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The Lutheran Church and Its American Environment

The Church and Modern Culture

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LUTHERANS landed in America before the arrival of the Mayflower. Some Danish Lutherans, looking for the Northwest Passage, buried forty of their dead on Hudson Bay in 1619. In December of the same year Pastor Rasmus Jensen held a Lutheran Christmas service on the shores of what is now the United States of America.

There are other associations of Lutheran individuals with early events and affairs in America. Jonas Bronck came with the early Dutch who settled at what is now New York. He established the first library on record in the United States; and his name became immortal in the numerous combinations of the name "Bronx." Frederick A. Muehlenberg, a Lutheran clergyman from Pennsylvania, became the first Speaker of the House under the present Constitution of the United States. Together with John Adams, Vice-President of the United States and President of the Senate, he signed the Bill of Rights in 1791. Another member of this illustrious family, William August Muehlenberg, secured the first public school law for the state of Pennsylvania. Moreover, the Stars and Stripes, flown first by John Paul Jones, was made by the ladies' aid of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Philadelphia.

Despite these early contributions to the development of a new nation, the influence of the Lutheran Church on the American way of life has been quite negligible. Even the great migrations, beginning as they did in the fourth decade of the last century and including many thousands of Lutherans, left no appreciable effect by Lutheranism on the national outlook of our country. Indeed it would not be easy to refute the statement of William Warren Sweet: "Since the Civil War, Lutherans have profited more from immigration than any other Protestant body in America, and the Lutheran family of churches now constitutes one of the major religious blocs in our population. They have not, however, exercised the influence in American social and cultural development which their numbers would warrant." *

* "Protestantism in America History," in *Protestantism: A Symposium*, p. 107.

This, of course, raises the question as to the reason for this almost complete lack of influence on the part of the Lutheran Church in America. This failure cannot be attributed to the size of the Lutheran churches. Quakers have always numbered fewer members than the Lutherans; and yet the former have had a considerable effect on our way of life. Why did the Lutheran Church not make a comparable contribution? Is there something in Lutheran theology which prevents it from entering the market place, where ideas are exchanged and where public opinion is formed? Were Lutherans content to hide behind barriers of language and nationalism while the stream of events moved past them? Were they aware that they were often very vocal in claiming the privileges of freedom but frequently hesitated to assume the corresponding responsibilities?

These are no longer theoretical questions. There may have been a time when The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod could afford to keep itself aloof from its American environment. That day has passed. Our church has now become an American church in its techniques and outlook. There is no longer a language barrier to keep its members separate from the American community. Our Synod has, in fact, been catapulted *in medias res* by the catastrophic events of the last fifteen years.

This prompts an inquiry into the relationship that ought to prevail between our church and the American community. In a way, this is the first large-scale experience of Lutheran churches with a way of life in which it finds itself in competition with many other communities of interest that enjoy the same rights and privileges. It is true, of course, that Christians are not of this world; yet they are in it. And as long as they are in the world, also Lutherans have certain responsibilities toward society in general. These obligations vary to some extent according to the environment and position of a given church in a particular way of life. The relationship of various Lutheran churches to the social order prevailing in Europe was quite different from what it is in America. There Lutheran churches often functioned and still serve as established institutions. That is not the case in America, where the establishment of any religion is prohibited by the First Amendment. Every religious organization is thrown on its own resources in America and becomes a community among many other communities in the nation. All of these considerations make the question of our church's relationship to the institutions that surround it a very acute one.

The problem of the relationship of our own church to the American environment does, in fact, present us with a challenge. For the heart of our national way of life is the market place. This is the basic instrument of a free society. Here is where public opinion is shaped by the exchange of ideas. This interchange of thought takes place by all the means of communication. These create the spiritual, moral, and intellectual climate of the community. This community, in turn, stands above the state, giving even government its direction and its scope.

Now, since the church has received from her Lord the commission to go into the market places of the world to proclaim the Gospel, the question of our own church's responsibilities and opportunities become a matter of very practical concern. To examine some of the fundamental factors involved in this whole situation, the Lutheran Academy for Scholarship, in conjunction with Valparaiso University, a few years ago held what is known as the first institute on "The Church and Modern Culture." This was strictly an exploratory effort at raising some of the basic questions confronting our church in this particular respect. The results of these meetings, held at Valparaiso University, were gathered into a book entitled, *The Church and Modern Culture*. No other such discussion is extant. Hence this volume has become basic to any serious consideration of this whole cluster of interests and concerns.

The introductory statement to the volume is devoted to an exploration of the nature of Lutheranism as it relates to culture (pp. 5—14). This discussion is centered specifically around the question of the contributions made by the Lutheran Church to the literature of Germany in the sixteenth century. This introductory treatment was done by the Director of Research of the Lutheran Academy for Scholarship and Chairman of the Institute, Dr. John G. Kunstmann of the University of North Carolina. His conclusion is that Lutheranism as such has not made a great many contributions to culture. He finds the reason for this lack of influence in the character of Lutheranism, which, as the author puts it, directs its peculiar energies and potentialities and, above all, its principal and unique mission, perhaps, not away from secular culture, including literature, but certainly not toward it as if it were its primary objective.

Dr. Otto A. Piper of Princeton Theological Seminary is the author of the essay on "The Lutheran Contribution to Theology" (pp. 80 to 98). This discussion is particularly timely since it deals at length with the creative power of both Luther and the Lutheran principle. He concludes that "despite the latitude that characterizes Lutheran

theology it has remained homogeneous through the centuries and in all its national ramifications" (p. 98).

Another significant essay in this volume was prepared by Dr. Harold J. Grimm, presently of Indiana University. His essay is entitled "Lutheranism as a Cultural Force" (pp. 100—114). In this treatment the author takes vigorous exception to the general "textbook point of view" that Lutheranism is a quietistic religion which ignores its secular environment. The author points to the fact that Luther's attitude concerning political matters was indeed revolutionary, because it was based on new conceptions of personality and the Christian community. Dr. Grimm is probably correct in insisting that when Luther denied the state the right to compel an individual to believe contrary to his own conscience, he made a far-reaching contribution to modern culture, particularly to its pluralistic complexion. The author is persuaded that Lutheranism has been a powerful force in the cultural development of Western civilization "because it has from time to time imitated Luther in making a courageous effort to call attention to the dynamic character of the religious foundations of this civilization" (p. 111).

The question of Lutheranism as a cultural force both in Europe and America was treated also by Dr. T. A. Kantonen (pp. 115—126). This article is significant especially for its thoughtful discussion of the role of the Lutheran Church in America. His conclusion is that Lutheranism in America must be characterized by a defensive attitude. Yet he feels that the indirect contributions of Lutheranism have been considerable. He writes: "Although much of our democracy stems from the secular philosophy of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, many of Luther's ideas, with Calvinistic accretions, came to be embodied in the very structure of Americanism: religious liberty, the separation of Church and State, the importance of the individual person, the dignity of the laity and daily work, and the normativeness of the Bible" (p. 126).

Dr. Carl Mundinger, president of St. John's College in Winfield, presented to the institute a detailed discussion of the influence of Lutheranism on government and society, particularly as they may be seen in certain European countries (pp. 60—68).

Since our Synod is the one Lutheran Church which has a strong educational system, centering in its parish schools, it was necessary to have someone explore the question of the impact that Lutheran education has had on American culture. This was done by Dr. Otto J. Beyers of the University of Hawaii. Dr. Beyers is persuaded that "the impact of Lutheran education upon American culture is not commensurate with its total effort" (p. 59). He concludes, however, that

"there is evidence of a dedicated, intelligent, and creative leadership asking to be heard" (p. 59). In his concluding remarks the author expresses the conviction that the full stature of Lutheran education as a cultural force in America will be achieved in the next decades if the problems it confronts are met with the faith, the courage, and the imagination demanded by the present situation.

In a parallel essay Dr. Richard Caemmerer of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis described the contributions of Lutheranism to education, with special reference to Germany and the Scandinavian countries (pp. 39—50).

Some thought had to be given to the sociological background of Lutheranism. This part of the symposium was prepared by Professor Donald E. Wray of the University of Illinois (pp. 69—79). His paper is concerned with evaluating the present status and potentialities of Lutheranism in the light of several empirical investigations conducted in the past decade. Professor Wray believes that the Lutheran Church today is in a state of ferment such as it has not known in the last decades. The next decades, he feels, will see new alignments in the Lutheran Church that will affect both Lutheranism and the American way of life.

Some of the possible contributions of the Lutheran Church to the American way of life in the future are touched on in the opening address of the institute, which was given by the present writer (pp. 28 to 38). It is his conviction that the Lutheran Church has three major contributions to make. Our church has, in the first instance, a doctrine of nation and nationality that can lend depth to a free way of life. Furthermore, the Lutheran Church espouses a doctrine of vocation which can do much to prevent the erosion of individual character by the depersonalizing forces of modern society. Moreover, the uniquely Lutheran distinction between Law and Gospel creates the only kind of moral climate in which freedom of religion can flourish. Luther's conception of the two kingdoms can make a vital contribution to an understanding and appreciation of the American principle of the separation of church and state.

The keynote address for the institute was delivered by Dr. Conrad Bergendoff. His discussion of "Religion and Culture" (pp. 28—38), is a brilliant treatment of the general relationships possible between religion and culture. This essay alone is almost worth the price of the book.

There can be little question of the fact that the Lord of the Church has given our particular Synod the greatest opportunities for service

it has ever enjoyed. With its contacts established through such agencies as the Lutheran Hour, "This Is the Life," and the program of the Armed Services Commission, our church is confronted with an overwhelming challenge to face up to her responsibilities in every American community. Only rarely does God allow any church such abundant opportunities. We shall be able to render maximum service to God and man only if and when we understand the nature of our own church as it comes into contact with the forces of the American environment.

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(Special study outlines for the use of pastoral conferences are obtainable from the Managing Editor, CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, 801 De Mun Ave., St. Louis 5, Mo. The book itself, *The Church and Modern Culture*, may be ordered through Concordia Publishing House, 3558 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis 18, Mo., at \$3.00 a copy.)