

The Future of Lutheranism In a Global Context

Colleagues,

That topic is the title of the book review I've just done for *MISSIOLOGY*, the journal of the American Society of Missiology. The review editor muzzled me down to 500 words. You get much more.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

The Future of Lutheranism In a Global Context
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The three “big” words in the title – Future, Lutheranism, Global – get in-depth analysis from only one of the 13 contributors to this volume of essays coming from a 2004 symposium sponsored by Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota. That author is Per Lønning, now an 81-year-old retired bishop and theology professor (and for 7 years member of parliament!) in Norway. Here's what he says.

FUTURE: “Notwithstanding everything that can be called futurology, tomorrow is a time we do not know. Any research is a game, any result a guess.” (131) He offers this definition of futurology: “a science exploring things that will happen in case nothing happens; that is, nothing that disturbs preconceived expectations. The only resource for research into

the future is the past.” (132) LUTHERANISM: “I suggest a question mark at the term Lutheranism. Isms . . . generally advertise a compact ideological system.” Does “the quality of being Lutheran” according to the Augsburg Confession result in such an “-ism”? He doesn’t think so. (136)

GLOBAL: “A warning light should be lit not primarily for the word GLOBAL but for any use of language that, at the foot of some emerging Tower of Babel, strives to remove boundaries! Such expansive terms frequently are used to present some expected or desired process in today’s world as inescapable and in need of no further exploration or justification. But if today’s expanding globalism, in all its extensions of meaning, cries for anything, it must be the question of clarification!” (132)

In addition to checking on these three basic terms Lønning addresses what may be the most significant item for Lutheranism’s future, yes, for the entire global church in the days ahead. “The frightening ecclesiological nightmare of tomorrow is . . . the threat of a gigantic left-right division crossing most denominational borders and old confessional identities.” (137) It is the fight about the Bible, “division from the inside,” he says.

“The problem is that both [sides] may be right, each to some extent and in certain regards, but critical analysis may be missing in both camps, and personal preferences—socio-cultural attachments, in particular—will decide. Such attitudes may reflect a general preference in a progressive-innovative or in a conservative-protective direction. In addition to that, every epoch exercises its particular pressure on and through public opinion—a fact to which global commercialization is giving increased momentum from year to year.”(138)

Lønning's last two pages (142f.) bear this caption: "Scripture Alone! A Lutheran Principle? Yes . . . No . . . Yes!" Those two pages by themselves might be worth the price of the book.

So far Lønning. None of the other contributors give attention to Lønning's two waving index fingers about clarifying key terms or paying attention to the nightmare.

These authors—usually two each—come from Africa, Asia, Latin America, Middle East, Europe and North America. Many of their contributions are reportorial. They portray Lutheranism in their regions and muse about what the future may hold for Lutheran churches in their local contexts.

"Context" is an "in" word for many of the essays. And a particular vision of Lutheranism regularly accompanies such context-focused essays. That view of Lutheranism regularly gives an appreciative (or is it ritual?) nod to the Ur-heritage of the Lutheran Reformation, and then proposes—sometimes more aggressively, sometimes less—that Lutheranism's agenda today needs to move beyond that late medieval context and the theological issues of that day to the very different world and the manifold new contexts where Lutheranism is at home today. That frequently then leads to proposals, beginning with the opening essay by the editors, to take "the traditional themes of Lutheran theology" and "incarnate the gospel in cultures very different from the West." (p.2).

That term "incarnate"—and its Siamese twin "inculturate" (or "enculturate")—return mantra-like throughout the book. But no proponents of that agenda stop to ask whether that agenda is even close to what the original Lutheran reformers thought they were doing in their own "late medieval context." So readers are left ignorant should they ask: "If that was not Lutheranism's original agenda—(this reviewer's conviction)—why is it

Lutheranism's agenda today?"

Samples:

"The struggle to move beyond the missionary heritage and to enculturate Lutheranism in non-Western societies." (5) "The 16th century Lutheran Reformation" was itself "an inculturation." (14) In the pleas for such inculturation in Lutheranism's future one author—a prof at the Moorhead college—has the chutzpah to propose changing the ancient Lutheran axiom "ecclesia semper reformanda" (the church always needs reforming) to "ecclesia semper inculturanda" (the church always needs inculturating).(18) That same author links the inculturation agenda with "a prophetic presence regarding issues of social, economic and racial justice."(20) And continuing on that prophetic path we hear social justice hyped over and over again, with the chapter culminating in doxology about "the gospel's liberating power in situations of socio-economic injustice," and an exhortation for commitment to a "global dialogue . . . regarding God's liberating and healing work in the world."

That is a view of both the Lutheran Reformation and the New Testament gospel which this reviewer finds off base. It is not hyperbole when I suggest that had Luther heard those lines, his first response would have been "Huh?"

Luther might even say something like this:

Inculturation, incarnation of the Gospel? That is the PROBLEM (not the SOLUTION) we face in the Holy Roman Empire and the Holy Roman Church today.

The gospel has become so incarnated into late medieval European culture, that it is not THE Gospel any longer. We never used the

word culture much in our day, but here's something to think about when you're talking about human culture.

Human culture (in the now-fallen world) already has a "gospel," an "other" Gospel (fundamentally a false one), incarnated within it. No human cultures ever show up gospel-free. The gospels they incarnate carry the same theological DNA as the people who create the cultures. Since that primordial crash in God's once-upon-a-time clean creation—the REAL Big-Bang—this blemished DNA that bedevils every Old Adam/Old Eve comes along with the cultures they create. That happens willy-nilly. But why should that surprise anyone?

Like the flu virus, this blemished gospel mutates all the time, but its fundamental DNA does not. It is always, as the Lutheran confessions claim, an "opinio legis." Every culture incarnates the opinion that the culture-creators fear, love and trust this axiom: "law —yes, even God's law, if you happen to be a theist—will save you." Doing right will make everything right. Every culture brings with it this "other" gospel, this "other" soteriology. When asking how to heal life's fundamental fractures, the chronic answer is: If you just do the right thing, everything will be fixed.

[Yes, I am putting words into Luther's mouth. I wonder if he'd repeat them on his own. Having gone this far, I'll continue.]

The Augsburg Aha! about the culture of 16th century Europe went something like this. Inculturating the Christian Gospel into a thousand years of European culture has led to THE Gospel's demise. There's always an other gospel already incarnate there when THE Gospel meets folks in a new culture. The attempt by our Holy Roman Empire and Holy Roman church to inculture the Gospel in our day has led to this result: the "other" gospel won.

Is there a better plan?

Luther's Aha! (and Augsburg's too) was NOT to lay out a program to inculturate the authentic Gospel into the Germanic culture of that day, to replace bad gospel with Good Gospel. Not at all. Instead it was to let that culture be what God made it to be, an "ethos under God's law," as Elert labels it. Don't seek to gospel-ize it. In fact, step one is to de-gospelize the culture of the gospel that has infiltrated it, and not replace it with anything!

Next step: Instead of re-gospelizing culture with the authentic Gospel, the Augsburgers' agenda was to keep cultures gospel-less. When facing the other gospel in their own culture, they sought to strip from that law-delineated culture its "soteriological pretensions" (Bob Bertam's bon mot). These pretensions do not come from God, the UR-culture-creator, but from the fractured human agents in that culture who mistakenly seek their salvation in it. Let God's secular culture be secular. Secular, said the Augsburgers, means "no salvation here." So don't seek salvation there. De-incarnate from it the gospel that has sneaked into it.

Next step: Do your daily work—in all your "worldly" relationships—to preserve that secular culture. In nickel words: care for one another, seek justice and pursue it, keep your context "lawful" in warp and woof. Don't try to "gospelize" your culture. That was the mistake both of the Roman church and of the left-wing Reformers in our own day. They thought they could create a Gospel-culture. The Word of God says no. God organizes human cultures to run on law. When you seek to mix in the good Gospel, you "join together what God has rendered asunder." Granted, you can indeed try to do it, but the end product is always bad news—for both God's good Gospel and God's good law. It never fails. On both counts it's lose, lose.

Summa: Not only does the Gospel refuse to incarnate itself into

existing human cultures—can't be done if the Gospel is to remain Gospel—but strictly speaking it also does not create its own culture, either. At least not yet. Not yet do we live in the culture of a new heaven and a new earth. What the real Gospel does create is a new ethos for all of us still living in our “old” native cultures. Christ's “ . . . so send I you” is a mission back into our native cultures—that always run on law. “Be Easter people in your not-yet-Easter culture. Your agenda is NOT to redeem the culture, but to redeem the folks in it, yes, the folks imprisoned in it. Their rescue does not entail getting them out of that culture, but saving them from the false gospels that always surface in any culture, and tune them in to Christ's new song. They'll continue to march in their culture's parade with its law-dominant melody, but they'll be humming a different tune. You might even see a smile on their faces—surely there is one on yours—as y'all hum that Easter tune.”

Back to the book review

But that diversity, yes, that disagreement, throughout this volume about just what Lutheranism is—better said, what it originally WAS—reflects the reality of world Lutheranism today, as can be seen and heard when the Lutheran World Federation assembles its members for conferences and consultations. [ThTh reported on that earlier this year from the LWF consultation in Augsburg, Germany.]

From a Lutheran in the Middle East we hear “[The doctrine of] justification must go beyond the freed and forgiven individual. Justification today must go beyond eternal salvation.” But neither this voice, nor the other incarnators/enculturators in this volume address the original agenda, explicitly mandated in Christ's mission commissions, namely, the forgiveness of sins (John 20:23, Luke 24:47). None of the “let's-go-beyonders”

bother to mention the task—the tough, tough task—of “Christum treiben,” promoting Christ’s forgiveness in their own local contexts. You might think it was already a done deal. Or if not yet finished, a piece of cake. So now Lutheranism “must go beyond.” The evidence for this is not offered. And it won’t be. There is none. Au contraire

There are a few voices—none of them North American—that say “no” to the inculturation agenda and its social justice focus as the calling of Lutherans today and on into the future. Explicit in rejecting this notion of Lutheranism, also citing where it comes from, is Pongsak Limthongviratn (native of Thailand).

“Through the influence of the West quite often the gospel is interpreted from a socio-political point of view that focuses on the impact of the gospel through love, justice and social service as favored by social gospel activists. . . . The role and status of Jesus the Christ is reduced to perfect human or Guru. Though these approaches are meaningful, they are not the proclamation of the gospel. If everything is proclamation of the gospel, then nothing is proclamation of the gospel.” (51f)

Other non-Western voices—Asian and African—tell us that the distinct theology of the Lutheran Reformation has not penetrated very deeply into the Lutheranism on their continents. “Africa has many trained pastors . . .but only a few are able to articulate what Lutheran theology in Africa is all about.” (32) “There is little evidence to suggest that Lutheran confessional theology has made a significant impact on Lutheran thinking in Asia. Lutheranism in Asia represents primarily a historical identity or a denominational label rather than a distinctive theological profile.” (71) No wonder the future of Lutheranism here is difficult to divine. Even so, Lutheran church membership in Africa is expanding exponentially in painful contrast to

membership-atrophy in North America and Europe. Example (from the book's extensive appendix of Lutheran numbers worldwide): There are now twice as many Lutherans in three countries of East Africa as there are in all of North America—16 million to (possibly) 8 million. One reason is that Lutherans in East Africa are convinced: If you are baptized, YOU are a missionary. That is a conviction nearly incomprehensible for Lutherans in the West.

Diversity and disagreement about just what Lutheranism is shows up in the contributions coming from Europe and North America as well.

A Lutheran seminary president in the USA tells us: "The Lutheran church is called to a missionary vocation [that] is different significantly from the vocation of Lutheranism at the time of the Reformation." (147) The central themes of Luther and the Lutheran confessions are listed, but we never learn why the "missionary vocation" central to those classic themes now calls Lutheranism to embark on a "significantly different" calling. [Then comes this word of comfort for the restless natives in the ELCA: "I can say with confidence that the Lutheran theological tradition is being faithfully transmitted from generation to generation at all eight seminaries of the ELCA." (150) I wonder what scholarly research documents that claim—"faithfully" transmitted, and at every one! Would that this were true.]

A bishop from Germany tells us that "the number of church members has steadily decreased . . . due to waves of exits in the early 1970s and after the fall of The Wall in 1989." (120) But we never hear what German Lutherans—the ones who stayed—learned from this exodus. The proposals reported for increasing Lutheranism's relevance to increasingly church-less Germans are offered modestly by the bishop, but to this reviewer they bypass the center.

It's all about regaining cultural relevance. Forgiveness of sins is not on the list. The Wittenberg Platzregen has moved elsewhere.

Amidst these mixed messages from Lutherans around the world, come Platzregen words from the Caribbean: "In [Lutheranism's] confessional writings . . . the central formulation of the Christian message—the gospel—is in terms of the forgiveness of sins." (82) When this writer then closes the chapter, he asks, "Whither Lutheranism in the Caribbean?" Yes, Lutheranism has had and will continue to have "minority status" in the Caribbean world. Even so, here is his call: "to be a community in which no other identifier but faith in Jesus Christ constitutes Christian identity. The Lutheran articulation of the gospel—the good news of Jesus Christ—in terms of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone calls for a radical rejection of any identifier that competes with this good news for primacy of place as the Christian message and the generative center of the Christian faith. No human factor is to be allowed to share in or add to this good news. Where that happens, the very gospel is at stake. Thus, justification by faith is both evangelical proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and a necessary hermeneutic to distinguish between the gospel and distortions of it." (89)

World Lutheranism today is a mixed bag. Should you want prima facie evidence for that, read this book.