

Interfaith Prayer

Colleagues:

THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY's Reformation Festival issue (they didn't call it that), posted the end of October 2002, featured two of the best-known Lutheran theologians in America, Martin Marty and Gilbert Meilaender [hereafter MM and GM]. MM's photo even made the cover. Both GM and MM were reared in the theology and ethos of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. Both have come prominently into the mainstream of American theological conversation. MM was at “the sem” when I was. In his senior year at Concordia, St. Louis, ('52-'53) Marty edited the student theology journal SEMINARIAN and I was one of his stringers. A generation later GM was my student at the same sem. Both have gone a long way since then.

GM went to Princeton for a Ph.D. in Christian Ethics with Paul Ramsey, taught for years at Oberlin College, and now has an endowed chair in ethics at Valparaiso University. He is on the LCMS clergy roster. Though not an official spokesman for the LCMS, some sectors of his church listen to him. Even more, I sense, he is a major voice in today's ecumenical conversation in Christian ethics. In his article in the CC he “puzzles” (his term used 8x) over a problem that is now vexing the LCMS, namely, the ethics of Christians praying together with folks of other religions at a time of national crisis. More about that below.

Marty, now 75, has for almost half a century been writer-editor with the CHRISTIAN CENTURY, America's liberal Protestant journal, and for one third of a century Church History prof at the University of Chicago. His list of publications is so long that friendly wags talk about him as “the only man I know with no unpublished thoughts.” The article in this issue of CC was

not BY him, but ABOUT him. A MM retrospective: "The sense of place. The many horizons of Martin E. Marty." After 20 years also on the LCMS clergy roster Marty moved (was moved?) into the ELCA during the Wars of Missouri in the 70s. With some sectors of LCMS he is not persona non grata. E.g., for this past spring's 50th anniversary reunion of the "Class of '52," Concordia Seminary invited him to be the memorial speaker.

For a second time today I read the two CC articles side-by-side. One thing jumped off the pages. The MM article (remember, not by him, but about him, authored by Wendy Murray Zoba) has something like 14 column inches of Marty citing Martin Luther and appropriating his theology for such a time as this. In GM's article neither Luther nor the Lutheran Confessions ever get mentioned. But other prominent Protestants drawn on for support as GM threads his way through the puzzle are C.S. Lewis, Donald Baillie, and Karl Barth.

Strange. Especially since the MM article is more biographical, and thus plausibly could get along without Luther quotes, while GM is wrestling with an ethical issue that is currently wrenching his own LCMS denomination, a church known for its claim to be true to the Lutheran Reformation. So why not draw on the Lutheran Reformation here?

I asked GM that question in an e-mail after my first reading. I even sent along the Luther quote from the Large Catechism where ML says that people of "other religions" "even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them, and thus cannot be confident of his love and blessing." Gil thanked me for the reference, but saw it focused exclusively on salvation (soteriology) and not the ethical issue raised by LCMS District President David Benke's public prayer in the "Mars Hill" assembly at Yankee Stadium shortly after Sept. 11. Well maybe.

Now the last thing I want to do (according to one inner voice for sure) is to offer theological assistance to the LCMS in their time of trial. They once declared me along with 44 colleagues heretics “not to be tolerated in the church of God,” a synodical resolution that is still on the books. So when the LCMS has internal strife, my besetting sin is “Schadenfreude,” rejoicing in someone else’s (deserved) affliction.

But reflecting on GM’s article nudges me to propose what seems to be better theology than Barth, Baillie, and Lewis offer, viz., explicitly Lutheran stuff. First hermeneutics, then soteriology, then ethics. Linking hermeneutics and soteriology was at the center of what ThTh readers have heard me label “the Augsburg Aha!” of the Lutheran Reformation. Namely, what Luther once called his breakthrough, the “discrimen” [distinction] present in the Bible itself that “the Law is one thing, but the Gospel is something else.” That was Luther’s “aha!” (and the Augsburg Confessors’ after him), both for reading the Bible and for understanding how people got saved. In the axiom of Bob Bertram (he now in periculo mortis): “Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separable from Biblical soteriology.” Or in the words of the second great “Martin” of the 16th century, Martin Chemnitz: “The distinction between law and gospel must be made at every point in Christian theology.”

Therefore also in Christian ethics. Therefore also in evaluating Benke’s action in Yankee Stadium.

It seems to me that Gil ignores this Lutheran touchstone in his puzzling about Christians praying on Mars Hill. Yes, he didn’t quote Luther. But that’s not yet a demerit. What is “puzzling” is that the theologians he does use, and use affirmatively (at least the two that I know fairly well, Lewis and Barth), also ignore the Lutheran “discrimen” in doing their theology. Barth in fact claimed that Luther’s “discrimen” was a big mistake.

GM also does Biblical interpretation on his own in the essay. It seems to me that he ignores the discrimen. And that may be a segment of "old Missouri" within him. Even though the LCMS tradition is to hype "the proper distinction between law and Gospel," it is hyped as a "doctrine" to be taught and believed. One bane of Missouri—one that got 45 of us axed—is its heritage of "believing the Bible," but ignoring the "discrimen" as the axiom, the method, to be practiced in "Biblical hermeneutics and Biblical soteriology."

Gil goes to the Scriptures for precedents that may have some analogy to the Yankee Stadium event. From them, careful and clear-headed scholar that he indeed is, he carefully makes his own distinctions (but not the law/gospel one) about differing contexts and then weighs the possible applicability of these texts to Benke's action. There ARE no "easy" direct parallels, of course. Paul's discussion of Christians eating "meat offered to idols" gets yes/no answers from Paul himself depending on the circumstances. GM also examines passages in the Psalms, Romans, Amos, Malachi that come close, but none are direct parallels to "public prayer with people of other faiths." So even at the end of the article he is still puzzling. "We need to think more, and harder, about how to manage this." And he concludes with Karl Barth's proposal for guarded "tolerance" with non-Christians in the public arena.

Canonical use of the Bible is a clear alternate to the Augsburg Aha! for reading the Bible. It was so in the 16th century. It is so now. Canonist hermeneutics is what I learned in 8 years of LCMS parochial education. It's still vexing Missouri and the Benke brouhaha is its most recent bizarre episode. GM's essay, it seems to me, doesn't help much because it does not move beyond canonist exegesis. The soteriology linked to canonist Biblical theology is one that says—sometimes sotto voce—the more you can believe and live your life in accord with all that the

Bible says, the more you are pleasing to God. Granted, God is fundamentally pleased with you by virtue of Christ's death and resurrection. That's soteriology. That's number one. But there are also these secondary matters. . . . Case in point: Benke in Yankee Stadium. Does the Bible say God was pleased with that or not?

Personally I'm paying little attention to the LCMS hassle about Benke—and linked to that the hassle about the LCMS President Kieschnick who approved his actions. But from what I pick up through the grapevine, it is indeed being pursued canonically. Not only with canonist readings of the Bible, but (no surprise) with conflicting canonist interpretations of "The Handbook," the LCMS's book of canon law. It was not a frivolous binge on Luther's part when he tossed the Roman books of canon law into the flames in that protest parade at Wittenberg 5 centuries ago. Law, even "church law," is "something else" than the Gospel. But even worse than the bondage inflicted by canon law is bondage to canonist readings of the Bible. It seems to me that GM reads the Biblical texts as a canonist. If a Biblical text carefully parsed allows what Benke did, then it was OK; if the text does not, then he should not have done it. And he does come to a soft conclusion: "I doubt that it was wise for Benke to participate in the event." In this article he doesn't want to discuss the case, but instead use it "to provoke us to larger thoughts" about INTERFAITH 'PRAYER,' even though he finds himself "very puzzled about those larger questions."

Wouldn't the puzzle be easier to solve using the Augsburg Aha! for exegesis? And then through the hermeneutics, soteriology, ethics chain reaction you could get to Yankee Stadium? I think so. But I really ought to wait until "they" ask me (ha!) to do so.

One of the ancient captains on "our side" during the Wars of

Missouri urged me to “say something” about GM’s article in CC. He appreciated Gil’s careful thoughtful procedures, but didn’t agree with the conclusion. That reminded me of a classic bon mot from my grad student days in Hamburg Germany decades ago. It was Church Historian Kurt Dietrich Schmidt’s seminar. One of the much-brighter-than-I doctoral students made a brilliant case for something contra the professor’s position. Schmidt’s response: “Was Sie sagen stimmt schon, aber es ist trotzdem falsch.” [What you say makes perfect sense, but it is still wrong.] Canonist renderings of the Bible can be well argued, but they are regularly still wrong.

And another story, from the patriarch of the university where GM now teaches, O.P. Kretzmann. O.P. was riding in a cab in Manhattan, conversing with the garrulous cabbie about the difficult meeting he was heading for at the Lutheran Center. “On the one hand this...” O.P. said, “but on the other hand that.” The cabbie cut him short: “Father,” he advised (O.P. was wearing his clerical collar), “Sometimes you just gotta forget your principles and do what’s right!” Did Benke do what’s right? Even though I’ve only second-hand data, my guess is yes. My second guess is that there are principles—the Augsburg Aha! for hermeneutics, soteriology and ethics—to support that yes.

But I really ought to wait until they ask me.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder