

A Sequel to last week's Advent and Apocalypse in America—from Werner Elert in 1932

Colleagues,

This looks as though it was written yesterday, and not 76 years ago when Werner Elert published his Volume II of *Morphologie des Luthertums* (Morphology of Lutheranism) [Munich, 1932]. That was one year before Hitler assumed power in Germany.

In Volume I [1931] of the *Morphology* Elert offers his readers the “Theology and World View of Lutheranism” in three parts. One, the “Gospel Aha!” where it all began. Two, the consequences of this Aha! for “Dogma and Church.” Three, “Weltanschauung” (how you see the world when you start with the Gospel Aha!).

This first volume of Elert's massive study designates the Gospel Aha! as the dynamic, the energy source, of the Lutheran Reformation. He then tracks the “morphology” of that “dynamis,” the manifold and complex ways and patterns into which that energy “morphed” in subsequent Lutheran history. In Volume I he works his way through the Lutheranism of the 16th and 17th centuries, presenting the Gospel's morphing (shaping) Lutheran teaching and Lutheran church life, and then Lutheran perceptions of the world. In 1962 Concordia Publishing House published an English translation of Volume I under the title “The Structure of Lutheranism.”

Vol II traces the consequences of Lutheranism's Aha! in shaping daily life and society up through the 19th century in those places where Lutheranism took root—not only in Europe but throughout the world. E.g., his knowledge and insight about

Lutheranism in the USA is stunning. This volume two was never translated.

If all 521 pages of Elert's volume two are a bit daunting, you can get a quick-blick from one of his essays that we posted as Thursday Theology #29—almost exactly 10 years ago on Dec. 10, 1998. Here's the URL: <https://crossings.org/thursday/1998/thur1210.shtml> "Lutheranism and World History" is its title.

The last three pages of Morphology volume two I've translated for you below. They are the concluding paragraphs of section five, Social Structures and Economics. I offer them as a sequel to last week's "Advent and Apocalypse in America." Elert probes considerably deeper and farther than I succeeded in doing. That's always been the case.

The problems confronting modern society in the realm of economics can be approached from three directions. One is to see them as issues of technology, transportation, the distribution of world resources. Thus the once-thriving industries of the Thuringian forests came to an end not because human morality or diligence failed, but because the steam engine shifted the concentration of heavy industry away from wood to coal, when the railroad with its cheap transportation costs wiped out the decentralization of the iron industry that had previously been the case. The laboring masses relocated by this shift in technology can never be rescued from the place of their pain until they die out from childlessness. That is the solution technology offers.

"Or one can address those problems as mere questions of capital, issues of financial value. Carried to its consequence this procedure calculates every human activity, not only human work

at the machine, but also at the desk, in fact, the whole creation and everything humans produce (from governments to church bells), and finally human beings as well according to their monetary value. And they are then managed—and finally disposed of—accordingly. That means the end of the Western world, which today already is losing its commitment to “accountability” to others on the planet, and then aside from this accountability has absolutely nothing more to lose. In this model of economics standardized humans with standardized production, standardized pleasures and standardized minds have no individual color at all. They are all gray.

Or the third option. You can hope to master those problems with a fundamentally ethical program. That may be the method of charity for the oppressed, or class struggle, or the social gospel with its proposals to create the Kingdom of God on earth by bringing democracy to the whole world. These basically ethical possibilities still seemed plausible yesterday. [Elert is writing in 1932.] But today their naivete about the realities of our situation has been shattered.

These solutions born of ethical considerations and ethical energy are the weakest of all. That's also true of the doctrine of class struggle. [1932 is just 15 years after the Bolshevik revolution in Russia.] It separates the owners and the expropriated like sheep and goats, like the good and the evil, and believes that the good will win. That is “Aberglaube,” a false faith. Even the medieval church, which did indeed have great moral power, dared to proclaim “owning nothing” only as an “evangelical counsel” for monastics, but not for society at large. Communism draws its practical impulsive force exclusively from human desire for goods that communism has not produced and according to its own nature never can produce. One could understand communism and class struggle and even acknowledge it as a violent attempt of self-help for rescue from intolerable

conditions, as shaking off the vampire that sucks all the victim's blood. But it cannot cage the beast ready to spring in every human heart.

For those who are not convinced of this from other sources, the solid evidence for this is that every communist program calls for coercive force, not only to create the social and economic order it envisions, but to keep it in place once it has arrived. The only exception to that is Tolstoy. Yet his doctrine comes from principles of the peasant world of Old Russia. In his "Kreuzer sonata" he envisions the willing demise of the entire human race. His themes on closer examination are all privileges of the bourgeoisie.

Beyond all that, there is one thing that communism and capitalism and the believers in technological progress all share, and that is the capitulation of the human race to economics, with the word economics understood in the broadest possible sense. In all three options the same "Weltanschauung," world-view, is at work, whose explicit components cannot be denied.

The economy has become an inescapable dynamis of our personal life and the life of our society—in much the same way that Luther could not escape "reason" as soon as he started to think. He too accepted the necessity of taking reason's path to its bitter end. Many of today's blasphemies about economy call to mind—often verbatim—his eruptions about despair. Were we to think through the current economic and social world we live in, think it through to the end, we too would stand exactly before Deus absconditus [God in hiding] as he did.

His theophany [Aha!] came when he no longer sought to evade, but stood still and simply listened. With this we have brought this book [all 1000 pages] to full circle. [Elert's volume one begins

with Luther's "primal experience" of striving to cope with Deus absconditus.] For the question, what proposal Lutheran churches have to solve these economic problems, there is but one answer: None at all.

But faith in the Gospel Aha! born from primal despair celebrates resurrection from the death of this capitulation. People trusting this Gospel surmounted not only the mass deaths of the Thirty Years War. Such Christ-trusters were not only strong in bearing that cross and valley of sorrows. That itself was indeed something. But even more, Christ-trusters go to work living a particular ethos, a specific quality of human life. They do not imagine that whatever good they achieve in the world constitutes the Kingdom of God—or ever could be that. Such fanciful conceit is nothing other than cowardice in the face of death. Rather such believers, since they are now at peace with God, see death (as Matthias Claudius put it) no longer as an enemy. They acknowledge their limits and know that they are but fleeting and minuscule pieces of creation.

But this is really THE creation, God's creation where God's structures when broken do indeed bring recompense. These are the fundamental relationships of man and woman, people and nations, governments and law, and also a wholesome pattern of economic life. The tragedy of our time is bankruptcy of the human soul, evoked by the absolutizing of the last of these relationships, economics. The consequence is scant concern for all the others. For this reason it is only the empty eyes of "entseelter Menschen" [humans with no more soul] that stare at us when we seek to solve every economic crisis. The creator has once more become the hidden God—from whom there is no escape.

The "other" apocalypse of our Lord Jesus Christ is no escape either, but it is sur-vival, "living through" the encounter with

deus absconditus and coming out alive on the other side. Billions of treasury bills won't do anything to redeem "entseelte Menschen." There's only one way. It began with the mangled Messiah.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder