

# A SMITHIAN LUTHER AND FAITH-BASED UNIVERSALISM

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## FAITH; EMPIRICAL AND THEOLOGICAL

1. Recall this passage from Wilfred Cantwell Smith's Towards a World Theology. "A Luther found faith so utterly significant a matter that he proclaimed that by it, and by it alone, man is saved. As an historian of human cultural life across the globe, I find myself wondering whether perhaps he was not right. The record makes it not absurd to suggest that faith, especially when one contrasts it with nihilism and despair, is about as important as Luther held."

2. Smith submits "the following as an empirical observation, and in some ways almost verifiable: that the particular Muslim about whom we spoke, the man of faith whom I called *simul iustus et peccator*, was by that faith saved, in the mundane sense of the word... On earth, no man is fully saved..., but in so far as he is saved, he is saved by faith."

3. It does seem a bit incongruous at first. Smith's "theology of comparative religion" – a culturally inclusive theology of all believers: Muslim believers, Jewish believers, all believers – invokes Martin Luther as support. Incongruous, for was faith ever more exclusively tied to a single tradition, the tradition of Christ, than in the theology of Luther?

4. Indeed, for Luther was not faith so inseparably faith in Jesus the Christ, or at least in God through Christ, that any

theological definition of faith would be unimaginable without Christ as its *obiectum*? And would not all other faiths, because they are not in Christ, automatically be religions of “works” and therefore ineligible as “faith” at all? No, at least not automatically. That exclusivist Luther was not. For him faith was more generic than that.

5. Even a superficial reading of Luther must notice how attentive he was to pre-Christian believers within the Hebrew scriptures, how the Muslim faith of “the Turks,” however “shameful,” was at least less so than that of the current Christian establishment, how “faith of the heart” – later, Tillich’s “ultimate concern” – is what makes any object, true or false, into either *Gott* or *Abgott*. All these phenomena are described as faith (*Glaube*).

6. Of course, Smith is not the first student of world religions, even the first one from Harvard, to find in Luther’s preoccupation with faith a suggestive clue to religion in general, and a quite empirical clue. One of Smith’s worthy predecessors in this approach was William James.

7. The question, however, as Smith is bold to press, is whether what is described as faith empirically also qualifies as faith theologically, that is, as “true” faith or “saving” faith. And is such a theological judgment at all accessible to empirical test?

8. I would not have expected Luther to be much help with these post-Reformation questions. But Smith’s mention of him has served to remind me of statements by Luther which might at least help to sharpen and deepen our own questions.

# LUTHER

9. In his *De Servo Arbitrio* Luther considers the sort of spirituality defended by Erasmus: one which must always somehow be our own doing – admittedly enabled by divine grace, perhaps almost entirely, yet in some sense the responsible, freely willed act of the human subject; else the act is not “ours.”

10. Luther’s rejoinder is not that there are no such acts but rather that even such acts as ours, for all their outside help, cannot sustain the self-confidence we need before God – in short, faith.

11. What is required of us, says Luther, is that we “believe with certainty that we please God.” For “the offense of unbelief lies precisely in having doubts about the favor of God, who wishes us to believe with the utmost possible certainty that he is favorable.”

12. At issue at this point of the debate is Paul’s reference to “the glory of God,” of which fallen humans are said to be universally “devoid.” (Romans 3:23) What would such “glorying in God,” as Luther translates it, entail? “Now a person glories in God when he is certain that God is favorable to him and delights to look kindly upon him, so that the things he does are pleasing in God’s sight, or if they are not, they are borne with and pardoned.”

13. But isn’t it precisely this “delighting in the divine approval of their lives that Erasmus’ religious subjects, those conscientious and self-responsible “strivers” lack – and not only lack but would probably even abjure as presumptuous?

14. For good reason they would abjure such certitude, knowing as they do that their best efforts, however graced, are still far from God-pleasing. Their inability to count upon the divine

pleasure is not first a psychic deficiency, a failure of will to believe, but a deficiency rather in autobiographical fact, in any ontic entitlement to trust. Their disbelief is principled.

15. By citing the testable experience of Erasmus' religious subjects themselves, Luther has advanced his rebuttal from a scriptural base to an empirical one. "Experience proves that [Paul] is right." He challenges Erasmus to ask precisely those who know they are ultimately responsible *coram Deo* for their own lives. "And if you are able to show me one who can sincerely and honestly say with regard to any effort or endeavor of his own, 'I know that this pleases God,' then I will admit defeat...."

16. So far Luther's procedure might resemble what Smith called "an empirical observation, and in some ways almost verifiable." A further stage in Luther's argument attempts what Smith, too, finds to be the necessary next step: how to relate the "empirical" to the "transcendent," how to infer from what people experience of God what is indeed true of God, "how to correlate [faith's] saving mundanely with its saving cosmically,...for all eternity."

17. "Now," as Luther continues, "if this glory is lacking, so that the conscience dare not say for certain or with confidence that 'this pleases God'" – and that much conscientious unbelief, remember, Luther claims is empirically demonstrable – "then it is certain it does not please God. For as a man believes, so it is with him."

18. Notice, Luther's "transcendent" assumption is not just that "God is favorable" – that by itself would be too exclusively transcendent – but also that God "wishes us to believe with the utmost possible certainty that he is favorable." The divine favor is so internally related with the human response to it that a negation in the latter entails negation in the former. In

this respect Luther is what Smith also wishes to be, a “non-bifurcationist.” Human distrust and divine disfavor are as close and as synchronous as the two blades in Lonergan’s “scissors.”

19. It hardly needs saying, Luther’s position is not subjectivism, auto-suggestion, as if wishful believing (or disbelieving) makes it so – a misunderstanding which Smith, too, is eager to allay about his own position.

20. It is not even a case of what Habermas and others employ as “the Thomas theorem,” valid as that is: “What people believe is real is real in its consequences.” The consequences which Luther sees involved in the matter of religious unbelief are, to use Smith’s words, “cosmic” as well as “mundane” consequences, decidedly trans-subjective and even trans-social.

21. For Luther, as we said, the dilemma of faith – having to believe one’s life is God-pleasing though in fact it is not – is not resolved by the mere gift of more faith. For such faith, no matter how fervent, would still be counterfactual. The prior need is for an actual human life, a quite historical life and death and resurrection which, though it is not the believers’ own doing may still be viably their own – one which identifies them, *peccatores* though they are, as simultaneously and credibly *iusti*.

## LUTHER AND SMITH

22. On that christological solution, or at least on its theological “necessity,” Smith may well differ from Luther. And for both of them, I suspect, the difference would be critical. But on this much they would seem to agree: the one place where the “transcendent” and the “empirical” intersect is human “history,” and in the specific history of Jesus the Christ – there, at least – that intersection actualizes the divine

compassion.

23. Smith can say that “Christians proclaimed that in Christ faith had become available to man.” Luther would scarcely begrudge that, yet I imagine he would interpose that what became available in Christ was not first of all faith but rather a Way for people to be so pleasing to God – “on this earth!” – that already they could afford to believe they were pleasing.

24. It is only fair to admit that the above argument, Luther’s against Erasmus, while it does indeed appeal to “experience” and from that experience derives a theological conclusion, nevertheless yields a conclusion which is negative.

25. True, we omitted Luther’s sequel, which climaxes in a positive alternative, “a new creation by faith,” and goes on to celebrate the Isaianic promise, “I [Yahweh] have been found by those who did not seek me, I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.” Whether this affirmative antithesis is likewise derivable from “experience” deserves to be explored.

26. Even so, conclusions in theology are hardly inadmissible simply because they are negative. Smith, too, allows himself to adjudge objectionable theologies, including apostolic ones, as “wrong,” indeed “blasphemous.” Also in this respect, I suppose, he and Luther have something in common. Though eventually it may be each other whom they would hereticize (but perhaps not) there is some comfort in knowing that both of them reserve their severest criticism for heresy within their own tradition.

27. And what about negative criticism between religious traditions? Smith urges that in other respects we should emulate the modern scientific ethos, for instance its global universalism. Certainly he is right. And why not, we might add, emulate that ethos also in its mutual criticalness? All the more so as efforts are now made in critical theory to expand the

range of science into what used to be quarantined as judgments of value? This reciprocal candor should not be inconceivable in Smith's kind of inter-religious "colloquy", inspired by a common transcending love.

## GENERIC FAITH

28. What might have escaped notice in the earlier quotations from Luther is that in speaking of faith he was not speaking only of Christian faith. His empirical challenge to Erasmus was about religious faith altogether, what Smith calls a universal "relation of man to God."

29. "Until Schleiermacher," Smith finds, "the faith of Christians was thought of simply as faith, not as one kind of faith, one out of many alternatives." Likewise when Luther claims that God "wishes us to believe with the utmost possible certainty that he is favorable," the "us" clearly embraces not only Christians but everyone.

30. This universalizing of faith, at least as a divine requirement, whether or not as human fact, should discourage the customary Christian exclusivism about faith, namely, that faith is to be expected only of Christians and that other religious cultures operate under lesser expectations – say, the "righteousness of works." If it is indeed "necessary," as Luther claimed, that every human person "believe with certainty that he pleases God," then this necessity as a divine expectation is all-inclusive, as the awareness of it may also be – or may become.

31. Similarly Smith thinks that faith, though it has been theologically central for Christianity especially, probably also for Islam, "will be central also to the theology of the future," worldwide. I seem to recall Ninian Smart's writing somewhere,

only a few years ago, that the emphasis upon faith is distinctively Christian. More recently his Gifford Lectures, Beyond Ideology (favorably reviewed by Smith) speak freely of faith also in religious cultures other than Christian.

32. Also today's Christian theologians – theologians as different in other respects as Juan Luis Segundo and David Tracy – are seeking to locate common ground among the world's religious pluralities in a common "faith."

33. Comes now the question. Suppose that the faith which is to be expected of us all in any "theology of comparative religion" – a project I find not only compelling but endearing – is something more than Santayana's "animal faith," the pervasive human conviction that life is worth living after all." Suppose rather that the requisite faith is one by which the human creature "believes with certainty that he pleases God."

34. Question: is there not the massive risk that such a demanding notion of faith, once it is laid against the actual "experience" of the world's conscientiously religious, will have the sorry effect of pricing the inter-religious "colloquy" (or even the intra-Christian colloquy) quite out of the market?

35. In fact, is there not the further risk of discovering that those very religious traditions (including of course Christianity) which foster the highest expectations of faith are at the same time a major factor in proving such faith to be impossible, and thus a force instead for either cynicism or cheap compromises?

36. My own hunch is that those risks are real and formidable. And perhaps, given the ambitious emphasis upon faith which seems to be growing in the "theology of religions" movement, the risks by now may be irreversible. But I for one do not deplore those



risks. On the other hand, I foresee no resource for weathering them other than what, in the foregoing propositions, has been called faith.

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