

# One Christian's Response to "Star Wars – The Phantom Menace"

A generation ago, half a continent away, I stood in line on a hot summer day waiting for the next Star Wars movie. In those days it was an event, a daylong affair of waiting in one line to buy your ticket and then in another line for your particular showing. Choosing the "right" people with whom to wait and share the magical experience was crucial, especially since the waiting time far exceeded the viewing time. There was something hugely nerdy about dedicating so much time to a sci-fi flick, and yet enduring long waiting times, perhaps even for your second or third screening, was worn like a badge of honor even among non sci-fi fans. Star Wars clearly mainstreamed science fiction; it also saved Hollywood, reinforcing the blockbuster movie theatre experience that differentiated it from television and other diversions.

However, my experience of The Phantom Menace was not quite the same: we bought advance tickets over the phone and stood in line for less than thirty minutes. The show never even sold out. I felt sorry for the kids today who didn't wait all day, anticipation building like the slow ascent of a roller coaster ride, bonding with friends and strangers, speculating on what the next installment would bring. But then the cruelty of aging kicked in: easily one-half of today's audience did not see any of the Star Wars trilogy in the movie theatre; they hadn't been born yet. Nonetheless, through the miracle of the VCR, these younger viewers had probably seen the Star Wars movies many more times than I had, if the number of A Bug's Life video viewings shared with my five year old daughter is any indication.

What is it about Star Wars that attracts so many people, crossing lines of generation, nationality, religion, geek and non-geek, and now with Phantom Menace, even gender lines? Everything about Star Wars is a serendipitous combination of talent, work and luck. George Lucas is a master storyteller who, in addition to painting his canvas with the conflict and drama of good vs. evil and father-son relationships, understands all the elements of cinema that make for a moving experience. He understands the power of myth and how to reinterpret classic myths for today's audience. Above all he creates to please his inner muse, and thereby has also pleased hundreds of millions of others.

Star Wars stands as an industry unto itself. In addition to the movies, there are books, comic books, web site, toys, clothing, commercial tie-ins and parodies. In the mid 1980's there was a kitchen appliance spoof of the

Star Wars battle scenes entitled "Toaster Wars" with schlocky special effects but very steeped in the Star Wars spirit. In the mid 1990's there was a short video obtainable only over the Internet which spoofed the reality television show "Cops" in which a camera crew shadowed Imperial Stormtroopers on the planet Tatooine as they probed relatives and friends for the whereabouts of Luke Skywalker. Although Lucas could have sued for copyright infringement, he was so flattered by the quality of the spoof that he allowed distribution of the video, though only on the Internet.

Star Wars is so popular and engrained in our increasingly global culture, that one could paraphrase John Lennon's comment about the Beatles' popularity; that proportionately more people today know about the Star Wars mythos than those who know of the Christ story.

Is there anything that the Christian community can learn from Lucas' masterful storytelling? Can the Christian community garner the attention of and tap into the huge Star Wars audience?

George Lucas provides some insights in a recent Bill Moyers interview published in the April 26, 1999 issue of Time magazine (<http://cgi.pathfinder.com/time/magazine/articles/0,3266,23298-1,00.html>). He commented on recurring Star Wars themes such as the capacity to become, or do, evil. The most evil character (so far) is the intimidating black-clad more-machine-than-man, Darth Vader, who finds his strength in the dark side of the Force – something that is present in varying levels of every creature in the universe, whose potential is released as one trusts one's own feelings. In the Star Wars trilogy, Vader reveals to the hero of our trilogy, Luke Skywalker, that he is Luke's father, Annikin, and that he is bound to the dark side of the Force. At the close of that trilogy, Luke provides the opportunity for Vader to relinquish the dark side and come to the light: redemption. The compelling aspect of this year's release, "Star Wars: The Phantom Menace", is how a cute and gifted Annikin Skywalker, so much like any other nine year old kid, will grow up to become a personification of evil. Lucas states it's like trying to imagine what Hitler was like as a nine year-old.

The most interesting facet of this interview was Lucas' comments about Star Wars and religion:

**MOYERS:** *What do you make of the fact that so many people have interpreted your work as being profoundly religious?*

**LUCAS:** *I don't see Star Wars as profoundly religious. I see Star Wars as taking all the issues that religion represents and trying to distill them down into a more modern and easily*

accessible construct—that there is a greater mystery out there. I remember when I was 10 years old, I asked my mother, “If there’s only one God, why are there so many religions?” I’ve been pondering that question ever since, and the conclusion I’ve come to is that all the religions are true.

**MOYERS:** Is one religion as good as another?

**LUCAS:** I would say so. Religion is basically a container for faith. And faith in our culture, our world and on a larger issue, the mystical level—which is God, what one might describe as a supernatural, or the things that we can’t explain—is a very important part of what allows us to remain stable, remain balanced.

**MOYERS:** One explanation for the popularity of Star Wars when it appeared is that by the end of the 1970s, the hunger for spiritual experience was no longer being satisfied sufficiently by the traditional vessels of faith.

**LUCAS:** I put the Force into the movie in order to try to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people—more a belief in God than a belief in any particular religious system. I wanted to make it so that young people would begin to ask questions about the mystery. Not having enough interest in the mysteries of life to ask the question, “Is there a God or is there not a God?”—that is for me the worst thing that can happen. I think you should have an opinion about that. Or you should be saying, “I’m looking. I’m very curious about this, and I am going to continue to look until I can find an answer, and if I can’t find an answer, then I’ll die trying.” I think it’s important to have a belief system and to have faith.

**MOYERS:** Do you have an opinion, or are you looking?

**LUCAS:** I think there is a God. No question. What that God is or

*what we know about that God, I'm not sure. The one thing I know about life and about the human race is that we've always tried to construct some kind of context for the unknown. Even the cavemen thought they had it figured out. I would say that cavemen understood on a scale of about 1. Now we've made it up to about 5. The only thing that most people don't realize is the scale goes to 1 million.*

**MOYERS:** *The central ethic of our culture has been the Bible. Like your stories, it's about the fall, wandering, redemption, return. But the Bible no longer occupies that central place in our culture today. Young people in particular are turning to movies for their inspiration, not to organized religion.*

**LUCAS:** *Well, I hope that doesn't end up being the course this whole thing takes, because I think there's definitely a place for organized religion. I would hate to find ourselves in a completely secular world where entertainment was passing for some kind of religious experience.*

Lucas clearly believes in God and yet wisely remains vague, partially because the veil of his storytelling mystery (the cliffhanger!) was such an integral part of the first Star Wars trilogy's success. But his ambiguity is also wise in leaving each individual free to simultaneously delve further into him or herself and to explore outward into the bigger picture. Lucas' goal is for people to realize there's more to life than what we see (including movies).

This master storyteller wants us to leave his story and reenter our own worlds (and stories) richer for the experience. His vagueness allows us to see what we want to see and even if we see more than Lucas intended, as long as our imaginations are sparked, Lucas has completed his mission. This is as specific as one can be when using a mass medium like cinema.

As Christ-confessors we cannot build the same kind of audience Lucas has done with Star Wars. The gifts that Lucas possesses – of molding plot, characterization, drama, humor, pathos, music and special effects into a cinematic and thought-provoking journey – are special. We should be thankful that Lucas has found an outlet for his talent and points us to something greater than ourselves and sparks our collective imaginations. We should not try to compete for attention, especially with someone who is so good at it. We should tap into the pulse Lucas has found and build upon the audience that has already been gathered and point to what we know and confess in the mystery of The Story, that of the One who became one of us, who lived among us, and although innocent, suffered and died for us a painful and ignominious death, and rose again for us.

Does the Star Wars audience clamor for more drama? The Story has plenty of it. Do they/we want a Father-Son story? Got it. Epic confrontations, larger than life figures, empires, heroes, underdogs? Got it. The Fall, wandering, return, redemption? Got it. In spades. The Teller of The Story is not only The Master Storyteller, but The Storymaker and all for our benefit.

Even though the Bible is no longer the central ethic of our culture and may never regain its centrality, we are still called to share The Story, especially to those who are seeking. Perhaps the ones who turn to movies for inspiration and away from organized religion do so because they first see the monolithic institutional qualities of organized religion and don't stick around long enough to hear The Story. They're looking for meaning, for something larger. To paraphrase a recent ad campaign: they got questions, we got answers.

Finally, in addition to building upon Lucas's gathered audience, we can apply one main lesson from him: we must learn to reinterpret The Story in our own lives and share this with

others, which is a gift from the

Holying Spirit. Lucas reinterprets or “localizes” classic myths for our times; through the Holying Spirit, The Story is localized into our stories. Since we are called to preach to all nations, we can help others – who have never heard The Story, or have forgotten it – by helping to reinterpret and localize The Story into theirs. It is the simple act of bearing witness to The Truth of God’s gift to us in the crucifixion and resurrection of God’s son, Jesus Christ, and how this gift plays out in our lives. Our sin, brokenness, dying and death are all taken away by that loving act on the Cross. We as Christ confessors have wonderful stories to tell and Lucas has gathered an audience for us. All that is left is to tell our stories about The Story in our lives. And if you’re timid about doing so, recall the wisdom of the Jedi sage, Yoda, when he told his young disciple, Luke Skywalker: “Do not try; do.”

---

## **God-as-Gospel: The Doctrine of the Trinity as Science and Theology Converge**

Colleagues,

Two pieces this time. One’s about a book from the growing literature on the convergence of science and theology in today’s post-modern, post-secular, world. The second is from my sermon last Sunday in Rochester NY where Bob Wennerstrom was installed as pastoral associate in the Lutheran Church of the Incarnate Word (ELCA). Bob and I were classmates at

Concordia Seminary (St. Louis) in the 50s. After 40 years in LCMS pastorates, he retired a few years ago, only to be called now to this new post. Since he was crossing the Rubicon from the Missouri Synod to the ELCA, he asked for someone to preach the Gospel who had done that crossing before. You'll see what he and the congregation got below.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

---

## **BOOK REVIEW**

**Patrick Glynn. GOD: THE EVIDENCE.**

**The Reconciliation of Faith and Reason in a Postsecular World.**

**Rocklin CA: Prima Publ. 1997,1999. viii, 216pp.  
[5.8.99]**

"Is science uncovering the face of God in our post-secular world?" That is the question Glynn's going after. His answer is a feisty "Yes!"—and he's not a crazy, a TV evangelist, or a monkey-trial madman. His gig is science, the heavy egg-head stuff that's been the prize fruit of the Enlightenment. And from that science for us moderns came the message, gleeful for some, doleful for others: "Sorry, folks, there is no evidence for God out there."

But here at the end of the millennium "it ain't necessarily so." That song from Porgy and Bess is now being refocused. In the opera those words were predicated to "the things that you're liable to read in the Bible." But nowadays, Glynn says, those words now apply to "science." You know, when Christian kids went to college it was "the things that vexed when we opened our texts" — in biology, psychology, geology, and of course philosophy and lit crit. T'ain't necessarily so.



So what's happened to the "atheist scientists" we all know about, many of whom are still around? [There's pluralism in their midst too.] Glynn tell us. He's been there; done that. And now he's "back" to Christian faith, but he's not jettisoned his scientific and intellectual smarts to do so. 'Fact is they've pushed him to see the evidence for God in today's postsecular world. And that evidence is IN the stuff the scientists, using their hard-headed research tools, are telling us they are finding.

But it's not just Glynn. Quote the dust jacket:

*"A startling transformation is taking place in Western scientific and intellectual circles. Recent discoveries in physics, medicine, psychology, and other fields paint a radically new picture of the universe and humanity's place within it. Central is the dawning realization that the cosmos, far from being a sea of chaos, appears instead to be an intricately tuned mechanism whose every molecule and every physical law seems to have been designed from the very first nanosecond of the big bang toward a single end—the creation of life." In this provocative book, Patrick Glynn lays out the astonishing new evidence that led him away from the atheism he acquired [after a boyhood of Jesuit education] as a student at Harvard and Cambridge. The facts are fascinating: Physicists are discovering an unexplainable order to the universe; medical researchers are reporting extraordinary healing powers of prayer and documenting credible accounts of near-death experiences; and psychologists are finding that religious faith is a powerful elixir "for" [not "against," Dr. Freud!] mental health.*

*"God: The Evidence demonstrates that faith today is not grounded in ignorance. It is where reason has been leading us all along."*

Folks with a Reformation twist to their heritage will see evidence in this book that Glynn is indeed a Roman Catholic who wandered into atheism and is now returning from that far country. Any signal of the supernatural that scientists are finding (e.g., the healing value of faith, “any kind of faith,” the documented healthy consequences of practicing the “ethics of Jesus”) has him turning cartwheels. Well, almost. Granted, what he shows us is not to be pooh-poohed. But it’s still a stretch to get from scientists “finding room for God” all the way over to faith in a crucified and risen Messiah.

In Lutheran lingo the stuff Glynn gleans from postsecular scientists is data about “deus absconditus,” the hidden God. Not hidden so that there are no signals from this deity. Yes, signals aplenty. But signals that this deity is merciful to sinners? No. Even if the world out there is not “all red in tooth and claw,” the evidence for messages of mercy and rumors of redemption are either non-existent, or at best very ambiguous. If “science is uncovering the Face of God,” there is still a veil over the face that’s been detected.

But you can build Christian (=Christ-specific) bridges to those data. Someone two millennia ago put it this way: “The veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away” [2 Corinthians 3]. That’s our next agenda.

---

## **TRINITY SUNDAY SERMON – May 30, 1999.**

### **Texts: 2Cor 13:11-13**

11Finally brothers & sisters, farewell (or: rejoice). Put things in order, listen to my appeal (encourage one another), live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. 12Greet

one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. 13The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of (sharing in, being participants in) the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

### **Matthew 28:11-13**

16Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17When they saw him, they worshipped him: but some doubted. 18And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

### **Introduction:**

It's Trinity Sunday. And we've got three things to get connected this morning: Pastor Bob Wennerstrom, ourselves the congregation, and these texts, both of them the very last words in 2 books of the NT (Matthew's Gospel and Paul's 2nd letter to the Christians at Corinth).

The Gospel text itself has its own trio: Galilee, authority, and the Trinity—the "boonies," Christ's clout, the One-in-Three God. Trinity is not mysterious arithmetic about God, but Good News about God. Trinity is Gospel. The only way the disciples of Jesus could eventually do "God-talk" after their Christ-encounter—culminating in Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost—was as the Corinthians text does it. GRACE of our LJC = in Jesus we encountered God being for us, not against us. LOVE of God = God as agape, the give-away God finally giving away God's own self to sinners. The KOINONIA of [the Greek term, when followed by the genitive = partnering with, participating in, having a share of] the Holy Spirit. HS is not something spooky, but as at Pentecost [wind, fire, new language] Spirit is power, and the

holying adjective is the healing action wherein we are shareholders.

## **I. Diagnosis of their malady, theirs and ours too.**

**D-1 Dismay, Dismal.** Galilee—our life in the Boonies. Ho-hum record as Christ's disciples.

**D-2 Disbelief.** Sometimes worshipping, sometimes doubting, not remembering our authority.

**D-3 Disconnected from the Trinity** (from the Grace of LJC, love of God, koinonia of the HS) and its grim consequences: forced to live "coram deo" [face-to-face with God], but not with God as Gospel, "coram Trinitate" [face-to-face with the One-in-Three God].

## **II. A New Prognosis for the Afflicted**

**NP-1 Jesus' authority (clout, pull, connexions),** & how he achieved it. What it means for our Triune connexions—grace, love, partnering. What it does for you Bob, for the rest of us.

**NP-2 Re-membling** = getting in on Christ's clout—for you Bob, for us.

**NP-3 Galilee in Rochester.** The "therefore" in "Go therefore"—for Bob and for us. Glee and Glow in the Galilee called Rochester.

### **Conclusion:**

[Visual aid for the letter "W" in Wennerstrom]. We're not doing the Athanasian creed this a.m. (It takes about the same amount of time as this sermon did.) But we can picture it—with its words about the two dogmas of the ancient church: the Trinitarian nature of God and the Divine-Human natures of Christ—with what I have here in my hand, a carpenter's measuring rule folded into the letter "W." Three points here—Father, Son,

and Holy Spirit: (“Remember” that means Love, Grace, Partnering with and from God). And two points here—Jesus Christ, true God and truly one of us. It works either way, whether you hold it up this way or turn it upside down this way—the three points support the two and vice versa.

We could brand you, Bob, with this Trinitarian “W,” but it’s not a hot iron, and branding is gross anyway. So since you’re already marked with the sign of the cross, that will surely suffice. Suffice for you and for the rest of us here: for coping with our dismay, disbelief and disconnection as it repeats to plague us in our Galilees. Suffice for getting us re-connected to Christ’s clout and “going therefore” with glee and glow into our Galilee as Christ’s disciples. Our goal: to clone more disciples, and in the same way—getting them connected to Christ and his clout. Getting them the Trinitarian fix: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and our partnering with the Holy Spirit. You could use “W” for that too. Like “Wow! ” Like “Whoop-de-doo!” E.H.S.

---

# **Pluralism’s Question to Christian Missions: Why Jesus at All?**

Edward H. Schroeder

[Printed in *Currents in Theology and Mission*, vol. 26, No. 3 (June, 1999): 164-170. Reprinted with permission.]

In Spring of 1997 the Mormons dedicated a new temple in St. Louis, Missouri, and the Bahai community opened their place of worship. Already “at home” before that in St. Louis were Hindu and Buddhist temples and several mosques, plus some twenty additional religious communities alongside those called Christian. And St. Louis is heartland U.S.A. When I was a seminarian here in the fifties it was Lake Wobegon. You were either Lutheran or Catholic. Well, there were some of the other mainliners, but St. Louis was a Catholic and Lutheran town. Not so any more. Religious pluralism is here in the heartland.

So the missionary question has come home to roost. Why Jesus? Why is Jesus necessary—for anyone?

It is a truism to say that the person of Jesus, what he did and said—and what was done to him and said about him—is at the center of what Christians bring to the mission field, whether it is in St. Louis or in Singapore, in Chicago or in Calcutta. When Christians do that, the question inevitably arises in some form or other from the receiver: “Why Jesus? What do you witnesses for your Lord offer with this Jesus that is not already present in our current state of affairs without Jesus?”

The most succinct answer to that question—already from the New Testament times—was the one Greek word *euaggelion*. Rendered in English that is Good News. These two four-lettered English words are at the core of the answer to “Why Jesus?” With Jesus comes something Good and something New.

## **An amateur’s overview**

For twenty years I’ve been roaming as an amateur—maybe even as an alien, since I’m supposed to be a systematic theologian—within the American Society of Missiology, and its international counterpart, the International Association of

Mission Studies. I've learned that answering the "Why Jesus?" question nowadays inevitably pushes you to take a position about Jesus in relation to other religions in today's marketplace. Today's missiologists, the folks who do mission study as their daily work, talk about three options: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.

Exclusivism says: Jesus is the only savior. No other savior, no other religion, saves at all. There is only one way to the top of the mountain of salvation.

Inclusivism says: Jesus is the salvation in all its fullness; the salvation offered in other religions is not contrary but included in what Jesus brings. All the roads up the mountain are in some basic sense Jesus-ways. The way that calls him by name illuminates best what the other ways are all about.

Pluralism says: Jesus is one way up the mountain; there are many other ways going up there, and they get you to the top, too.

Recently missiology studies are challenging this "establishment" threefold set of options. One example is S. Mark Heim's 1996 book *Salvations*. Note the plural "s." Heim says not all religions are climbing the same mountain. There are many different mountains of salvation. Jesus is the way to the top of the Christian mountain. But Buddhists are climbing a different mountain. Nirvana is not the kingdom of God. That said, Heim does not dispute that Buddhism is the way for achieving Nirvana. Hinduism has its mountain, and so forth. But these are different mountains, different salvations.

*A fundamental axiom in missiology today.* Setting Heim aside for the moment, it seems to me that the dominant paradigm in the threefold set of the earlier "-isms" is rooted in the scholastic tradition of Western Christian theology. Even with such roots in a distinctively Roman Catholic theological tradition, it is

widely accepted across today's ecumenical spectrum. I suggest that the axiom underlying all three options in the triad is the formula: *gratia non tollit naturam, sed perfecit*. Literally: grace does not remove or abolish nature, but perfects it. For us that says: What God's grace (including the Good News about Jesus) offers is not a replacement for what is naturally present but a fulfilling of what is already there. God's grace latches on to something already good, though not as good as it could be, and by appropriating what is already there God's grace brings it to completeness, to 100% full-goodness.

All three of the going "-isms" build on this nature-grace premise. Exclusivism uses it to say: What's new in Jesus is that only in him is saving grace present to bring lost human nature to the perfection God intends for it. Inclusivists, starting from the same premise, see the grace present in Jesus also present in other religions, and in all cases grace is bringing nature to perfection. What is "good" in Jesus and distinctively new is that he is grace in absolute fullness, the perfect fullness of God's grace. Pluralists see grace present in all religions, perfecting human-kind and the world in a plurality of ways. There is nothing so distinctively new or good in Jesus that is not available elsewhere as well.

This grace/nature axiom is regularly linked in today's mission theology to a revelationist framework for all of theology. God's self-revelation is understood to be what all religious searchers are seeking. If religions were to be rated, the one offering more of God's revelation would be preferred. But at present that very point is what's disputed. Yes, even the exclusivist will grant God's self-revelation in some other religions, but will deny that it is sufficient for salvation. The inclusivist and pluralist find more of God's self-revelation in other religions, even granting—as pluralists do by definition—that it is sufficient for salvation. When revelationist-minded Christians



are asked "Why Jesus?" they respond: "In him we Christians have experienced God's gracious self-revelation in all its fullness. Thus we call Jesus Lord."

*The reformers' alternative.* Sixteenth century Reformation theology did not directly dispute the nature-grace axiom, as far as I know, but in its Lutheran confessional writings—and in Luther too—it basically replaced it. One reason for the replacement was that there was no biblical term that fit what Greek philosophy called "nature." A second was that a "grace" which perfected such "nature" was not what the New Testament called the "grace of our Lord Jesus Christ," a.k.a. "the power of God for salvation to those who trust it."

In its place (for relating what was good and new in Jesus to what God was already doing throughout human history) Lutheran theology offered its own axiom of the distinction between God's work designated "law" and God's work designated "gospel." In the earlier Lutheran confessions of 1530 and 1531 the paired terms are law and promise, St. Paul's favored set of opposites. This alternate Reformation axiom has scarcely been exploited, even by Lutheran missiologists, for its mission theology potential. What follows is an attempt to get started on the project.

Every ideology, every -ism, every religion offers to help people move from a bad situation to a better one, from perceived "un-heil" (not-healed) to "heil" (healing). All claim to have "good news" for humankind. Implicit in such offers is the conviction that people need help, that they've got a problem, a serious one.

*Using the alternative with St. Paul as partner.* From the earliest times disciples of Jesus used the word "gospel" (=good news) as the label for what they had received in their own encounter with Jesus and what they had to offer. Their good news

was good and new for other people as well. They too had to answer—and had an answer—when asked: What was “good” about Jesus, and what was “new” about him?

The question in New Testament times came from two different directions: the Jewish faith community and Hellenistic religions. Christians in those days had to show how their good news measured up to these long-time favorites. To give some initial content to these two options I shall use St. Paul’s own designations in 1 Corinthians. Judaism sought “signs” (signals for fulfilling God’s law, ethical power) while Hellenism looked for “wisdom” (insight into the world we live in; how things really are, with an ethic appropriate to such wisdom). And each of these two offered their own good news for how to achieve what was sought.

People already practicing (and trusting?) these two options were not easily persuaded that the Christian good news was either good or new. St. Paul in the N.T. documents promoted the Christian gospel to both groups. He did not always succeed. Look at his track record in the book of Acts, or in his epistles. He was not an obvious winner either in Jewish synagogues or in Greek forums around the Mediterranean basin.

In the epistles from his hand we see him working out theological support for the goodness and the newness of the Christian gospel vis-à-vis these two major competitors. These epistles are not verbatim reports of his missionary witness to people committed to these two basic alternatives. Rather they are addressed to audiences who already claim to be Christian, but who in Paul’s diagnosis of them are often moving back (have already moved back) into the Judaism or Hellenism where once they were at home. Doubtless he had given a clear answer to the question, “Why Jesus?” What is good and new in Jesus?” in his original missionary preaching to these audiences. Yet it apparently

didn't stick, so he is constrained to do it again. In many instances from his epistles we see that his mission congregations ostensibly see nothing so new or so good in Jesus that it cannot be merged with the good news they enjoyed in their previous Judaism or Hellenism.

In Paul's theology throughout his epistles, even when we grant the important differences of their various contexts, he claims at least two "new" elements in the message he preached. Of these two only one is actually "good news," and the other is basically "bad." Yet you don't enjoy the goodness of the good news unless you come to terms with the badness of the bad news. It's like a wonder drug for some rare disease. If you are afflicted with that rare disease, you won't see how good the wonder drug really is unless and until you come to terms with how bad the disease is that afflicts you. And it may even be that only after being healed will you say: "I now see how sick I really was."

One new element within Paul's preached theology is a deeper diagnosis. Paul sets the gauge on his theological X-ray machine to get a picture *de profundis*, out of the depths, at the deepest level of human need for salvation. That X-ray exposes "un-heil" to be more drastic than either the Judaism of his own earlier years had acknowledged or the Hellenism of the world he traveled in had discovered. That deeper diagnosis was itself new, though hardly good. But it was a piece with, a corollary to, the more profound good news he proposed alongside it. That was, of course, the gospel of Jesus, the good news about Jesus, for Jews and for Greeks, something both *good* and *new*. This Jesus was "good enough," he claimed, to meet and treat the diagnosis *de profundis* that finally God's own X-ray brings to light.

It might be argued that in Paul's own life he first encountered the goodness of the Good News in his Damascus encounter with the risen Christ, and then extrapolated how bad the bad news must

be. But we do not have enough clear signals in Paul's own writings to reconstruct how that all happened. At one place he does 'fess up to the fact that he "didn't know what sin really was," until he bumped into the "Thou shalt not covet" commandment (Rom 7.7). Paul surely had learned that commandment on his way to being "a Hebrew of Hebrews" (Phil 3.5). Perhaps both came at once: Christ gifting Paul with faith-righteousness at the same time as the scales fell from his eyes to see his own original sin, a life of coveting the law's righteousness.

In Luke's report of Paul's sermon to a Jewish audience (Acts 13.39)—even if not Paul's *verba ipsissima*—we have in one sentence a summary of the good and the new about Jesus that does recur throughout Paul's epistles: "Through him [Jesus] everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses." This could well have been Paul's linchpin for answering the Why Jesus question to Jewish audiences. As good as the Law of Moses is—and Paul never denigrates it—there is one thing it was incapable of doing: justifying sinners. That good and new thing comes with Jesus.

*Some help from Westermann.* Without getting into an extensive excursus on the full meaning of "justifying sinners," we are helped by recalling Claus Westermann's insight into Hebrew anthropology so evident in the Psalms (and articulated in Westermann's commentary on them). Humans are created for living in three primordial relationships:

Relationship #1: to others (relationships to the outside)  
[R-1];

Relationship #2: to self (relationship to the inside) [R-2];

Relationship #3: to their creator (relationship to God) [R-3].

Primal among these primordial relationships, of course, is R-3. The fractures at R-2 and R-1 result from it. To be healed or

not-healed at R-3 constitutes the root of being healed or not-healed in the other two—inside and outside—relationships. And conversely, sickness or health at R-1 and R-2 is symptomatic of the health/unhealthy at the root, the God-side. It is the X-ray of the God-side of our human selves that goes beyond, goes deeper than, what Paul had come to see in the Judaism of his upbringing.

God's promissory words and actions culminating in the Good News about Jesus are the actual healing. A classic articulation thereof is Paul's claim in 2 Cor 5.19 using the language of commerce: "God was in Christ balancing the world's account with himself, not reckoning people's sins against them." The mechanics of the transaction were also economic (v. 21): "God made Christ who had no sin [on his account] to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Luther recognized the fundamental economic picture here when he designated this "*der frohlicher Wechsel*," the joyful exchange.

## **Consequences for missiology**

So "Why Jesus?" Only in him is God not reckoning sins to sinners' accounts, as God otherwise regularly does. In Jesus the Christ, God offers sinners a joyful exchange: the sin of sinners is assumed by Christ, Christ's righteousness becomes the sinner's possession. Christians claim that Jesus is necessary for R-3 healing, and they know of no other kerygma that even makes that offer. The Christian gospel claims that healing of this primal fracture is a very costly transaction. It necessitated a crucified and risen Messiah Jesus. Bonhoeffer is right. It is "*teuere Gnade*," costly grace.

With that healing comes an entirely new prognosis, a new future, for the formerly sick one. And therewith comes another aspect of the "newness" of the gospel of Jesus. Especially vis-à-vis the

alternative of Jewish religion, Paul hyped freedom. First, the grace in Jesus was a free gift with no prerequisites. Second, the life it engendered, the ethics of life in grace, had no post-requisites, either, no *ex-post-facto* "you gotta's." In ethics that too is good and new.

In dialogue with other healing proposals of our day, whether secular ones from our Western culture or the gospels of other world religions, Christian conversation partners should push the discussion to the R-3 agenda. This is not to be pessimistic, but to hear how any alternate gospel diagnoses this primal malady—if at all—and how it offers healing.

Secular gospels do not address the R-3 malady at all, for they doubt that it exists in reality. If people so claim some "God-problem," secular gospels regularly relocate it to the level of R-2 and diagnose it as illusion or neurosis. Before one can answer "Why Jesus?" here, Christians will push dialogue partners to greater depth in their own diagnosis of the human malady. Otherwise Jesus is indeed unnecessary.

There is a parallel here with classical Buddhism, I believe. Buddhism balks at seeing any genuine R-3 "bad news" at all in human historical terms. That is true, say Buddhists, because the human "self" is the problem, and any God-figure is but another Self to whom my self is related. Sorry to say, all that is illusion. Buddhism's diagnosis of humankind's problem goes only to the point of R-2 desires and R-1 suffering arising from that libidinous root. Here too the Good News of the crucified and risen Jesus is unnecessary. But, of course, the Christian claim is that the diagnosis is too shallow.

In conversation during my guest-teaching stint in Ethiopia (1995) with seminary students coming originally from African Traditional Religions—where R-3 agenda (God-problems) is daily-

life experience—I learned that the sacrificial systems for “justifying sinners” in their home culture never liberated them from the system itself. Sin always recurred, and the system of required sacrifice never stopped. With no coaxing, their answer to “Why Jesus?” was like the apostle’s words in Acts 13: “Sins are never *forgiven* in transactions with the spirits; they are paid for. The good and the new about Jesus is sins forgiven and with him comes freedom from the payback system itself.”

Later that year in a seminar in the USA a man was describing how greatly he had been helped in his own healing by “therapy” from psychological and psychiatric professionals. I expected him to conclude from the way he was talking that he had no need for Jesus. But I asked him anyhow: “So what’s your answer, John, to the ‘Why Jesus’ question?” His response (with no prompting): “To get my sins forgiven. Therapy doesn’t do that, can’t do that.”

## **Some initial conclusions**

Back to St. Paul’s words about God’s new economy, namely, God’s balancing accounts with sinners not by counting their trespasses but by accounting sin to the crucified Jesus in the “joyful exchange” and then vindicating Jesus at Easter. This economy is not really a “fuller” revelation of God than is encountered in God’s other trespass-counting economy, including God’s economy operating in other world religions. Isn’t it rather something qualitatively new and different from what even Christians experience in their encounter with God’s other economy in daily life? Does the joyful exchange have any genuine parallel in the goodness that is admittedly present in God’s first economy, and also in what God’s economy is doing in other religions?

Isn’t it fundamental to the Christian gospel that it is genuinely “new wine”? If so, might that not lead to triumphalism in just a different way? Not necessarily. The Christian gospel’s

claim to having “better” good news is not that “We’ve got something better than you.” No, Christian good news is linked to a realism about a “worse” diagnosis of the human bad news. Sin is more than R-1 loveless behavior, more also than R-2 wickedness in the human heart. Sin’s primal reality is the sinner’s God-problem [R-3], the chronic malady of not fearing, loving, or trusting God, and substituting self-fear, love, and trust in its place. The Christian claim is: “R-3 healing is needed. R-3 healing is possible. We have a story about how it happens.”

That story tells of the crucified and risen Jesus, that suffices to forgive, to justify, sinners with their God-problem. Other religions—secular, new, classical, or even Christian permutations—that ignore or deny R-3 diagnosis have no real need for the gospel’s Jesus. If there are any proposals in today’s religious marketplace, proposals that diagnose the human malady to its R-3 depths, they need to be listened to. And if a religion doing such depth diagnosis should also claim to have sufficient good news to fix that malady apart from the Jesus of the New Testament, that gospel would be a genuine challenge to the Christian good news.

If alternate religions with their alternate gospels are not coping with the R-3 reality, they are scaling a different mountain. Heim just might be right—different religions, different mountains. The Good News about Jesus makes no bones about how bad the bad news is. It does not make a mole hill out of the mountain called sin. But it is not pessimism that animates Christian diagnosis about the deadly mountain that needs scaling. It is finally the Christian good news that urges such a diagnosis. It is the good news that on a particular mount outside a city set on Mount Zion, this diagnostic mountain was scaled by the crucified and risen Jesus. That’s not to say, “Good for Jesus! He made it to the top!” It’s also good for



sinners trusting Jesus. Such sinners are now home free, free to scale this mountain into the presence of God—finally free to climb every mountain.

[Pluralism \(PDF\)](#)

---

# Homosexuality and Reformation Theology

Colleagues,

An exec from the ELCA Division for Church in Society called earlier this month asking me, his prof in the 70s at Concordia Seminary (St. Louis), for some Reformation theology on homosexuality, additional to what I had proposed in ThTh 34 [Jan. 28, 1999]. Here's what I sent him.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

---

## Some Reformation Perspectives for ELCA's Discussion on Gay and Straight.

A. Sex is "Secular"—but that doesn't mean "God-less."

1. When the Lutheran Reformers said "No" to marriage as one of the Christian sacraments, they were giving sex and marriage "back to the world" where God had put it in the first place. That's what they claimed to be doing. They claimed that it was the Gospel itself, the Good News about Christ, that compelled

them to do this. What God was doing “in Christ” was something else than what God was doing in creation generally. Sex and marriage belonged in the “creation generally” category.

2. It's not only sex and marriage that belong to God's “creation generally.” Also there “out in the world” is all the other stuff of daily human life: child-birthing and child-rearing, families, eating and drinking (digestion too!), politics, economics, housing, education, health care, daily work, and so forth. All of that is great and godly stuff, but it's not Gospel, say the Lutheran confessors.
3. In their day that was called “secularizing” marriage along with these other slices of life. Nowadays in our language “secular” is almost a synonym for godless, but not so in Reformation times. The “secular” world is God's world, God's “first creation.” It's distinct & different from God's “new” creation in Christ. But in no way is it godless. God is very much present and active here in the “first” creation, personally “walking in the garden” as Genesis 3 puts it.
4. To discuss things “secularly,” the Reformers insisted, means doing theology on these topics in a particular way. Straight Bible-quotes won't do. What we need is not commands from God about how to behave, but pictures/images/insight on what God's up to in the old creation. That's not just the creation as portrayed in Genesis, but what God's up to in the creation we live in. What is God up to with us who are his creatures right now?
5. From reading the Bible in this “secular” fashion, the Reformers saw God carrying out a “law of preservation” and a “law of recompense.”

Preservation was God's organizing things so that life—human and all other things living—doesn't die out, but keeps on going. Recompense was God's organizing things so that rightful actions (the preservation agenda) got rewarded and wrongful actions (destruction) got their come-uppance to make them stop. God structures things so that creation gets cared for. Caring for creation does not yet redeem it. But in view of sin's impact if creation isn't cared for, there won't be anything left to redeem.

6. Another thing they learned is that "creation generally" changes as time goes by. Sex and marriage practices, for example, undergo change as history moves on. God's own hand is in the mix of this movement. In Biblical times there's concubinage, polygamy, monogamy, and we find no criticism that only one was right and the others wrong. Rather, said the Reformers, God carried out preservation and recompense in all three formats. All of them "worked" to carry out God's agenda in the first creation.
7. The same, they saw, was true with governmental systems, economic systems, family and clan systems, all the systems of the "natural" world. If one or the other model was criticized as "not good," it was because the people involved—or maybe the system itself—didn't carry out God's double agenda, both preservation and recompense.
8. From this vantage point they had quite a bit to say about marriage, especially in the face of monasticism that was hyped as superior to marriage. They said very little about sex, and practically zero about homosexuality. The last item was not a

hot topic, although the Reformers comment occasionally on homosexual activity in monastic life. The subject was basically “underground.” But times change. God’s own hand is in these changes too. God has put homosexuality on the “secular” screen that we face today. So how might we take the Reformers’ angle about things “secular” and carry forward their good work?

B. It’s the Creator’s Ordainings, not the “Orders of Creation.”

9. One component of the secular perspective that has come down to us through our Lutheran history is the expression “orders of creation.” That term is actually not found in 16th century Reformers, although terms almost like that are present. But they come with a particular “twist.” In our language “orders of creation” sound like patterns that God put in place right from the beginning. That would then make them permanent, sanctioned by God, and we’d better not mess with them.
10. But here’s the Reformers’ twist: Better to translate that expression into English as “the creator’s ordainings” rather than orders of creation. “The creator’s ordainings” puts the focus first of all on God the creator and not the creation. Secondly, it accents God’s continuing creating activity. God’s “ordainings” are not the permanent patterns put in place once-for-all, but are what God is continuing to do. And as we noted above in the secular section, as time changes, as history unfolds, God “ordains” changes in the patterns and structures of human life and society. At whatever point in time, whatever place on the planet, in whatever web of relationships that God “ordains” for us to live,

these ordainings are the “givens” of our personal biography. They are the “specs” God places on each of us, first setting our lives in motion and then continuing to sustain us.

11. This case-specific focus on each of us as distinct persons created (ordained into life) by God, Lutherans know from Luther’s Small Catechism. What we believe about creation, says Luther, is not the story of Genesis, but the story of ourselves: “I believe that God has created me, linked together with [his German word is “samt”] all creatures; that he has given me and still sustains my body and soul, all my limbs and senses, my reason and all the faculties of my mind, together with food and clothing, house and home, family and property; that he provides me daily and abundantly with all the necessities of life, protects me from all danger, and preserves me from all evil.” In this specific way, with all these personal attributes (God-ordained for me) I am called “to thank, praise, serve and obey God. This is most certainly true.”
12. Luther doesn’t mention sexuality in that gift-list, but today God puts it on the lists we have. If “hetero-” is one of the creator’s ordainings, then wouldn’t “homo-” also be on the gift-list for those so ordained? Isn’t it also “most certainly true” for both that they “thank, praise, serve and obey God” as the sexual persons they have been ordained to be? Both homosexuals and heterosexuals have a common calling to care for creation, carrying out the double agenda in God’s secular world—the law of preservation and the law of recompense. If the gifts are different, the pattern of care will be different. What examples are already available

within the ELCA of Christians—gay and straight—doing just that—preservation and recompense—with the sexual gift that God has ordained? Despite the current conflict, is it true about sexuality too that “what God ordains is always good?”

C. A “Sinner/Saint” T-shirt for Everybody in the Discussion.

13. You can’t avoid talking about sin in this discussion. But we’ll be helped a lot if we get the Reformers’ slant on this topic too. The debate about sin in the Reformation era was the flip-side of the debate about justification and faith in Christ. If you don’t have sin properly focused, the Reformers discovered, the Good News about justification goes out of focus too. The “other side” in the Reformation conflict said: sin is doing bad stuff, things that God forbids. The Reformers said: doing bad stuff is a symptom of sin, but sin is something else. It’s what’s going on inside people, what the Bible calls the heart. The second article of the Augsburg Confession says it crisply, “not fearing God, not trusting God, and (in place of these two absent items) with a heart centered on your own self.” In Luther’s words sinners are people “curved back into themselves.”

14. One of the Reformers’ favored Bible texts for sin was Paul’s succinct sentence: “Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” Sinful is any thought, word, deed, that doesn’t proceed from faith. And the radical opposite is also true: Un-sinful, yes “righteous,” is any thought, word, or deed that does proceed from faith in Christ. Any discussion of homosexual behavior—or heterosexual behavior—as to whether or not it is sin, must pass this check-point, if it is to proceed in terms of Reformation

theology. Heterosexual behavior is not automatically sin-less, nor is the homosexual kind automatically sin-full. Can either be done, is either of them done, "in faith?" That is the question. If heteros can live out their sexuality "in faith," is it not an option for homosexuals too? It doesn't take much effort to establish that the opposite is true for both gays and straights, namely, that the gift of my sexuality can be lived "without fear of God, without trust in God, and with a heart curved back into itself." If gifts from God can be received and used "in faith," then this one must come under that rubric too.

15. Lutherans have an expression (its roots all the way back to the Reformation) that Christian people are "simultaneously righteous and yet still sinners." Of course, that's not just true of Lutherans. It's standard Christian experience. New life in Christ has come to us through the Spirit in Word and sacrament. We've stepped into God's new creation in Christ. Yet the Old Adam, the Old Eve, still spooks us. Faith and un-faith are both present within us—sometimes barely seconds apart in our lives. The words of the frenzied father [Mark 9:24] are the confession of all Christians this side of the grave: "Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief." That sober confession—"sinner and saint simultaneously"—should be printed on the T-shirts of all of us involved in this discussion.

D. In setting up rules and regulations within the church, where does the Gospel come in?

16. Instructive for this might be AC/Apol 28 in our Lutheran Confessions. The topic in Article 28 is the authority of bishops and the status of rules and

regulations within the church. Homosexuality, of course, is not under discussion in AC 28. But we can be helped by what the Reformers say there.

17. How to go about making rules for church life? “Bishops must not create traditions contrary to the Gospel... They must not ensnare consciences as though they were commanding necessary acts of worship.” “They have no right to create traditions apart from the Gospel as though they merited forgiveness of sins or were acts of worship that pleased God as righteousness.” The drumbeat is for “being a bishop according to the Gospel.” No ELCA bishop would disagree with that, I’m sure.

18. But then how to go about being a bishop “according to the Gospel?” And—for our topic here—how can ELCA membership (in our democratically structured church governance) join the bishops in doing so? Two caveats are constant in Article 28: one about Christ, one about a Christian’s conscience. The Christ-caveat is: Don’t set up any rules that dishonor the glory of Christ’s merits and benefits. The conscience-caveat is: Don’t burden consciences in their exercise of Christian freedom. The two caveats are really just two sides of the same coin. Rules and regulations that “burden... ensnare... harm consciences . . . crept into the church when the righteousness of faith was not taught with sufficient clarity.”

E. But surely the rules laid down by the apostles in the NT are permanent, aren’t they? Not really, says Article 28. “Even the apostles ordained (sic!) many things that were changed by time, and they did not set them down as though they could not be changed” [Apology 28.16] Here’s an example: “The apostles commanded that one should abstain



from blood, etc. . . .Those who do not observe [this] commit no sin, for the apostles did not wish to burden consciences with such bondage but forbade such eating for a time to avoid offense. In connection with the [blood] decree one must consider what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is." [AC 28.65]

19. The Christian church has no tradition of favorable rulings for those who are simultaneously Christian and homosexual. It seems that in the NT era no Christian could even imagine that those two words could be put together. It was just "clear" that those who worship idols also consent to homosexual practice. Since Christians don't worship idols, they also don't behave sexually as idolators do. The two just go together. That's surely Paul's point of view in Romans 1, I think. I imagine it would have "blown his mind," as we say, if Tertius, Paul's secretary writing the words of this letter for him (16:22), had turned to him as he laid down his pen and said: "You know, Paul, I'm gay. Gay, a Christ-confessor as you are, and not celibate."

20. Whether or not Paul ever heard such words, it's clear that such voices are everywhere in the Christian church today. Might it even be God who has brought about the change? Our Reformation roots have resources aplenty to use for such a time as this. Let's not let them go to waste.

---

# A Feminist Christian's Theology—Two Reviews

Colleagues,

Exactly one year ago ThTh #1, our first one, went out into cyberspace. Today's edition is #50. If you have been on the receiving end since the beginning, you did get 52 editions already, since we doubled up a couple of times in this first year, sending out two week's worth on one Thursday. For our first birthday anniversary we're sending you a twinset, two reviews of the same book, one from each of us. We think the book's important enough for a doubleheader. But we didn't do our work together. Neither of us saw the other's review until we'd written our own. Then first we talked about what we'd done. You get them both at the same time.

Peace & Joy!

Robin Morgan &

Ed Schroeder

---

**Gail Ramshaw**

**UNDER THE TREE OF LIFE.**

**THE RELIGION OF A FEMINIST CHRISTIAN.**

**New York: Continuum Publ. Co. 1998.**

**vi, 149 pp. paper. \$16.95.**

Review by Edward Schroeder

In only one book that I know of do I get mentioned by name in the text. It's the autobiography of my Doktorvater, Helmut Thielicke, as he describes his visit to Seminex in the 1970s.

Gail Ramshaw's UNDER THE TREE OF LIFE, a life-story retrospective of her own, may be the second. May be. She speaks of a miscreant professor (blessedly unidentified) at Valparaiso University, who "advised me upon college graduation that I had no future in the field of liturgical language since I was a woman." I wasn't the only theology prof Gail encountered at VU, and I don't remember such an utterance. Since encounters with Gail Ramshaw, even then, were unforgettable, I think I'd remember. But maybe not. "Senior moments" occur more regularly in my own biography these days.

Whoever that false prophet was—*mea culpa*, if it's me—he (sic!) couldn't have been more wrong. Gail is upper upper echelon liturgical scholar of our time. She's an American—and even a Lutheran, not just in her ecclesial affiliation, but in her theology. Well, in much of her theology. But more on that below.

One reason we crossed at VU was the common Missouri Synod roots we both had. Nurturing roots, she can still say, in many ways, and just as often strangling in the umpteen put-downs by patriarchy—she prefers the term "androcentrism"—that oppressed her as her own wings unfolded. This is at least her 15th book and she just turned fifty. That half-century mark she celebrates with this gift to us. And gift it is. Even if her theology were all heresy, as she's heard more than once, especially when "I have riled lots of the old boys," reading her prose is sheer delight. She's such a word-crafter, a maven of metaphor. And as one generation her senior I'm clearly one of those old boys, yet on page after page I got riled into smiles, sometimes even audible old boy laughter.

"We [Christians] aim for symbols that are shared," she says at the end. And that's the simplest reason why androcentric symbols have to go. In her "search for shared symbols," she has not only riled the old boys, but "also disappointed some of the women,

for we women do not yet agree on the name of God, the meaning of Christ, the life of the church.”

Her own core symbol is the book’s title term, the tree of life. That tree is found throughout the world of religion. In Christian faith and worship too it’s a fundamental image from Genesis via Calvary to Revelation and on through the two millennia up to our own day. Her table of contents itself looks like a tree. Four chunks of trunk, 30 branches, the theme and parts. I can do no better than to replicate it for you.

**RELIGION IS A COMMUNAL WORLDVIEW . . .**

*I, now fifty years old,  
a feminist, minimizer style,  
repelled by the horrors of religion,  
drawn by the symbols of religion,  
especially the ubiquitous tree of life—  
with the serpent goddess out on a limb—  
am reading a Bible written by men.  
Symbols can smother  
or manifest the mystery.*

**ABOUT ULTIMATE REALITY . . .**

*The mystery of One-in-Three,  
our Clothing,  
our Sovereign Love,  
our Waiter, Winter, Weapon, whatever—  
yes and no to each—  
is God for us.  
Even feminists are in need  
of what Christ might mean  
and the Spirit give.*

**WITH REQUISITE RITUALS . . .**

*Each Sunday morning,  
in the night of Easter,*

*and in the dead of winter,  
we savor the water, the bread, the wine,  
following saints unbalanced,  
attending to their remains,  
opening up in prayer.  
So we practice the faith.*

***AND ENSUING ETHICS . . .***

*Our goal is not heaven,  
but justice in the arena,  
care for the trees,  
and bedrooms that benefit the body.  
For we all are the body.*

*And then a coda: "Such is the religion of one feminist Christian."*

There's lots of stuff I'd like to rap with Ramshaw about, erstwhile student now my teacher. A trivial one for starters: Is the Ascension of Christ really impossible as a "symbol that can be shared?" For her it is one of the "symbols that smother." "Filled with male hierarchy," she says and then concludes, "so I skip Ascension Day, and I suggest to others that they do the same." Is my twitching here just proof that old boys get riled? Maybe.

I was genuinely jabbed at only one place where she closes a section predicting that "most Christian systematic theologians will dismiss me altogether." Well, maybe most of them that Gail has already encountered have done so. But there are systematicians and then there are systematicians. When did she ever engage any of us so designated in the Seminex/Crossings tradition? Yes, I know: if the magistra can't make it to the mountain, it's the mountain's job to get to the magistra.

Her way of “doing” the Trinity is grist enough for a term-long seminar on its own. Ditto for her 5 pages “of what Christ might mean.” Here she goes down the clothesline of the Jesus images of her 50 years, and then adds her own. “To this list—gentle Jesus by my side, the elusive historical Jesus, Jesus oppressed and suffering with me, a bleeding Christ suffering for me, a victorious Christ conquering death, magisterial Sophia herself—let me propose another: Jesus as the opening up of God.” Packaged in but three paragraphs, Gail’s Jesus has juices for another seminar. Here’s where I’d offer my most serious “Wait a minute, Gail,” alluded to above.

Granted it’s only three paragraphs, yet the God whom Jesus “opens up” looks to be a tad antinomian, I’d say. Antinomian means “soft on God’s law.” Says Gail: We used to think “we knew who and where God is, God is the law-giver way up above the mountain top.... But the more our ancestors reflected on Jesus, the more they came to believe that God is also a person among us.” Yes, but in leaving the mountain-top did the deity opened by Jesus also leave that law-stuff back there too? Almost sounds so in Gail’s Gospel. Although at one place (only one that I noticed) she speaks of God as judge, her condensed Christology doesn’t mention that judge.

So the Judge’s bench was effectively left back on the mountain-top too, as Jesus “opens up God for us” in the Ramshaw model. For when it comes to “Jesus saving me,” he does not save us from any divine critique. “If we are saved from anything, it is from ourselves. I am freed from a life kept small and constricted—not to say boring—by continuous rotation around myself.” That’s not untrue, of course, but with Gail’s soteriology, that’s all we get—at least, so far. She grants that her “proposal is partial and only in process” and she does “not pretend to have the problems of Christology solved or to have satisfied all feminist Christians.” But that partial Christology “does not keep me from

going to church.” That’s a good lab for Christian theologies in process.

Come to think of it, that’s where I’ve learned important stuff in my theology. One such liturgical learning came for me in whichever lectionary year it was that Romans 8:1ff appears. The words are hardly ambiguous: “There is therefore now no condemnation [the Greek is *katakrima*, “incrimination”] for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death.” Apart from the work of Christ God’s critique of sinners persists willy nilly. The “rule” of the Spirit [tree] of life in Christ Jesus supplants the rule of the law of criticism. And the criticism, if not abrogated, is finally deadly. God the critic needs more attention in Gail’s paragraphs here, and that not because some grumpy systematicians are such pessimists.

That she bypasses God the critic comes as a bit of a surprise in a volume that is so critical, rightly critical, on every page! And you don’t have to read between the lines to see that the author thinks the deity agrees with the critical judgments she makes. Thus Gail verifies criticism itself as a “shared” experience. Could criticism ever be hot enough to be called a shared experience of God? Many a Biblical person did—women included—e.g., Miriam, Deborah, Judith. Well, then, why not bring back the Judge’s bench and its “strange and dreadful” culmination in Christ’s cross—as “shared symbols” of women’s and men’s shared experience?

A Jesus who opens up a previously (mis-)packaged God, is a revelationist Jesus, to use another term of theological shop-talk. In revelationism Jesus pulls back the veil for us to see what God always was and still is. But nothing in the cosmos fundamentally changes because of Jesus. Such a Jesus was integral to my parochial Missouri Synod education. It may be a

piece that Gail too still needs to shed.

Revelationism leads us to believe that Jesus' life and work don't change things substantively between God and sinners. Instead it's our perception of God that changes. Reality "out there" does not. If that is so, then Roman's 8:1ff needs rewriting. But then you'd also have to rewrite a lot of Easter liturgy and hymnody. And hooked on Easter as Gail is (thank God!) I know she won't go for that. Her Christology section concludes: "Perhaps next Sunday I'll come to see it better than today. There are endless pages in the book. The tree keeps growing." Good. We can look for new branches in the days ahead.

---

Review by Robin Morgan

My first attempt at reviewing Gail Ramshaw's new book *Under the Tree of Life: the Religion of a Feminist Christian* didn't go well. I said something nice and I said something critical as a good book review is supposed to do, but I knew that I was missing the heart of my reaction to what she had to say. Her personal reflections on life, liturgy and the Christian community touch on many issues I continue to struggle with myself: the Bible's male authorship, the power of symbols both to give life and to destroy, the names we use for God, how we pray, how we worship together, how women can claim their rightful place in the community. She quotes people I like to read: C.G. Jung, Virginia Woolf, Gerda Lerner, Annie Dillard.

Yet I was unsettled by her reflections and after further thought I realized that the core of what is at stake in her theology is the location of authority. Early on we're told that she grew up fundamentalist and toward the end of the book she says, "To keep doctrine graspable, God has to be relatively contained, the church controlled. So I am used to hearing people screech at



each other, 'What! You claim that you're Lutheran, after you said that about this?'"

So she ejects the absolutist authority of Scripture, rightly so, but what is put in its place? From my reading of her work, the authority now is located in an uneasy marriage between "the Cartesian I" and "the tribe". God moves within the community in the liturgy and then each individual makes decisions about the rightness or wrongness of the manifestation of that movement for themselves (Easter Vigil is good, Ascension Day is bad).

My concern is that as she is rejecting a fundamentalist reading of Scripture, the efficacy of the Word, the living Christ in our midst, gets shuffled off to the side. Somehow in de-emphasizing the Cross and heightening the importance of resurrection, she manages to strip the resurrection of even the possibility of historical reality. What seems to be left is its metaphorical shape (the wineskin) without the truth content (the wine), which generated it in the first place.

This kind of metaphor as truth is the theology of the privileged. People who are struggling to survive day to day don't have time for a metaphor without content. The community isn't enough when the whole community is being trampled from the outside. Metaphorical power just won't do. People struggling to survive need real power, the power of the Word.

Jesus Christ crucified and raised is the center of Christianity and is the locus of authority. "You have heard it said, but I say to you" was his refrain over and over again in Matthew. It was no longer Torah that had ultimate authority, but Jesus Christ himself. No wonder he was killed.

Neither Bibliolatry nor worship of the tradition and its corollary, the contemporary community, can be the central authority. Of course, the living Christ as the center of our

lives isn't going to lead to easy answers or hard and fast rules about ethics. He certainly isn't going to satisfy feminists like Mary Daly and Starhawk who want women's inner knowing to be the ground of being nor the fundamentalists who know the exact dates of creation as well as Armageddon. But for Christians the living Christ is the center outside of ourselves as well as within every fiber of our being. He is universal as well as local.

I respect Gail Ramshaw's quest for a Christianity that makes sense to a feminist. I just can't agree with her willingness to let go of the cross in the process.

---

## **The Other Half of the U-turn of Repentance, a Response to ThTh 48**

Colleagues,

Michael Hoy, veteran Sabbatheology guru, sent in today's piece. It's Mike's addendum—"support" he calls it (well, sortuv)—to my ThTh #48 offering last week. It's "the rest of the U-turn of repentance, the really good stuff." Mike's stuff offered here is indeed good stuff. Early this year Mike moved to St. Louis from a deanship at Capital University in Ohio. He's now pastor at Holy Trinity Lutheran congregation here in town. He's also the dean of our local St. Louis "School of Theology." Mike's add-on to my U-turn of last week demonstrates his gifts for both of those jobs.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

---

## “The X-tra Ingredient for Palatable Penitence-Enjoyable Even-for a Ninevite Nation”

This article follows and supports Ed Schroeder’s insightful topic last week, “Repentance: Coping with God the Critic.” Let me summarize some of his main points: The Amoses of our day—the “public soul-searchers”—have not placed the God of Amos into the equation of the tragedies, a God who holds his creation accountable. The events of recent times suggest that America is a nation with a God-problem. Just because many don’t (or can’t) use such God-language in our pluralist secular culture doesn’t mean that God is not acting critically.

So what is required of us is repentance, “a ‘fessing up to the truth of the critic’s critique and making a U-turn,” even though the track-record for such national acts of contrition is not encouraging. (Keep in mind that it is not necessarily the sins of the present actors that leads to these present tragedies, but God’s “visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation.”) Using the “Crossings” model of Diagnosis/Law/Criticism, we have the **behavioral** problem in our acts of evil; the **heart** problem of a worn, weary, and wary sickness that leads to these behavioral problems; and a **god** problem in that God is holding us accountable as a nation lest we repent. Can Daniel Schorr et al. bring that kind of “Abrahamic faith” diagnosis to bear on our problem today? And will America repent?

I wonder whether the poor track-record of repentance from nations to which the Hebrew prophets (like Amos and Jonah) appealed might be traceable to the fact that their repentance rarely got to the root of the God problem. That’s not the prophet’s fault, but the tendency for us is to skirt that deep a diagnosis. Perhaps we may recognize the behavioral problem. Most

ethicists or reformers are willing to go that far, though that is hardly theological ethics/reformation. And my guess is that media-types like Daniel Schorr et al. do help us, to some extent, see that problem. Perhaps among some, even most Christian-types, there can be a recognition of the heart-problem. But rarely—and this I believe is Ed's point—do people plummet that far.

Ed has given us the first half of the U-Turn. Now Ed has set me up to give you the last half of the U-Turn. My guess is that he would have done that himself this week, but since I e-mailed him about the lacuna of “what does the gospel of Jesus the Christ have to do with all this?” he gave the assignment of completing the U-Turn to me.

Essentially what I indicated to Ed is that “the U-turn becomes palatable (even enjoyable) when Jesus the Christ frees us from the radical criticism. Otherwise, America may repent of its actions, but not to the Critic.” That needs some unpacking; and before I can say how the U-turn becomes “palatable, even enjoyable,” I will want to say a little more about our problem in making U-turns.

1. “America may repent of its actions.” The Amos-types we have today may lead to some changes in this regard—to get people to change their behaviors (actions). In fact, their solutions are all too often geared toward that kind of quick-fix, for example, the cry for “better gun control laws” or “better parenting” so that incidents like Littleton don't happen again; or perhaps even the calls for relief for Oklahoma tornado victims. Those solutions may put a bandaid on the problem, but they will not resolve it once and for all. Still, they are the easiest to talk about in the public square. And I don't mean to disparage them. They are works that help people.

Christians and non-Christians can join in that kind of civil righteousness. But it just doesn't get to the heart of the problem—and that is what many, if not most, ethicists and reformers (including the so-called theological types) miss.

2. Repenting of the actions. There is still another solution that doesn't really resolve the problem, and this one is common among Christians, perhaps because way too much of Christian preaching (unfortunately, unfaithfully) takes this short-cut on the U-Turn. The short-cut is when Christians think they need to look at some of their motives and attitudes for the kinds of bad behaviors they do. Then, the solution is projected: change the motives and attitudes. Maybe Jesus even gets cited as an example. Or maybe the Spirit gets cited as a source for changing those attitudes. The end result is a soul-searching moralism. But the problem in its fullest dimension is not resolved. And the real fruits about why Jesus had to die are wasted.
3. Repenting to the Critic. This is the problem in its fullest, and this is where Ed left us last time. And there is no solution that we have to resolve it—no resources of our own. But that is where the real “good news” begins.

Now, on to the really good stuff.

1. The X-tra Ingredient for Palatable Penitence. The palatable-ness of penitence, while it does in fact become palatable for us (read below), must first meet the palate of God. In the public square, on Golgotha outside Jerusalem, up the road from later-day Kosovo, the kind of gusto that will satisfy the problem at the God-level is met through the public crucifixion of Jesus the Christ—public also as “King of the Jews” in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. In Jesus' teachings, he would also use the

illustration of Jonah (Matthew 12:39-41), not so much for Jonah's proclamations per se, but for Jonah's three days in the belly of the great fish as symbolic of his three days in the belly of the earth, from which he emerged with a gigantic U-turn, an act signifying that "something greater than Jonah is here!" (vs. 41) That U-turn is his act to take along all who have been swallowed up in the criticism of the Critic, to bring them out into a new era of hope and promise.

2. Enjoyable Even. Because God's palate is satisfied with the U-turn of this One-Greater-than-Jonah, we get to go along for the ride in Christ's U-turn. Our hearts find delight and liberation in the source of Christ's victory over the divine criticism. We don't go through life wondering warily how this is all going to end. We get, even now, a foretaste of the ending by faith! That ought to put a spark into our hearts, to satisfy our deepest longings, because we are counted among those for whom the Great Repentance in Christ has claimed "among the thousands of those who love me."
3. for a Ninevite Nation. Those who have faith in the Promise-Greater-than-Jonah can be the agents of U-turning our nation, helping our nation to see possibilities beyond evil and tragedy, helping our nation to hope again. In fact, there is a public place for this, in our nation, among the community of those who gather around the palatable, enjoyable table of our Lord who has died and has been raised, and who themselves turn around, in the spirit of forgiveness and love, and (undercover) bring that pleasure and good will to the nation. There is, then, a message of hope for us to bring to the Ninevite Nation, whether or not Schorr does—and, in fact, that message is broadcast to a wide audience every feast day of the Great U-Turn. Remember that Nineveh repented, and was saved.

Remember also, from Ed's article last time, that Suleiman went home. God hears the repentant cries of his people on behalf of others. The nation may benefit from our own cries. But imagine how much more it will benefit from enjoying the taste of forgiveness!

Michael Hoy  
May 13, 1999

---

## Repentance: Coping with God the Critic

For the prophet Amos the question was rhetorical and the answer obvious. "Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does evil befall a city, unless the LORD has done it?"[3:6] But it wasn't obvious to his hearers. Nor, it seems, are the rhetorical trumpets and local evils obvious to us in these United States. Here's a recent quintet in alphabetical order:

*K is for Kosovo*

*L is for Littleton*

*M is for Monica (or Milosevic)*

*N is for NRA (or NATO)*

*O is for Oklahoma tornadoes (that's OKC again! Last time was 1995)*

And that's just in the past few days. God has only 21 letters left in our alphabet.

Like Amos I am not a prophet, nor the son of one, but I have been reading the Hebrew scriptures for personal edification these days. You don't have to be very smart to notice the non-Amos, anti-Amos, diagnosis (especially since Littleton) that's gushing over our national psyche. If only the term "psyche" (soul) were rendered, as it once was, the God-turf in human affairs. God does get mentioned—though rarely—in our national soul-searching (?) but usually in the objective case. That's what people say about God, God at the end of the sentence. One example is that high schooler's confession of her faith in God seconds before her murder—which no commentator seems to know what to do with.

But have any of our public soul-searchers, the Amoses of our day, put God in the nominative case, as the original Amos did? God at the beginning of a sentence, God the subject of the sentence: "the LORD has done it." Amos' sort of soul-searching is not what such souls say about God, but what God "has done" and continually is doing to such souls—and to their respective bodies and lives and nations and.... God the subject, maybe even God the verb.

Well, you can't expect media voices to speak such language in our pluralist secular culture. OK, but what if they (or some of them) did? On that point Amos lived in such a time as ours. Up north where God had plunked him down "they" didn't analyze or comprehend public events that way either. He's a loner there in Samaria with his God-talk in the nominative case. "They" have better explanations for all the evidence he cites for God the Nominative. So it isn't really today's secularity or pluralism that keeps God from being subject in our sentences. Amos's word for it was plain old unfaith. Which was very much the same 3 millennia ago in Israel as it is in the USA in 1999.

I printed the word LORD above with all caps, as English versions



do to signal that the Hebrew term is Yahweh. Not just a generic deity, but the God REALLY behind our universe, the “true” God we earthlings confront behind the masks [Luther’s term] of daily life events. This LORD is not merely God the Creator, but also God the Critic, and only thereafter God the Rescuer. Amos doesn’t interpret God (objective case) to the people, but interprets the people’s recent history by linking it to God the Nominative. He merely quotes God’s speeches: “I withheld the rain from you. I smote you with blight. I destroyed your vineyards. I sent the pestilence. I slew your young men. I overthrew you.”

And as if that isn’t bad enough, after every one of those “I-statements” comes the even more lethal refrain, “yet you did not return to me.”

“Turn” and “return” is normal Hebrew language for “repent.” Repenting is nothing so fuzzy as I once was taught, “feeling sorry for your sins,” but a ‘fessing up to the truth of the critic’s critique and making a U-turn. If God isn’t our critic in the mini- and maxi- apocalypses on the front-page today, then who is? But what should America, our country, repent of? Where have we gone wrong? Ay, there’s the rub. Unless some real Amoses (=outsiders) are around, we’ll not be helped by answering our own question. The outsiders are there who could help us, many within the USA. But even those inside our land are outside the attention vector of the makers and shakers. Many are as odd-ball as Amos. They have no credentials, “not a prophet, nor a PK, a prophet’s kid.” They are readily dismissed: “Go back to Judah where you belong.”

Even if the US may well have been “right” on many national actions in the past, our self-righteousness about those matters has always been an offense—not just to our fellow world citizens, but to God the Nominative. That’s bad enough as self-

righteousness always is, but with us (perhaps because of our legend as a Christian nation?) it expands to cover nearly everything American. And the last estate of that nation is worst than the first. So how do you call such a people to repentance? The Hebrew prophets represent one way. But their track-record is not encouraging. Basically they all failed to lead their hearers into the U-turn. Or if there was repentance it didn't last long. Another staccato refrain is: "And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD gave them into the hand of the [fill in the blank] for 40 years."

Lest there be some doubt, I'm not saying that the murdered high-schoolers or the tornado victims were getting their personally deserved come-uppance from God. The prophetic perspective is that God's "law of sin and death" cranks out its karma "visiting the iniquities of the fathers [a nation's makers and shakers] upon the children to the third and fourth generation." Of course, innocents get slaughtered. But their deaths derive from those daddies who didn't repent and thus flipped the switch for the juggernaut to roll. We cringe at the injustice of the consequences for the kids. The prophets did too. But they claimed that our enlightened critical finger pointing back at God was mistaken. Yes, God did it, but the daddies invoked the deity to do it.

If precedents for nation-wide repentance are not promising, even when the "pros" called for it, what then? First of all, as Jonah learned (the hard way!): who really knows until it's tried? After God finally got Jonah there via the scenic route, even superpower Nineveh repented. That didn't initially please this surly prophet until the LORD goaded him with that gourd and 'splained it to him.

Suppose Daniel Schorr, veteran news interpreter for two generations of Americans, were to draw on his Hebrew heritage

and “go prophetic” once. Not hellfire and brimstone, but just like Amos with words something like this: “There’s a third level to our national trauma, which I think American Jews, Christians, and Muslims too could comprehend. Drawing on the tradition of these ‘Abrahamic faiths’ we can diagnose America’s dilemma thus: The first level is behavioral, the evil we are doing to each other from highway rage to gunning down high-school kids to NATO strikes, all of which “take out” the righteous along with the unrighteous. But that’s just symptom.

“Deeper still is the second level, the interior, call it the human heart. We’ve got a nationwide cardiac disease, those bruised and battered, worn and weary and wary, sick hearts that generate such behavior. These are not healed by any of our national panaceas—Wall Street’s boom, Viagra, air strikes, or behavioral mod programs of re-education even with the best of therapists and beaucoup bucks. Why? Because our nation’s cardiac disease is itself still but a symptom.

“Underlying even that depth diagnosis is a still deeper one, the root of the sick tree and its bad fruit. Call it what Jews, Christians and Muslims call it: our God-problem. That’s not first of all what we think and do about God, whether we are a nation of believers or not. No, the prophets call this God the Nominative. To cope with God the Nominative there is only one way. One word. Repent. Just how as a nation to do that will take some figuring out. For we are woefully out of practice. But if we could hear God the Nominative calling us to do so, we’d already be a giant step down the U-turn road.”

I don’t know how to get such counsel to Daniel Schorr. If any of you readers do, well . . . . But even if he never gets the suggestion or gets the idea on his own, the rest of us could do this in our smaller worlds of daily work. Swaying the masses is not to be gainsaid, but in prophet’s perspective the remnant

counts too.

I think I've mentioned this before in an earlier issue of ThTh: In 1529 Luther called for such continent-wide repentance in "Christian" Europe vis-a-vis Suleiman the Magnificent and his 600 thousand Muslim troops outside the gates of Vienna. His analysis of the military realities showed two Goliaths outside the gates of Vienna. One was Suleiman and his up-to-then invincible hordes. The other was God, who had designated Suleiman as the "the rod of my anger, the staff of my fury" [Is 10:5] against a phony Christian Europe. Luther's proposed strategy: divide the enemies. "Take care" of God first. Repent. That's the only way to cope with God the Nominative when God is critic. God regularly backs off when sinners U-turn. Thereafter with Suleiman bereft of his divine ally, he might be beaten in battle, though the prognosis for that was not good.

Luther didn't expect Europe to do a Nineveh, the entire city repenting in sackcloth and ashes. But he held out hope that if a few did it, a remnant, God just might count that as good enough for all. There are no statistics about who did or didn't repent. Maybe it was only Luther (let's hope) and a few who read his treatise. This much, however, is history: Suleiman never attacked Vienna. Instead he turned around and went back home.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

---

## Outsiders and Insiders

Colleagues,

For this week's ThTh, two announcements and one piece of theology. The theological essay comes from a Crossings aficionada. She sent it to me earlier in the week as a "Monday Musing." It spoke to my muse. Let's see if it does to yours too.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

## THE TWO ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. FYI. The number of you on the receiving end of this listserve has now come to 400. We've instructed our listserver—for a fee, of course—to raise our limit to 500. From the printout of that receivers-list we see that at least one of the receivers is itself a listserve address. Others of you have also told us that you pass it around. So the actual number of receivers, like the number of angels dancing on a medieval pin-head, is probably impossible to determine. 'Course we'll never know how many receivers actually read what goes out. So we live by faith . . . and hope . . . and love.
2. In less than two months, D.v., Marie and I will enplane for Indonesia for a three-month stint (July, Aug. Sept.) as mission volunteers with an English-language congregation there. I might as well say up front that the locale is Bali. Yes, I know.... But, as they say, "Someone has to do it!" In view of Indonesia's own turmoil these days, Bali (we're told) is presently less stressed than other places in the country. There are now 2 English-language congregations there. Working within Indonesia's current visa rubrics, the Balinese church has settled on a pattern of having a new "invited guest-visitor" come every 90-days. So that amounts to 4 such folks each year. And the congregational life is thriving, we're told. Is there

a message here?The real point of this announcement is to alert THTH folks in AUSTRALIA, HONG KONG, NEW ZEALAND, and the PHILIPPINES that we hope to visit your locales on our way back to the US in November 1999. If we could make contact with ThTh-folks while we're in those places, we'd count it all joy. E-mail addresses on the listserve printout don't always tell us who is where. So help us out, please.

---

## **THE ONE PIECE OF THEOLOGY – A MONDAY MUSING**

Belonging has always been an issue in my life. I've never felt like I fit in. However, I've discovered in the last few years that within the circles in which I move, no one else considers me an outsider. If anything, the opposite is true. I am an insider even while my outsider feelings remain.

No doubt any good psychologist could explain this phenomenon in terms of my past because I've also discovered as I've grown older that I am far from unique in terms of the experiences I've had and my reactions to those experiences. But I think something far deeper is at work within my life these days.

In Matthew 8 Jesus says, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." I wonder if the Lord wasn't so much bemoaning the fact that he didn't have a mortgage and a two car garage, but that his life in this world that he loved so much seemed to have little to do with the "normal" day-to-day activities of those around him. Just before this line he had healed Peter's mother-in-law. Right after it he's asleep in the boat with the disciples when the storm comes up and they wake him because they're afraid they're going to die. He rebukes the wind and then turns and rebukes the disciples, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?"

Augustine said that our hearts are restless until we rest in God. I wonder if even after we rest in God or because we rest in God there is a restlessness born of having tasted the feast to come. We have glimpses, moments when life seems to click into place and we grasp, if only for an instant, what it's all about. Our relationships with each other are usually blown about by circumstances, feelings, misunderstandings, but occasionally, momentarily, we come together and experience the kind of eternal intimacy we all crave.

When my husband and I got married almost twenty-five years ago during our agnostic period, we had no Bible readings in our wedding ceremony, but we did have a reading from Anne Morrow Lindbergh's "A Gift from the Sea". I recently picked up her book again and read the passage that had so caught my attention as a callow bride:

*"When you love someone you do not love them all the time, in exactly the same way, from moment to moment. It is an impossibility. It is even a lie to pretend to. And yet this is exactly what most of us demand. We have so little faith in the ebb and flow of life, of love, of relationships. We leap at the flow of the tide and resist in terror its ebb. We are afraid it will never return. We insist on permanency, on duration, on continuity; when the only continuity possible, in life as in love, is in growth, in fluidity – in freedom, in the sense that the dancers are free, barely touching as they pass, but partners in the same pattern."*

Her worldly wisdom is admirable, coming from a life filled with many joys and many sorrows. If life is only what we sense, only what we have right now, then the way to find peace is to accept what is. However, I have found in my life as a Christian that I have shot right through youthful restlessness, past this

acceptance of what is to a new restlessness born of having tasted more. I am no longer willing to sing “que sera sera,” not because I have to have my own way necessarily (though that does still occasionally come into play), but because of a passion for the One who loved the world so much that he gave himself...for me.

Our connection with God through Christ links us to the universe in a new way. We are no longer just “dust in the wind” trying to make it through the day, we are intimately bound to the cosmic plan, even, or maybe most especially, when we have no idea how it is being played out around us.

There is a permanence in our lives that connects us, no matter what the circumstances, feelings or misunderstandings. Each time we eat the bread and drink the cup at the communion rail, our lives are bound together more intimately than we can bear to comprehend most of the time. We are not cast adrift, wandering aimlessly. We are part of the pattern, part of the dance, which started long before any of us was thought of and will continue long after we’re forgotten because the First Dancer will never forget us. Our part in the choreography is indelibly set in His mind and when he returns for us, his music will awaken us, his hand will clasp ours and nothing will ever separate us again.

Who wouldn’t be restless for this fulfillment? Who wouldn’t long to tell everyone about this wondrous life? Shout it from the rooftops! We do belong.

---

## **Historic      Episcopate—Another**



# (once underground) Voice

Colleagues:

MeLinda Morton studied theology at Seminex in the early 1980s. After seminary she went into the Air Force and served as an operational AF officer for ten years: “I did some flying, served as a Minuteman II missile officer, and spent my last three years in the space program.” Her Minuteman II service, she says, were “years secreted underground in command of enough nuclear missiles to blow the earth off its axis.” Sounds like Apocalypse Now.

Ordained thereafter, MeLinda has served as ELCA Interim Pastor in smallish congregations. Currently she’s at one near the Texas – New Mexico border. In, with, and under all of this she’s been involved in two graduate programs. One is law, the secular kind, with her J.D. degree coming next month. Second is a doctoral program in systematic theology at Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, to which she’ll return when she has her law degree in hand. Talk about credentials! One doctorate in Law and one (I hope) in Gospel.

Somewhere along the line MeLinda bumped into ThTh and wrote last week to re-connect & to say thanks. In our subsequent exchange, she asked my opinion on “Called to Common Mission [CCM],” the Lutheran revision of the Lutheran-Episcopalian “Concordat.” That Concordat didn’t garner enough votes to pass at the 1997 ELCA general assembly, and it seems that the CCM revision has not pacified the critics either. It’ll be up for a vote at the next assembly later this year. Some ELCA bishops wish it would all just go away, but of course it won’t.

Even efforts by veteran Episcopal dialogist and Concordat author, J. Robert Wright, in Lutheran publications—DIALOG

(Winter 1999) and LUTHERAN PARTNERS (March/April 1999)—do not palliate the perturbed. In a whimsical parenthetical line Wright puts his finger, I think, on the deep background beneath the dilemma, the truth behind the trauma. He says: “After all, there are probably as many different definitions of the historic episcopate among Episcopalians as I have encountered definitions of justification among Lutherans!” If neither side has consensus within its own ranks for the gift it claims to bring, what does full communion amount to? What do numbers mean regardless of which way the vote goes?

Back to MeLinda. Well, I didn’t have anything “new” on the CCM to pass on to her, so I pulled up ThTh 17 (Sept. 10, 1998) and sent that. Its title: “The Historic Episcopate [HE] and Justification by Faith Alone [JBFA].” Should you wish to see it, GO TO the Crossings web page [www.crossings.org](http://www.crossings.org)

---

After reading ThTh 17, here’s what MeLinda wrote back:

*Dear Prof. Schroeder:*

*Thank you for your kind response. I paid enough attention during my days at Seminex to fairly well predict your theological critique. I have considered at length the HE as it relates to “order” within the institutional church; in particular matters such as you raise [when you say] the following:*

*7. “Episcopoi” as overseers—even in the NT usages of that term—are misread, I think, when we link them to what the word “bishop” has become in today’s church, also in our ELCA. Nowadays it regularly signals a “legal” (I’m not saying legalistic) magisterium of some sort, an “authority over” congregations, doctrine, pastors, policies, finances, etc. Thus it’s already suspect ala JBFA hermeneutics. Why? Because*

*the law, whether canon law, even God's law—by definition—can never “guarantee” the Gospel.*

*So the question becomes; What then is the function of this “legal” ecclesial ordering? By what positivist amenity does it commend itself to application? Does it operate in some effective manner to stay hands of evil; to assure, if not grace, then justice?*

*The institution of church does, most surely, employ law; and rightly so. The church is not immune from the necessity of “ordering.” The issue of course is the relationship between that “ordering” for the sake of the institution and the proclamation of Gospel which is essential to the very existence of church; the boundary of the former seems appropriately set by the free expression of the latter.*

*So we return again to the question; Does the ordering exercised in the application of HE operate in some effective manner to stay hands of evil; to assure, if not grace, then justice?*

*I think we misstep by overextending our specifically historical reflections of HE. Whatever nostalgic comfort we may obtain from surveys of early church structure or Euro/Swedish ecclesial systems, such examples are significantly abstracted from the contemporary institutional environment.*

*Perhaps the real questions here are not questions of cozy heritage and sturdy orthodoxy, but of power.*

*I appreciate the vision that sees “apostolic succession [as] missionary continuity, not the passing on of magisterial management.” However, our contemporary hierarchical expressions of church leadership reveal little of this risky missionary zeal. To the contrary, it is the sad reality of our particular*

*contemporary expression of church that, even sparse hierarchical ordering has become ineptly applied, organizationally detached, rigid, and institutionally self-serving. (Growing numbers of rural congregations suffer without regular pastoral care, theological education is ill-funded, regionalism inhibits service and collegiality.)*

*I am concerned that the legal expansion of this tidy hierarchical system will further a growing institutional oppression of those fragile locales, those horridly ambiguous places of suffering, in which we are called to extend the grace of God to all humankind.*

*MeLinda*

---

## **Theology of the Cross or Theology of the Resurrection?**

Colleagues,

Every Friday noon during the current academic year Robin Morgan and I have joined a handful of other folks at St. Louis (Jesuit) University for a brown-bag lunch hour at the Theology Department. Robin's in a doctoral program there. One item of her program has her working with "Theology Digest," a department publication. At the Friday event a few of us "separated siblings" (aka Lutherans) get together with RC colleagues to review an essay being considered for a future Theol. Digest issue. Even when an essay isn't so good, the convivial exchange always is.

Couple of Fridays ago Robin was leading us through an essay by John Pawlikowski, social ethics prof at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. Its title: "Christology after the Holocaust." Her patent sympathy with the article during our discussion led one SLU staffer, Ron, to ask—just as we were about to leave: "Why do you like this piece, Robin?" "Pawlikowski is urging a theology-of-the-cross Christology," she said. "That's the best kind, I think."

"Well," said Ron, "there are all kinds of theologies of the cross. Luther's, for example, was taken straight from Anselm. But there are others." That prompted my intervention: "Whoa! Ron. Agreed there's a variety of theologies of the cross going around these days—and some of them not very good. But that Luther got his from Anselm—no way! Luther's is a critique, a replacement, of Anselm's picture of what happened on Good Friday." But time was up, so this exchange got no farther than that. But it may come up tomorrow as we look at an essay on Minjung theology, sometimes called a Korean theology of the cross. It's Robin's turn to present again.

Since the Pawlikowski discussion I've read Gerhard Forde's ON BEING A THEOLOGIAN OF THE CROSS. Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518 [Eerdmanns 1997]. It's a little over 100 pp. long. I recommend it. Forde doesn't touch on the Anselm and/or Luther question. So I'll have to do it myself. The next two paragraphs signal the direction I'd take, maybe even with Ron tomorrow.

My "take" is that Anselm gets stuck on the category of "rectitude" in spelling out his "substitutionary satisfaction" picture of the cross. That means he never gets beyond the language of the law. Taking images from medieval feudalism Anselm shows how sinner-serfs are woefully in arrears with their obligations to God, the honor they owe to their divine liege

Lord. Rectitude requires balancing the accounts. "Satisfaction," making it equal again, restoring God's honor is called for—and that restoration from humans, not angels or some other beings. Sinners, woefully deficient in the business of honoring God, obviously cannot do it for themselves, let alone anyone else. But a sinless human could, especially if that human were also God. For then his human acts of honoring God would have INFINITE dimensions. Thus they would be more than enough to substitute for, to cover, the FINITE dishonor present in each sinner's account with the deity. No matter how many zillion finite sinners there are to cover for, Christ's infinite rectitude, his "rightness" in honoring and obeying God, is by definition sufficient for the task. In a nutshell that's "Why God became Human," or in the Latin title of Anselm's magnum opus: "Cur Deus Homo?"

Luther can also talk substitution and satisfaction, but for him the cross is God's Gospel getting the last word, finally abrogating the law. It is not God and Christ finding a way to have the law "work" to get sinners saved, as Anselm proposes. Swedish Lundensian theologians earlier in our century contrasted Luther with Anselm, portraying Luther's atonement model as the "classical" one of early church history, viz., "Christus Victor." This focuses on Christ conquering the powers that tyrannize sinners: death, wrath, Satan, and yes, even God's own law. Nearer to the truth, I think, is that Luther had as many "atonement models" as did the Biblical texts he was teaching/preaching on at any one given time—from the cultic picture of sacrifice (Lamb of God) to the commercial "sweet swap" of II Corinthians 5 with several others in between.

Back to Forde's book. He tells us that the title was purposely chosen. It's not a book on Luther's "theology" of the cross. Why? Because the primal Luther document for the topic, the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518 [hereafter HD], is not a set of

theses on theology of the cross. 'Fact is, that term [Latin: theologia crucis] appears only once in the 28 theses. Luther's topic in HD, says Forde, is the "theologian" of the cross, the person doing Christian theology. Said even more precisely, the person to whom, on whom, God does his own cruciform work, resulting in "That person deserv[ing] to be called a theologian, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God through suffering and the cross."

The word "cross" itself appears only three times in the entire set of theses and doesn't actually pop up until thesis 20 in the sentence just cited above. So is the Heidelberg Disputation about cross-theology or not? Well, yes, but not as a theology that you could sit back and learn and then give lectures on. Such a procedure is close to that of the "other" kind of theologian—and the ONLY other kind there is—the theologian of glory. Now wait a minute...

The historical context for HD was Luther coming to the 1518 chapter meeting of his fellow Augustinian monks and laying out before them what was going in Wittenberg. This was of more than casual interest since his 95 Theses on Indulgences the year before were now a public hot potato. In HD Luther is laying out his fundamental critique of scholastic theology with its foundations built on good works of the law [theses 1-12] and human free will [13-18]. Drawing on St. Paul and "his trustworthy interpreter St. Augustine," authorities no one would want to argue with, Luther blows away those twin pillars before he even mentions the "cross."

Then moving to the language of I Cor. 1, in theses 19-24, we hear all three mentions of the cross and its contrasting term in "theologians of glory," his summary label for the scholastics. The first mention of the cross in thesis 20 has been cited above. The other two references are #21: "A theologian of glory

calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is," and #24: "Yet that wisdom [sc. the "wisdom" that theologians of glory relish, the law's wisdom] is not of itself evil, nor is the law to be evaded; but without the theology of the cross we misuse the best in the worst manner."

Glory theologians, says theses 21, not only misread God, but they also misread the world. Such misreading is not just a slight blur, but 180 degrees wrong. Correspondingly, the law with its pressure on us to perform, is not per se perverse, but in the hands of glory theologians becomes precisely that.

In hyping the cross Luther is not saying that Good Friday is the one and only item of Christian theology. Rather Christ and his cross are eye-opener and then the eye-piece for viewing everything that can be called Christian. Call it the "cross-hairs" in the scope. The subject matter in cross-theology is the entire breadth of the Biblical narrative—from creation to Bethlehem to Calvary and Easter and Pentecost and the Parousia. Theologians of the cross are not the opposite of theologians of the resurrection. Only through the cross-hairs can we see Easter as the Good News is it "for us and for our salvation." So also the term "glory" is not a No-No for theologians of the cross. Instead the issue is: what's the glory? Where and how do you find it? Answer: not in our doing "whatever we can" to move toward God, but in Christ's move toward us "manifesting things of God through suffering and the cross."

In an earlier book on this topic (from the days of non-inclusive language) WHERE GOD MEETS MAN, Forde had spoken of the "traffic problem" arising from our human yen to move somehow, someway, at least just a little, up toward God, while God opted to move down—way down in suffering and the cross—to us. One of the chapters portrayed the sinner's dilemma (and God's too) as



humans being intent on “Moving Up the Down-Staircase.” That’s still a compelling image.

There’s a lot of other “goodies” in Forde’s HD study. And it’s not at all an exercise in Reformation archaeology. He’s constantly in dialogue (read “argument”) with churchly and secular voices today, many of whom write off theologians of the cross as pessimists or masochists, or even sadists. But not so, says Forde. Pursuing cross-theology is no more “negative” than helping an addict, an alcoholic, “hit bottom” so that healing may begin. And like such a one, even theologians of the cross are not “healed,” but “being healed.” The Old Adam and Old Eve, chronic theologians of glory and thus addicted to believing in their own achievements (however infinitesimal) and their free will (doing the best I can), still spook around within all cross-theologians. So they too say freely, even cheerfully, “I’m a recovering glory-theologian; but I am recovering.” Call it Resurrection. Call it Easter. Risen indeed! Hallelujah!

Peace & Joy!

Ed