

Images Of Black Religion:
An Historical Kaleidoscope

MILTON C. SERNETT

An Address To Lutherans

SIDNEY E. MEAD

Messianic Prophecy And Messianism

RAYMOND F. SURBURG

The Analysis Of Exodus 24, According To
Modern Literary, Form, And Redaction
Critical Methodology

WALTER A. MAIER

Theses On The Law And Gospel

DAVID P. SCAER

Book Reviews



CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY LIBRARY
SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS

75515

An Address to Lutherans

SIDNEY E. MEAD

*Professor of Religion in American History
University of Iowa*

Delivered at the Seminary, October 26, 1972

I FELT HONORED and was very pleased when invited to give this Beto Memorial Lecture here at Concordia, a bastion of good Lutheranism. For Lutherans have always made me feel welcome in their midst, have shown an interest in what I have had to say, and have responded with pertinent and therefore instructive questions and comments—as I know you will do today.

I am aware that it is hazardous for an outsider to appear before any religious group, for he does not know where live coals may lie beneath what seem to him only the dead ashes of bygone or unimportant differences and conflicts within the family. To me, not only as historian of the experience of Christianity in America, but also as an individual human being, Lutherans are an intensely interesting people. Perhaps because they came in large numbers relatively late, and commonly with a language difference that constituted a brake on over-rapid amalgamation into mainstream Protestantism, and because of ethnic differences that tended to set them apart in communities with an inner cohesion that resisted merging into the hodge-podge of American pluralism, they have remained a peculiar people.

Now it seems to me, that in the context of Providence, being a peculiar people signifies a peculiar calling or destiny. Noting this I used to give a lecture entitled, "Lutheranism—Protestantism's Secret Weapon in the United States." In it I presumed to remind Lutherans of what seemed to me to be their unique character and position in our American religious panorama that Philip Schaff rightly called a motley sampler of all church history and the results it has thus far achieved.

On this occasion, as in previous appearances before Lutheran groups, although I feel like a timid lion thrust into a den full of Daniels, I am going to presume to remind Lutherans of some implications of an extensive study that they recently sponsored.

This is *A STUDY OF GENERATIONS*, jointly sponsored by the three great Lutheran Synods, and published by Augsburg Press. I have not seen the book, but only the review by Myron A. Marty in *THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY* of October 11, 1972 (pp. 1021-1022). According to the reviewer the book is a "family portrait" of Lutherans in the United States, and from what he says, it must be a portrait of Oliver Cromwell's "warts and all" variety. Further, it must represent pure Baconian research, for, he says, the conclusions "rest not on the preconceptions of the [four] researchers" who just gathered "7 million bits of information" that apparently automatically "fell into a pattern." Fifty-seven of these "findings" are "pulled together . . . in a summary profile" in the last chapter.

To this outsider the most striking feature of the "findings" mentioned is their obviousness. For example, from studying the "7 million bits of information" the researchers came up with the con-

clusions that there are differences between the generations of church members, and some differences between clergy and laity, and some differences between the synods! On this basis the reviewer hazards the opinion that not all Lutherans will like all the findings. He also opined that “the most pertinent and perceptive part of the report deals with the polarity between gospel-oriented and law-oriented Lutherans,” something I had thought to be an endemic polarity in Lutheranism from the beginning.

Now it seems to me that if the primary purpose of the study was to enhance these Lutherans’ self-understanding, they hardly needed to finance the collection of “7 million bits of information” from 4,745 of their church members to discover that *these* particular differences exist. What I think is important is that a study of this kind was undertaken and that such “findings” are greeted as new discoveries. This suggests that in our technological age when IBM advertises that it makes “Not just data [but], reality,” what everyone knows is not considered an aspect of “reality” until it is “scientifically” demonstrated. The prevalence of *this* perspective ought to concern all Christians.¹

To me the most, if not the only, significant part of the study is that which the reviewer passes over somewhat playfully as of interest to “those with an eye for paradox . . .”, as he indicates that “the researchers’ comment [is]: ‘Something very curious is going on’”—by which they perhaps meant to suggest that something is rotten in the Lutherans’ State of Denmark. The finding was, according to the reviewer, “that three out of four Lutherans said that all religions lead to the same God, yet three out of four . . . [also] stated that belief in Jesus Christ is absolutely necessary for salvation.”

What is astonishing about this finding is that it indicates that around 50% of Lutheran church members in the United States find it possible simultaneously to hold two apparently theologically irreconcilable positions—to hold at the same time two contrary views, each rooted in age old antagonistic theological traditions. The question for Lutherans, for all of us indeed, is how is this possible in those denominations that are eminently noted among the Protestant groups in America for their resistance to the theological erosion that has taken place in all the other mainline denominations? I suppose that any respectable professor of theology would flunk a student who seemed so intellectually impervious to instruction that he could remain blissfully unaware of any problem here. But I would not assert that no theologian could or can reconcile the two positions to his satisfaction, for I have learned not only the respect but to stand in awe of the intellectual legerdemain displayed by some of the breed.

So I merely mean to say that to me the positions seem to be irreconcilable, and in any case, since I am not a theologian it is not my job to try to reconcile them. To the historian the very interesting question is, “How did this situation come to be?”—or, more specifically, “How did these *Lutherans* of all people get themselves into that theological cul-de-sac?” I think there is a historical answer, or at least that the historical study of the experience of Christianity in America during the past five centuries is the way to go looking for an answer.

And, to anticipate the answer I want to suggest today, it is that these members polled are *both* Lutheran Christians *and* loyal citizens of the Republic in which they live; and that the theology of their denominations is different from the theology that legitimates the constitutional and legal structure of their country.

To me, the ability of around 50% of Lutheran church members to hold two conflicting theological positions—two perspectives that appear to be mutually exclusive—is not just an interesting paradox or something “very curious” to be passed over, but something that poses the crucial question that has confronted Christians in the United States since the end of the 18th century when the theological issue was seen, vehemently discussed, and then laid on the table.² And because the issue was never satisfactorily resolved intellectually, today these people as both church members *and* citizens are not just living “on the boundary” between two worlds of reality. They are religiously and intellectually split, part of them living in each of the two worlds at the same time. The question is, how is this possible—how did this situation come to be?

Today I can but briefly adumbrate an historical answer.

The Reformation established in Christendom for the first time in centuries the right of private judgment, but without undermining belief in the Biblical revelation as highest authority. What prevailed among Protestants was the right of private judgment *under the Scriptures*.

By the end of the eighteenth century the right of private judgment had, for many intellectuals, been divorced from Biblical authority, and for the first time in Christendom, at least since the era of Constantine, a genuinely *religious* alternative to orthodox Christianity had surfaced and was thereafter maintained and perpetuated.

Meantime, notably in the English colonies that were to become the United States, the heroic attempts of the planters of colonies to establish and perpetuate the European pattern of religious uniformity—attempts solidly rooted in premises legitimated by Christian doctrine and axiomatic for centuries—had broken down. Nathaniel Ward, a Massachusetts Bay lawyer turned minister, presumed in 1647 in the guise of THE SIMPLE COBLER OF AGGAWAM, to remind his cohorts of the true Christian position. He said, “. . . God doth no where in his word tolerate Christian States, to give Toleration to such adversaries of his Truth, if they have power . . . to suppress them.” There is, he continued,

no Rule given by God for any State to give an Affirmative Toleration to any false Religion, or Opinion whatsoever; they must connive in some Cases, but may not concede [in principle] in any.

Tolerations, he declared, are evidences of “carnall enmity” to God, and anyone who consents to them “is either an Atheist, or a Here-tique, or an Hypocrite, or at best a captive to some lust: . . .”

Beginning with that Christian perspective, one might say that during the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the “connivance” of State in the toleration of divergent and diverse forms of religion that Ward reluctantly admitted might be necessary some-

times, was gradually elevated into a positive premise that was to provide the legal foundation for the new Nation—namely, the legitimation of religious pluralism that for many centuries had been anathema in Christendom.

The genius of the political leaders whom we commonly call the “founding fathers” is revealed, not in their inventing religious freedom, but in their realization that if there was to be a *United States* made up of the diverse colonies, they would have to depart from the centuries old Christian tradition of uniformity and legitimate religious pluralism. That they knew what they were doing is suggested by Jefferson’s argument that if we are Protestants we reject the binding power of all traditions.

The legitimation was found in the religion of the American Enlightenment—the first alternative to orthodox Christianity to be maintained in Christendom. This is now a commonly accepted historical generalization, nicely stated by Crane Brinton:

The basic structure of Christian belief survived, however, not without heresies and schisms, until roughly the late seventeenth century when there arose in our society what seems to me clearly to be a new religion, certainly related to, descended from, and by many reconciled with Christianity. I call this religion simply Enlightenment, with a capital E.

As a religion, Brinton continues,

... Enlightenment does have a theory of the structure of the universe, or a cosmology, which is certainly a thorough-going monism—all is Nature, and Nature is all—but also that its ethics are at least as vigorously dualistic as the Christian, but with the good as the natural, and the bad as the unnatural.³

This Enlightenment religion is a radical monotheism, or, as one might describe Jefferson’s position, a radical unitarianism of the First Person—Thomas Paine’s “plain, pure, and unmixed belief of one God.” The central dogma was the existence of God, Creator and Governor of the Universe, to whom alone ultimate allegiance was due. In other words, “God” was an absolute presupposition, which means that whether or not God exists was not a matter of propositional truth, as it has become even for most theologians today.

Whatever else these American men of Enlightenment were, they were not atheists. They *were* “infidels” in the precise sense that they denied that the Bible was, or contained, the sole revelation of God to man. They built upon that other strand in the Christian tradition, the concept of the second volume of God’s revelation—the Creation. Thomas Paine expounds this doctrine at length in his *THE AGE OF REASON* (1794). Where Christians argued that man was enabled by grace to understand the revelation in Scripture, Enlightenment men argued that man was gifted by the Creator with “Reason” that enabled him to read and understand the revelation in the Creation. Here we must not confuse “Reason” with the process of reasoning alone. The concept of “reason” came close at least to the idea of humankind as the universe—the Creation—coming to self-conscious awareness of itself, the idea made vivid in the writings of our contemporary, Loren Eiseley. Orthodox Christians and Enlightenment

men agreed that man's duty was to obey God, and that he learned what his duty was by interpreting God's revelation. They disagreed only on the locus and nature of the revelation.

The obverse side of the Enlightenment high doctrine of the Creator and Governor of the universe was the finite limitations of the creature in *every* respect. This determined the conception of the nature and limits of man's knowledge. Finite men could have no absolute knowledge even of the existence of God. The implication of this is that he must live by faith in the Creator—something prominent in the writings of Benjamin Franklin.

The creature could have, not sure and certain knowledge, but only "opinions," and, as James Madison argued, because "the opinions of men" depend "only on the evidence contemplated in their own minds," therefore "the religion of every man, must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man." It is for this reason that opinions could neither be borrowed from others nor imposed on one's fellows by coercion—the damnable error of religionists that, as Jefferson thought, had made half the world hypocrites and the other half fools. In this context Madison defined religion as one's *opinions* of the "duty which we owe to our creator, and the manner of discharging it." Therefore, he concluded, the individual's duty is "to render the creator such homage, and *such* only, as he believes to be acceptable to him"—a neat way of stating the implication of the right to private judgment. This duty to the creator "is precedent, both in order of time and degree of obligation, to the claims of civil society" because "before any man can be considered as a member of civil society, he must be considered as a subject of the governor of the universe." A man's first and ultimate *allegiance* [is] *to the universal sovereign.*" His duty is to obey what *his* conscience tells *him* is the will of God. In other words, one must obey God rather than men.

This perspective made for a radical separation of the substance, or essence, of religion from the forms (the socially devised vehicles) of religion. Typical is John Adams' belief that

The substance and essence of Christianity, as I understand it, is eternal and unchangeable, and will bear examination forever, but it has been mixed with extraneous ingredients, which, I think will not bear examination, and they ought to be separated.

It is in this context that we are to see the concept of the "essentials of every religion" that is so prominent in their writings. Franklin, for example, notes that he "esteemed [as] the essentials of every religion" and "never doubted . . . the existence of the Deity; that he made the world, and govern'd it by his Providence; that the most acceptable service of God was the doing of good to men; that our souls are immortal; and that all crime will be punished, and virtue rewarded, either here or hereafter." On this basis Franklin, who is fairly representative, while fully recognizing the many conflicting forms of religion (theologies, worship forms, preaching styles, politics, etc.), **maintained his absolute belief in the Creator and Governor of the universe.** The forms, being merely the **humanly created vehicles** for the conveyance of the "essentials," were subject to moral judg-

ments. So Franklin continued, assuming that the "essentials" are "to be found in all the religions we had in our country, I respected them all, Tho' with different degrees of respect, as I found them . . . mix'd with other articles, which, without any tendency to inspire, promote, or confirm morality, serv'd principally to divide us. . . ." This argument from the moral tendencies of beliefs—which may well be seen as a form of pragmatism—was not peculiar to Enlightenment men, but was at the time highly developed and almost universally used by the ardent defenders of orthodox Christianity.⁴

The final premise of Enlightenment religion is that so clearly stated by Thomas Jefferson in "An Act for Establishing Religious Freedom" in Virginia (1779), namely

that truth is great and will prevail if left to herself, that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict, unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate, errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them.

This, all too briefly sketched and illustrated, is what I mean by "the religion of the republic," that is, Enlightenment religion with its definite theological structure. It is this theology that legitimated—provided in Peter Berger's sociological terms, the "plausibility structure" for the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution, and has furnished the legal premises for the long line of Court decisions in matters pertaining to the relation between what Madison called the rights of religion and the civil authorities in the United States. What was legitimated by Enlightenment theology, as orthodox Christian theology apparently could not at the time, was religious pluralism in a commonwealth.

In simple terms, the archetypal question for commonwealths in Christendom is that of Amos 3:3—"Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" Christians have answered, "no, not unless they be agreed on the beginning point." So commonly their organizations have demanded subscription to a creedal statement as the first condition of fellowship. Enlightenment men also answered "no," but held that all that was necessary was agreement on the goal (e.g., the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness)—the obvious basis for supporting that "all religions lead to God." The three-fourths of the Lutheran church members who asserted this belief, spoke directly out of the perspective of the American Enlightenment doctrine that all the diverse outward forms of the religious denominations are merely socially devised vehicles that carry the same inner "essence" of saving religion. It ought not to surprise anyone that, being Americans, they expressed this cosmopolitan, inclusive, religious view. What ought to concern the clergy and theological educators, I think, is that so many Lutherans also asserted the contrary particularistic Christian view without, I gather, noticeable uneasiness about the theological inconsistency. Historical study of the American experience can throw light on this ability of American clergy and laity blithely to straddle the gulf between cosmopolitan Enlightenment and particularistic Christian doctrine.

Because from the perspective of Enlightenment, all doctrines are merely forms of articulation, Christian leaders of the time (c1775-1800) could not, accept the radical monotheistic premise of Enlightenment, and remained absolutistic Trinitarians on Biblical authority. These men assured that a particularisticly Christian nation was being formed along somewhat different but essentially traditional Christian lines.

So once the Constitution was accepted, national religious freedom established, and the new nation launched, Christian leaders mounted a massive attack against Enlightenment religion which they dubbed "Infidelity." This ecclesiastical counter-revolution—for that is what it amounted to—was carried on the wave of revivalism following 1799 that is known as the second great awakening. In it Enlightenment was swamped under a flood of invective that, while sweeping around the theological issue, drowned "Infidelity" under a mire of social opprobrium. At that time Protestants turned back to pre-seventeenth century theologies for the substance of their intellectual lives, and "sent the mass of men back to a set of beliefs that was bound to come into sharp conflict with the expanding world of science, and made them suspicious of any attempt at mediation or conciliation."⁵ This marks the point where, as A. N. Whitehead put it, "the clergy . . . began to waver in their appeal to constructive reason" for the explanation and defense of Christian modes of thinking and acting. They surrendered the intellectual initiative to leaders of the main currents of modern thought—which were rooted in Enlightenment—and theological education tended to become training for the maintenance of organized ecclesiastical life in a first to sixteenth century intellectual ghetto.

What seems to me more important than the traditionally viewed conflict between science and religion that followed in the nineteenth century, is that insofar as the attack on Enlightenment monotheistic religion was successful it undermined the theological legitimation (the "plausibility structure") of the constitutional and legal systems of the Republic, which, by and large, have had to look outside the churches for such support. One result of this has been that, by implication, ecclesiastical leaders in America have often appeared to be offering their members a choice between being good Christians and being good citizens. The study would seem to suggest that 50% of the Lutheran church members refuse to make this choice at the expense of a glaring inconsistency in their thinking.

The Christian reaction against Enlightenment is understandable enough historically. Against the monolithic absolutism of Christian doctrine, Enlightenment opposed what latter day Justices have called the principle of the plurality of principles—which means that Court decisions are seldom based on appeal to a legal principle, but upon an agonizing balancing of the merits and claims of "more than one so-called principle."⁶

Christian leaders sensed that acceptance of pluralism *in principle*, meant the death for every religious group of its peculiar and particularistic identity. This was clearly recognized by some Protestant leaders in the nineteenth century, who welcomed the prospect

because, they argued, the providential undermining of sectarian particularity in America presaged the emergence in actuality of true Christian unity. Philip Schaff, the great Church historian, spoke of the United States where he saw all the religious groups fermenting together, as the Phoenix grave of all European sects of Protestantism and Catholicism, and predicted that out of the universal conflict between the sects, something wholly new would emerge.

But the religious freedom that made all the sects voluntary associations equal before a civil authority that was neutral where their sectarian claims were concerned, also placed them in a highly competitive relationship to one another, and this tended to induce, indeed, to force each group to accentuate its peculiar doctrinal emphases, and institutionalized forms and practices, for only in them could it find legitimation for its unique identity and separateness from all the other Christian groups. So while they were theoretically united as Christians, in practice, insofar as they were united it was only in opposing "Infidelity."

It is important to note that the triumph of Christianity over "Infidelity" by around 1830, was not a theological, or intellectual triumph, but rather what might well be called a great and successful campaign of character assassination of the leaders of the opposition. And because the theological issue was not resolved, since that time and down to this generation, the intellectual and religious lives of the United States have not only flowed in separate and parallel streams, but have been separately institutionalized in Universities and Denominations respectively.

So there we are today. As the highly visible Michael Novak noted in the CENTURY MAGAZINE for April, 1971, "the tradition in which intellectuals ordinarily define themselves [today] is that of the Enlightenment." and, indeed, "the dominant religion" in America is "the religion of the Enlightenment" and the issue between it and "an adequate contemporary religion [Christianity?] . . . is theological." This appears to me to be what I have been trying to get theologians to see for the past twenty-five years at least. And I long ago concluded that the most likely place in Protestantism to expect an adequate theological clarification of the issue posed by the two conflicting traditions at war in the hearts of Americans, was in Lutheranism.

Now that it has been "scientifically" demonstrated in a study of themselves, promoted and paid for by themselves, that three fourths of their members placidly hold the two opposed theological perspectives at the same time, perhaps Lutheran theologians will turn at least enough of their attention from Luther and the Reformation to try to understand why this "something very curious" that their able researchers noted, "is going on" in the minds and hearts of at least half their members. The answer lies in the peculiar experience of the old Christianity in this New World.

FOOTNOTES

1. In this connection see the book by Theodore Ruzak, **THE MAKING OF A COUNTER CULTURE: REFLECTIONS ON THE TECHNOCRATIC SOCIETY AND ITS YOUTHFUL OPPOSITION** (Anchor book, 1969); chapter i, "Technocracy's Children," and chapter vii, "The Myth of Objective Consciousness."
2. See my **THE LIVELY EXPERIMENT: THE SHAPING OF CHRISTIANITY IN AMERICA**, N.Y.: Harper, 1963. Chapters iii and iv.
3. "Many Mansions," **AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW**. XLIX (January, 1964), 315.
The classic spelling out of the continuity between medieval Christianity and Enlightenment, is Carl Becker's **THE HEAVENLY CITY OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY PHILOSOPHERS**.
4. This I spelled out at considerable length in my published dissertation—**NATHANIEL WILLIAM TAYLOR, 1786-1858: A CONNECTICUT LIBERAL**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942.
5. John Herman Randall, Sr. and Jr., **RELIGION AND THE MODERN WORLD**. N. Y.: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1929. 28-28.
6. See my article, "Religion, Constitutional Federalism, Rights and the Court." **JOURNAL OF CHURCH AND STATE**. Vol. 14, No. 12. 1972-205.