as if united power, by definition, corrupts. That sort of pluralism, so cowardly because it dreads mutual accountability, is but a disguised form of polytheism.¹⁵ For that, who needs courage? But a vital pluralism, if it hopes to become ecumenical, does need the courage of reciprocal criticism.

Theories of Pluralism: A Critique

Few things are so in need of our criticism from one another, or so worthy of it, as the theories we variously cherish about pluralism itself. But such criticism likewise requires courage in view of the prestigious status such theories enjoy. The following paragraphs present only a sampling of three or four theories and at that with only minimal criticism. That much criticism requires only modest courage, but it at least requires the courage to be sympathetic.

Take for example that pluralist theory which regards religious differences with "neutrality" or, what is scarcely better, with "tolerance". Either way, this theory of pluralism tends to underplay the importance of truth, a criticism which has been made often and with good effect. Because it has, the theory may no longer pose the problem it once did. However, a historical reminder may still be in order. One of the more eloquent critics of this low-truth theory was Horace Bushnell. Not one to lack for courage, Bushnell gave the benefit of his criticism both to the neutralists and to the tolerant "liberals". The former, he objected, were not out "to find the truth", but only "a position halfway between", "midway between somewhere and nowhere". As for the "tolerance" of the "liberal school", Bushnell has this to say: "Having no creed, in fact, save that other men shall be welcome to theirs, ... the liberal school makes a virtue of negation, and freezes itself in the mild and gentle temperature it has mistaken for charity".¹⁶ The danger in such a criticism is

¹⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1960), p. 28.

¹⁶ Horace Bushnell, "Christian Comprehensiveness" in *The New Englander*, Vol. VI, January, 1848, p. 86. For these and the following discoveries about Bushnell I am indebted to John G. Huber, "The Principle of Comprehension as

that in the process of restoring truth we neglect charity. But that false antithesis was the very one Bushnell was trying to scotch. Bushnell's own alternative, in which he might have been influenced by the French philosopher Victor Cousin, was what he called "comprehensiveness". Notice, that was over a century before the "Lausanne principle" of comprehension came to be articulated at the Faith and Order Conference in Oberlin. It is reasonable to expect that Bushnell had the courage to take criticism as well as give it and that he, no less than today's Anglicans and other proponents of comprehensiveness, would have welcomed like criticism of his own proposal. To give him and them that benefit of the doubt requires little enough courage. After that, criticism should proceed amicably, from us to them and vice versa. However, I frankly confess that at the moment I am not as clear as I would want to be either about what comprehensiveness entails or about its limitations. To advance beyond it to something better, therefore, requires courage not merely in a moral sense but in a theological. How to think big, and still bigger, about the church of Christ and about the ecumenical possibilities of pluralism in general?

Or take another example, this time that theory which views pluralism as essentially a process of competition, albeit "amiable competition". This theory is still popularly applied, also to Christian denominations. Though usually with the gentlemen's agreement not to proselytize, they are seen more or less as good-natured competitors.¹⁷ What is it about that theory which requires reevaluation? Merely that competition is ruthless? On the contrary, competition can also be construed on a game-model as play among good sports. But the sanguine assumption that free play among competitors will automatically insure an over-all harmony—isn't that in need of a second look? Also by the churches? Shouldn't they especially have courage to believe that inter-group harmony comes by something more radical than by sportsmanlike competition? Even political theorists, in this country as well, are exposing the factual baselessness of such naive pluralism.¹⁸ Granted, such exposure has not been accomplished without courage, both by the critics and by those who accepted their criticism. But then that only underscores the need of brave mutual criticism, which after all is something more than brave competition.

Consider one last example of a pluralist theory which invites criticism, a theory which at first blush looks very much like the one we ourselves have here been suggesting. It is the theory that pluralism is saved by criticism alone. Now if there is no such theory, at least in so many words, by all odds there ought to be. Yet it is a fact, isn't it, that there is such a theory after all, at least in practice? The practice is widespread. And why shouldn't it be? For such a view of pluralism (call it the theory of *solo iudicio*) would contain at the least a very important half-truth. As we ourselves have been saying, unless the many diverse centers of our society—Gerhard Lenski is even willing to call them "incompatible"¹⁹—are joined in the mutual accountability and correction of critical exchange, pluralism seems doomed. Surely it would stand no chance of

an Ecumenical Context for Christian Unity Within the Diversity", unpublished dissertation at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, 1972, pp. 80-87.

¹⁷ See article "Denominationalism", *op. cit.*, pp. 262 f.

¹⁸ Henry S. Kariel, "Pluralism" in David L. Sills, editor, *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1968) Vol. XII, p. 168.

¹⁹ Gerhard Lenski, Jr., "Pluralism", in Julius Bodensieck, editor, *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965), Vol. III, p. 1909.

maturing into an ecumenical pluralism, if the conflicting parties stopped taking one another's corrections seriously.

Yet on the other hand, as we also said, there does seem to be a built-in resistance to such mutual criticism. Why else would it require courage? Why do pluralistic men, for all their criticalness, still shrink from their critical responsibilities to one another? Perhaps for no better reason than that criticism is negative, and no one likes being all that negative or all that negated. Unfortunately that is so. Criticism always does contain, at least implicitly, an element of negation—shall we say, of accusation? But is that a good enough reason, an audacious enough reason for limiting it? Might there not be a more surpassing limitation—other, that is, than criticism's own negativism? For instance, what if the more radical way to silence criticism were not muting the criticism but suffering it head-on and, in suffering it, suffering it out of existence? But wouldn't that assume that the parties who could survive such criticism are ultimately beyond it? No doubt. The proposal sounds almost christological, doesn't it?

But now we are getting ahead of ourselves. Meanwhile that other, almost true theory does persist in practice. It is the widespread conviction that criticism—both pro and con, back and forth—is the only clue to a durable pluralism. The theological justification frequently given for that theory comes in some form of *finitum non capax infiniti*. Accordingly, men's basic sin is construed as idolatry, meaning by that they deify the creaturely. Or in the idiom of philosophical idealism, they absolutize the relative. They dignify what is merely partial (for instance, their own confessions or their own national ethos) as though it were everything, The Whole.

So, how is this universal idolizing to be corrected? How else, say the practitioners of this theory, except by counter-balancing each partial vision by still other ones? Admittedly, each counter-balance is likewise limited, since the whole truth is not available to any of us, finite as we are and are bound to be. The best we can do in that case is to redress one another's excesses and thus aspire to an approximate wholeness. This must be done laterally between contemporaries, but also lineally by each succeeding generation's criticism of its short-sighted predecessors. An infinite regress may have to be posited, an endless future, in order to accommodate such ongoing corrigibility. In any case, criticism, always courageous enough to be mutual and tireless, is assumed to be of the essence. If that theory does not say in so many words that pluralism is saved by criticism alone, it does come close. Neither its appeal nor its accomplishments are to be underestimated. If it is to be improved upon by an alternative pluralist theory, we shall certainly need courage for the effort.

Pluralism's Critical Dilemma

Before things get better they get worse. And isn't it one of the special burdens of Lutheranism that it has been vouchsafed the terrors of the worse? Then shouldn't Lutherans especially have a heart for today's pluralist, whose critical duties crush him and on which he is so tempted to renege? What I mean in this case by things being worse is this: the plight of modern critical man (and it would be easier not to know it) is far worse than anything he might have imagined. He is right when he intuits that criticism is a fearful, destructive thing. No wonder he shirks his critical obligations. But how dreadfully right he is, he himself rarely guesses. For him, perhaps

mercifully so, there is still “the veil over Moses’ face”. Really, though, what is so forbidding about criticism is not only that it is negative. Ultimately—that is, *coram Deo*—it is self-defeating. Yet the critic dare not desist from it. Torn by that dilemma, is he to be abandoned by us without help when we of all men ought to appreciate his predicament?

Not the worst thing about criticism, though something which is bad enough, is its negativism. That is not always apparent. For criticism is evaluative and evaluation approves as well as disapproves, commends as well as rebukes, not only penalizes but also rewards. It is tempting to suppose, therefore, that herein lies the encouragement for the pluralist in his reluctance to criticize, namely to reassure him that though criticism is judgmental it is not always that.

Yet isn’t it already a judgment upon men that they even need rewards as an incentive to improve? Who could progress without compliments? Which corporation could curb its air-pollution without prospect of tax-relief? Which denomination could advance without the promise of gain? Kant with all his duty-for-its-own-sake had to invoke the rewards of immortality. Human existence being what it still is, the retributive process of praise and blame—yes, even praise—has to count on men’s need of it in order to induce them. As Augustine said, without concupiscence the law would be not only unnecessary but ineffective.²⁰ So even praise is a reflection on men, not of course because it is affirmative but because it is humanly indispensable. The same thing is true of any going pluralism. Its constituent parties likewise need to approve one another’s strengths. Repeat: *Need* to. But that already is a negative within the affirmative.

None of this is to deny of course that criticism must always be, as we say, constructive. But however constructive it may be, it always assumes that the one being criticized needs constructing. That already impugns him, and what man of good will wishes to be party to that? Which Roman Catholic enjoys telling Lutherans, “Let me explain papal authority to you”, or which Lutheran goes out of his way to ask Baptists, “Do you really understand why we baptize infants”, so long as the one is thereby implying to the other, “I have something you could use but still don’t have”?

Yet even the most constructive pluralism always insinuates, willy nilly, just such criticism. And such criticism, however subtly, simultaneously diminishes a man. Constructive criticism is always also destructive. Saying that does not reduce criticism to fault-finding. That would be caricature. Worse than that, it is a cop-out. Few critics have been so sensitive to that fallacy as literary and art critics, exceeded perhaps only by news commentators. Goethe felt constrained to explain that there is not only “eine zerstörende kritik” but also “eine produktive”.²¹ And Luther reminded his Wittenbergers that their criticisms of their fellows dare be only for the latter’s *improvement*, their “Besserung”.²² The modern appreciation of progress, relying as it has on the infinite corrigibility of history, likewise intends for criticism to be always and only constructive.

²⁰ “No punishment could be inflicted on men ...if they did not love those things which can be taken from them against their will.” (*De Libero Arbitrio Voluntatis* I, xv, 33 [translated by C. M. Sparrow], Charlottesville, Va., 1947).

²¹ Grimm, loc. cit.

²² WA 32, 475 ff.

But these very commitments to human corrigibility and to neighborly improvement only betray the more that there is first of all some existing human deficiency which--by "produktive kritik", nevertheless—needs correcting. To have to imply that is one of the causes of the anguish of modern critical pluralism.

The man who is criticized always stands to lose something by that, much though his critic may wish that were not the case. That places the critic in the embarrassment of a magistrate. Not only is he rendering a verdict, he also exercises disposition over the other's goods, notably that one good which next to life itself is the most precious, his "good name". Luther recognized this in his explanation of the eighth Commandment. There his interest is not primarily in whether our criticisms are true; that of course is the barest minimum. Luther's larger concern is with the way criticism, true criticism especially, deprives the neighbor of his "honor".

It is shallow to imagine that critics inflict loss only in courts of law, where there is access to force. "The sword" after all is only the most obvious form of a retributive process which engages all of us, especially in modern pluralism. Think for example of the costs, just the financial costs, which the ecumenical movement has had to exact from the member churches. That is a price they now have to pay for having been so long apart, not just a criticism but a price. But it is easier not to acknowledge that.

However, none of all these inconveniences which discourage pluralist criticism—not its implication of reward-seeking, not its impugning, not its infliction of loss—has yet revealed that one most appalling dilemma of all. Sooner or later it has to be faced: though criticism is an inescapable obligation the very participation in it is self-condemning. The pluralist has no choice morally but to engage in the critical exchange, but by that act he invites criticism against himself. From whom? Not only from his fellowmen but also from his ultimate Critic, who might just be using the fellowmen as agents, as "masks" for the ultimate criticism of the human critic.

But this human critic, the conscientious pluralist—why is he under criticism? Surely not for being critical? Yes, for that reason too. Also for other reasons of course; he does have faults of his own, no doubt, all of which gets evaluated and recompensed as a matter of course. But that initial guilt of his is now further compounded by his criticizing. He criticizes others for what he himself is guilty of. He acts the judge while at the same time he is the culprit.

Still, isn't criticism precisely what this man is obligated to do, sinner though he is? And isn't he obligated to that by the final Critic himself, whose own judgments he is responsible for reflecting? Right, that may indeed be the man's God-given responsibility or, as Luther put it, his "Aufgabe", his divine assignment.²³ He is especially apt to have such an assignment in modern pluralist society, where judgment is no longer located in a few ordained authorities but is distributed among a broad plurality. But if criticism is the pluralist's role and if he has that on the highest authorization, how can he be expected to discharge that role when at the same time he incurs judgment as he does so? Exactly. That is the dilemma.

²³ Ibid.

It is hardly any comfort to ask what purpose this appalling dilemma might serve. As far as its social usefulness is concerned, the dilemma would seem to serve no purpose at all except to discourage more than ever the critical duties of pluralism. Actually, isn't there a sort of wry advantage in the fact that the dilemma is for the most part unheard of and, where it has been heard of, it is benevolently disbelieved? So it might seem.

All the more so with the dilemma's theological purpose, namely, to so implicate the human critic as to leave him finally "without excuse". For the critic's plight then is not only that he is a hypocrite, faulting others for what he too commits. Worse than that, by cooperating in that awesome process, the divine criticism of his world, he thus becomes an accomplice in that divine process. By his very complicity in it he endorses it. Having endorsed it, not only in words but by a lifetime of eloquent practice, he relinquishes all rights to immunity when that same process comes for him. His criticism has all along been self-incriminating. As he by his own act concurs in divine judgment he himself incurs it. God's guilty agent, by acting as judge, has unwittingly been building a case against himself.

Thus "you give him the right", says Luther, to reciprocate in kind.²⁴ But of course this thought did not originate with Luther. He was only sermonizing those ("harte ... strenge") words of Jesus: "For as you judge others, so you will yourselves be judged." (Matt. 7:2) The same words, which have a long biblical tradition, are restated by Paul: "Do you imagine—you who pass judgment on the guilty while committing the same crimes yourself—do you imagine that you ... will escape the judgment of God?" (Rom. 2:3)²⁵

This predicament whereby the critic is not only criticized in return, which might seem fair enough, but in addition is criticized for being a critic at all—this could provide today's reluctant pluralist with even more cause for renegeing than he already suspects. What is Lutheranism's contribution to him? Simply to blurt out the bad news forthwith? Hardly. But neither is it our task to sit on the guilty secret for fear that its discovery would ruin everything. God has no need of lies. Neither does his world. What real hope could there be for a pluralism erected on fictions? Anyhow doesn't the perceptive pluralist already suspect something about the underlying dilemma he and his fellow-critics are in? Doesn't his discouragement betray that? And if it is our ambivalent lot as Lutherans, as Christians, to have had the awful roots of this dilemma bared to us, what then? Why then we are in a singular position for appreciating all that the pluralist is up against, whether he knows that or not. We identify with him, as well we might, for his dilemma has also been ours.

How Pluralism is Ecumenized

What we promised at the beginning of this essay has now come due, a Lutheran understanding of pluralism. "Lutheran" in this case referred to the way Lutherans have been identified historically as Christians. Lest that be construed relativistically, let me now add: "... the way Lutherans have been identified as Christians", not simply by themselves and by others but historically by God. "Lutheran" describes the historical form in which God has called Lutherans Christians.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 480.

²⁵ See WA 56, 188.

How he has so identified them is seen, of course, only reflexively from the way they confess he has done so.

Notice, that already assumes that something so “finite” as a historical community is capable (*capax*) of bearing something so “infinite” as a divine identification. Not that that community is identical with God himself. Yet he can and does identify it as his and, in that sense, identifies with it. Such an intimate involvement with the divine describes of course many another historic movement besides Lutherans, though it might be the Lutherans’ special responsibility to say so, both about themselves and about other Christian communities. That requires prophetic audacity. That is what this essay has been trying to do with modern pluralism, namely, to say how pluralism might be identified *coram Deo*. How might we do that? How else but by recourse to Jesus Christ and to his promise?

We hasten to explain that the way God identifies with history is not necessarily benign. That was clear in the preceding section about pluralism’s critical dilemma. There, as we saw, God’s involvement was with something so negative as criticism. Not only was he criticizing *by means* of human critics, but also was criticizing those very critics *for being* critical; he was implicating them in his own critical process so as to incriminate them.

It isn’t only that God’s connection with history often defies human comprehension; most often it does. It isn’t only that history often defies God himself; that no doubt is why he needs to criticize it—for example, us and other pluralists for our lack of critical courage, the groups in our society for their lack of mutual accountability, etc. The point is, God’s involving himself with history is all too often a thing of judgment. But that should not suggest either that judgment, endless and ongoing criticism, is a solution. Not that criticism isn’t good; it is finally God’s own. Still that process of criticism is itself under his judgment, and so are we if we insist upon being identified with that process ourselves.

On the other hand (Luther would have called this hand the “right hand”), God has also a drastically different, altogether affirmative identification with history: the history of Jesus the Christ and of those who identify their lot with his. God affirmed him and by extension them, even though this Jesus called into question the ultimacy of God’s other, critical history. He claimed its days were numbered, though temporarily it would continue in force—until The Last Analysis. What he dared to suggest instead was that the really promising future, God’s ultimate identification, was with him and his own movement, which was a movement for mercy and peace. It is no wonder that for this audacity Jesus suffered the consequences from that retributive process whose ultimacy he had challenged. What is a wonder is that God vindicated him, by raising him from the dead, by identifying with him completely and by affirming as theirs together that historical movement which now moves by their common Spirit. Call that new movement God’s history in Christ. Or Jesus’ people. Or the church.

This whole new history of Jesus Christ, both fore and aft, shows great promise. It shows promise for even the old history, including such aging movements as modern pluralistic society. For the effect of Christ’s winning his case was not to invalidate the critical process altogether, only to keep it from speaking the last word. True, if it weren’t that he had superseded that criticism with

forgiveness and had demonstrated these new priorities with his resurrection, we could not have believed the grim thing we said before: that the critical process is itself marked for judgment. In the interim, though, the divine criticism has only been trumped, not wiped out. God's old creation still persists, and that is a critical creation.

Because that old critical creation is God's, the same God's as the new creation is, there is real continuity between the old and the new. They can be meshed, and in both directions. The new people of Christ can reenter the old history and reinvigorate it. That way they could give today's faltering pluralism—say, in the political or ethnic sector—a new lease on life and prevent it from lapsing into separatism. But the reverse is also true. They can draw upon the old history and baptize it into the new. For instance, they might employ secular models of organization, everything from empires to princedoms to town-meetings, and bring these into captivity under Christ as models for organizing, of all things, the church itself.

Witness how the ecumenical movement in this past century has reflected the general pluralism of its environment, and how in its own movement it has subdued that pluralism to Christian purpose. Nowadays almost every major denomination, at least in the West, is taking on a pluralistic cast right within its own confessional boundaries. There may be, if I may use such expressions without offending, Baptist-type Lutherans and Presbyterian-type Lutherans and Lutheran-type Lutherans all in the same synod. We can only hope that this trend will eventuate in a genuine transforming of the old age by the new, not just in an uncritical conforming.

At any rate that is what we mean by the ecumenizing of pluralism, the borrowing and then transforming from old history into new, but then a mirroring back again to the old of what improvements it might hope for also in its own domain. Shall we call this the indigenizing of the church? Or conversely shall we say it is the churching of the world? No matter. Either way, the implication for today's pluralism is that it has something to teach the church and, once the church has made that its own, pluralism has something to learn in return. See, the one hand does know what the other hand is doing.

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