

# **Lutheran Identity in a "Pluralistic" Context<sup>[1]</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

Discussion, and even sharp debate, of Lutheran identity in a North American context is nothing new. At least since the first half of the nineteenth century Lutherans in North America have had some deep disagreements about what it meant to be "Lutheran" on this continent. The earliest battles were between a group known as the "American Lutherans," who favoured a style of assimilation more like that of the New School frontier awakenings of the time, and the "Old Lutherans," who were equally American but who wanted Lutherans to identify more with a style more like the Old School as the "conservative Reformation." Unfortunately, this earlier argument was too soon drowned in a sea of new European immigrants and so never completed.<sup>[2]</sup> Soon enough the new immigrants were having their own battles about assimilation. So, once again today we face this question: What does it mean to be a Lutheran in the context of North America's cultures.

One aspect of our context is pluralism. Ours is an age when Christians ought to be working very hard to overcome divisions between peoples. Is this then an appropriate time to consider a uniquely Lutheran identity? No doubt there are some Lutherans who would get a bit embarrassed about holding up any sort of identity which would cause Lutherans to stand out from the general consensus of society, and we ought all to question a definition of Lutheran identity which emphasizes being different just for the sake of being different.

Yet I think that we Lutherans do have a good reason to think about, and to work to hand on to our children, a uniquely Lutheran identity – if we remember what Luther's efforts to reform the church were really all about. Our identity is important, and can make a crucial contribution to our contemporary context because Luther discovered something important about the Gospel, something that is still important today. We ought not centre our identity on division or our own separateness, but we should be forming our identity as Lutherans around the discovery that the Gospel is God's unconditional promise in Christ.

What makes the formation of such an identity difficult is that most people, and that includes Lutherans, don't really believe what Luther said about the Gospel. Even among Lutherans it appears that most of us think that we will get to heaven because we are good, moral, hard-working, Bible-believing, church-going people. In this we are no different than the pious people of Wittenberg in 1517 who believed that buying an indulgence would make satisfaction for their sins.

## Consumer Homogenization

A two-step analysis of our contemporary society will indicate why most moderns have never accepted Luther's understanding of the Gospel. The first step has to do with the question of the form of North American pluralism. There can be no doubt that our cities, and even our rural communities, are home to people from many more ethnic and cultural groups than they were even twenty years ago. Even the diversity of the Los Angeles of my childhood – one of the most plural cities in one of the most plural states – was nothing compared with the ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity of the Los Angeles of today. If such is true of Los Angeles, it is all the more true of Toronto, of St. Louis, of Winnipeg, of Omaha, and even of places like Hanover, Ontario, and Solvang, California.

This apparent pluralism has developed in North America in a specific socio-economic and cultural context.[3] Since the eighteenth century certainly and probably already since the seventeenth, religion in Europe and North America has come to be seen more and more as part of the private sphere rather than the public sphere. That which we place in the private sphere we consider subjective, as belonging to the realm of "beliefs" and "values" rather than the realm of "facts." Thus each person chooses his or her own religion for his or her own reasons and the rest of us are expected to be tolerant of that choice.[4] It is of course better that we should tolerate one another's religions than kill one another in religious wars, but the peculiar form of post-Enlightenment Euro-American toleration also comes with its own costs. In a culture based on a market economy, religion has entered the market place. Martin Marty puts it well: "Religion is now a consumer item for a nation of spiritual window shoppers." [5]

Religious pluralism is allowed and even encouraged because it has been encompassed in a broader homogenization driven by the North American economic engine of consumer capitalism. As a result, with all of the ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity which is so obvious and so visible around us, it is also true that in several important ways North America is far less diverse today than it was in 1950. When was the last time any of us heard a real local dialect? Why do we all watch the same television shows? What has happened to the uniqueness of local cultures? Why are all the stores in the malls in Waterloo, Ontario, the exact same stores that are in malls in Biloxi, Mississippi, or Regina, Saskatchewan, or Fresno, California.

As a child I saw the first McDonald's in San Bernardino, California. At the time it was the only one. In my lifetime with my own eyes I have seen McDonald's replace local restaurants serving local food from Heidelberg, Germany, to Elmira, Ontario, to Eureka, California. Long before church people jumped on the globalization bandwagon, transnational corporations, many of them originally American or Canadian, have been out globalizing with a vengeance. There is now a global consumer culture of hamburger stands and shopping malls that has homogenized us into a mass society of consumers.

What strikes me about the world today is not its pluralism, but precisely its lack of pluralism. French Canadians and English Canadians may argue and fight about who and what is a distinct

society, but every morning we eat the same breakfast cereals packaged in the same "French on one side, English on the other" boxes manufactured by the same companies from grain grown by the same farmers who are shackled by debt to the same banks who own both our houses, we drink the same brands of coffee produced by the same oppressed Latin American farmers and sold to us by the same American companies that sold us the cereal, and we drive to work in the same cars sold to us by the same Japanese companies. And, of course the story is not much different anywhere in North America. The billboards in East Los Angeles may be in Spanish, but they still advertise Coors and Budweiser – as they do in Chinese in parts of Toronto.[6]

Whether we are German or Swede or Filipino, whether our native language is French or English or Mandarin, whether we worship in a church or a synagogue or a mosque, we North Americans are first of all consumers, and we are more and more defined by our place in the continental and global economy. A recent cartoon summed it up. The map of North America is divided into three sections: What used to be Mexico is the factory zone, what used to be the U.S. is the shopping zone, what used to be Canada is the skiing zone. [7]

This is a crucial aspect of the context in which we must discuss Lutheran identity in North America today. It is of course important to what it means to be a Lutheran today that my next door neighbour is a Hindu from South Africa or a Sikh from India or a Muslim from Pakistan or a Jew from Montreal or a Baptist from Hong Kong. But it has become more important for me the Lutheran as well as for my Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Islamic, and Jewish neighbours that we are all being co-opted and each of our religious beliefs is being eroded by the ideology of consumer capitalism. In today's world, North American Lutherans have more in common with their middle class Hindu or atheist neighbours than with Lutheran peasant farmers in El Salvador, Indonesia, or Namibia.

## **The Ideology of Consumer Capitalism**

No matter what our ethnic background, no matter what language we pray in to which God, we are all caught up together in a world economy controlled by a very few corporations. Our distinctive religions have all become subservient to the ideological beliefs that will keep us being good consumers. As Joel Kovel points out

In such an atmosphere, spirit becomes residual, and spirituality becomes irrational and irrelevant. Everyone is free to pursue spirituality under capitalism, and almost everyone does. But none of it matters to the order of things. The true religion of modern society is to be found on the television set on Super Bowl Sunday. ... [8]

And that is the second step to understanding why Lutheran identity formed by the Gospel is so difficult a topic for us today. The consumer culture is supported by a particular ideology, an ideology which has at its disposal incredible resources for power and communication and which has replaced and is replacing not only a Lutheran identity, but any and every distinctive religious

identity which might direct the minds and hearts of people away from achieving consumer success.

We can see into this ideology if we consider an earlier form of its basic myth. This myth is more or less the plot of a Horatio Alger novel from the turn of the century: Poor boy starts at the bottom, works hard, thinks positively, and makes it to all the rewards at the top.[9] As long as this form of capitalist ideology was secure, we were constantly bombarded by messages that we only get what we have earned, that success is based on achievement and performance, that those who work hard rise to the top and those who don't work hard fall to the bottom. Those messages still hold some power over us. Of course, since World War II and the end of the Great Depression we have added an addendum to the story: Poor boys and girls who make good have the time of their lives and find meaning and purpose watching television[10] and shopping. In addition to believing that success (the North American version of salvation) comes from hard work and positive thinking, we now also believe that happiness is something that can be had by buying some advertised product.

So, one of the fundamental beliefs of our culture is that you get ahead through hard work and positive thinking, and getting ahead is defined as having plenty of money to spend on ourselves. Because of this belief we heroize hockey or baseball players who make a million dollars a year, and we demonize single mothers on welfare who struggle to raise their children on about one per cent of that. We reward wealthy industrialists with ever more lucrative national defense contracts because their financial success proves their worth, while we penalize welfare recipients with ever deeper cuts to social spending because their poverty proves that they are worthless bums. This belief seems imminently reasonable to us – good common sense – and we base our lives and our society on it. Every one of us is affected in one way or another.

## **The Lutheran Insight and Discovery**

Faith in hard work and positive thinking is basic to our society and most of us believe in this faith. But our belief has its problems. Luther was one of those who saw the problems with the sixteenth century version of hard work and positive thinking. The church in his day taught people that if you did your very best, God would lift you out of a state of sin and put you in a state of grace. Doing your very best at this first stage meant loving God for God's own sake, feeling truly penitent, and confessing your sins. Then, in the state of grace, if you continued to do your very best – now loving God for God's own sake, living a moral life, and doing the works required by the church – God would give you the grace necessary to go to heaven. If you sinned, you were back at ground zero – and if you died in a state of mortal sin you went to hell.

The problem with all this, Luther realized, is that once you know about the reward system, you can't love God unselfishly – you are always, perhaps far back in your mind, aware of the potential rewards and punishments. Once you begin to ask the question of your own salvation, you cannot love God for God's own sake. You realize that you only love God because if you don't you are

damned. You despair and you begin to hate this tyrant God who has made earning grace conditional on fulfilling a condition which you cannot fulfill.

What does all this say to us today?<sup>[11]</sup> To ask the question of salvation is to ask the question of personal worth. Do I have any worth as a person? What is my justification for taking up space in the universe? Is my life worth anything? When we start asking questions like that, there are two types of answers we can come up with. One answer says "You have worth if ..." This is a conditional answer. I have worth if I fulfill certain conditions. In the case of the consumer society in which we live, the answer is often some variation on the theme: "I have worth if my career path is leading upward to where I can buy all that I need to make me happy."

Luther's insight was that this sort of answer is really no answer at all. The "if," the conditions throw me back into myself and my own abilities – the very source of the question! If I had no doubts that I could fulfill any condition that anyone might put on me, if I had no doubt that my hard work would earn success, if I had no doubt that my achievements would prove my worth, then I would never ask whether I am saved or not. Once conditions are placed on me, I will never be able to discover a sense of worth or value as a person, because it is my doubts about my ability to fulfill conditions that caused the question in the first place.

Luther, of course, did not stop with this insight. If he had he would have just drifted away from the church and never been heard from again. Luther's insight was accompanied by what was considered a radical discovery. As Luther studied the Scriptures and listened to his professors, he began to make this new discovery. In the early years of his teaching ministry, as he lectured on the Psalms, Romans, Hebrews, and Galatians, the new discovery solidified and became the core of Luther's teaching and preaching. What was this discovery? Luther discovered that God intends, in Christ, to give the unconditional answer to the question of human worth. God does not intend to say, "If you fulfill some condition, then you have worth."

God intends to say, "Because of what I have done in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, each and every person is given worth and meaning as a gift." For Luther the Gospel is God's unconditional promise of the gift of human worth and meaning in Christ, and faith is being confronted by this unconditional promise and having to live our personal and communal lives in the light of this radical promise. Luther's discovery is that in Christ God's love and acceptance comes to us with absolutely no strings attached. Because of what God has done in Christ, the future is open to us and is no longer limited by conditions. Christ's crucified and risen life has become our future.

## **A Lutheran Identity for Today?**

No matter what our ideology tells us is the case, our Lutheran understanding of the Gospel tells us that God's relationship to people is one of unconditional love. There is no way that we can force God to put conditions on the worth and dignity given us and all people in Christ. When

Lutherans say that we are justified in Christ by grace alone through faith alone we are saying that in Christ God has fully and completely accepted us and all people and has affirmed human worth and given us all purpose in life totally and utterly apart from any conditions we might or might not be able to fulfill.

This message is the whole basis of the Lutheran Reformation and is the centre for any proposal for Lutheran identity in any time or place. It was for this message and for this message alone that Luther was willing to consider a unique understanding of who we are and what the church is. If we lose this understanding of the Good News of God's promise of unconditional acceptance of sinners in Christ, then we lose our identity and our reason for being a reform movement in the church catholic.

And yet even among Lutherans, researchers at the Search Institute have told us, we have gone from 1970 when 60% of a sample of Lutherans in Minneapolis understood justification by grace [12] to today when 60% of a sample of Lutherans in the United States do not understand justification by grace.[13] Canadians do no better. Sociologist of religion Reginald Bibby has shown that the religious consumers of the present age are looking for fragments of religiosity that will help them be more successful in an increasingly competitive world. They will appear at the door of the church when they believe that the church has some specific service which they think they need at the moment. They are not looking for an integrated, Gospel-based way of life.[14] Why is that? Many would argue that the very nature of modern, technological, capitalist society is the reason. People are not looking to the church for a whole way of life because they already have a way of life that has been formed in them by the people who use television to convince us to buy commodities.

Our experience as North American Lutherans at the end of the twentieth century bears out the insight of Jürgen Moltmann:

As consumer choices, religious traditions are divested of their former claims to be sole arbiters of absoluteness and the anchor of certainties which faith offered are dissolved in a corrosive atmosphere of general skepticism. People can believe everything they want, but one may no longer claim that belief to mediate an absolute truth. One can say what one wants but it no longer has any binding public status. Herbert Marcuse has called this the "repressive tolerance" of Western consumer society. Tolerant in allowing everything as subjective possibility; repressive in respect to skepticism about any objective reality being adequately mediated by religious symbols.[15]

The globalization of consumer capitalism threatens the extinction of religious identity in any form that would be recognizable to those who set out to reform the church catholic in the sixteenth century. We may have reached the ultimate form of the American religion that Dietrich Bonhoeffer identified in the 1930s as "Protestantism without Reformation."

## Conclusion

How can we think about a Lutheran identity for this time and place which will enable us to live in and by the Gospel as unconditional promise in Christ? We live over against and within society as globalized by consumer capitalism, a society whose plausibility structures do not include the possibility of unconditional affirmation. What we need is perhaps what Orlando Costas called "a 'theology of the crossroads,' or a critical reflection at the point where cultures, ideologies, religious traditions, and social, economic, and political systems confront each other, and where the gospel seeks to cross the frontier of unbelief."<sup>[16]</sup> This would be something of a new venture for North American Lutherans, as we have spent most of the last one hundred and fifty years on this continent resisting the press of the Canadian and American context. What is interesting is that those years of resisting assimilation might serve us very well now, if we build from our former position as immigrant outsiders to develop a constructive critique of consumer capitalism from the perspective of a Lutheran understanding of the Gospel.

Our weakest point as Lutherans has always been in discovering and articulating how our understanding of the Gospel as God's unconditional promise in Christ is practiced in social life – and this Achilles' heel is precisely where existence in the heart of American consumerist hegemony attacks us most deeply. For North American Christians there can be no escaping the political and economic place we occupy in the world today. The world has been globalized on our terms. If you dig to the root of almost every social problem in the world today you will find that it is caused or exacerbated by the American economy and our joint desire for the products of consumerism that the world economic system gathers on this continent. It is essential that a Lutheran identity for the North American context take this reality into account. We must develop not only a personal following of Christ in the consumer society, but a communal and social understanding of God's unconditional promise to all people in Christ.<sup>[17]</sup>

In the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone we have the resources to confront the ideology of consumer capitalism – have in fact the killing critique of consumer capitalism. The question is whether we will use that resource and make that critique. Can we learn how to take Luther's doctrine of justification seriously not only in personal life, but also in social life? If we take it seriously, perhaps we can develop an ethic of stewardship that will enable Lutherans to translate the doctrine of grace into a worldview and social project, not just an intellectual construct.<sup>[18]</sup>

If we are unwilling to let the Gospel determine our lives as persons and as churches, then we should be honest and give up the name Lutheran. If we are serious about being known as Lutherans, then we need to be equally serious about the Gospel and a Gospel identity. If we want our identity as Lutherans to ascend above chauvinism and hypocrisy, then we need to be serious every day about believing, teaching and confessing the message that God loves us and all people unconditionally, with no strings attached. We need to take seriously, celebrate, and communicate the fact that Christ died precisely for the ungodly and sinners – and we need to let Jesus' death on

the cross be the renewal of our worship, our life together, our social ethic, and our Christian education.

## Notes

1. This article was originally presented at the North American Consultation on Christian Education sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation at Mississauga, Ontario, September 1991, and published by the LWF in the proceedings for the conference. Research for the article was funded by grants from the Lutheran Life Insurance Society of Canada and Wilfrid Laurier University, the latter including moneys provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
2. I recognize that this interpretation differs somewhat from previous interpretations of the "American Lutheran" debate. I do not have the space to develop the argument here, but it seems to me that the older interpretations, including that of Kuenning, "The Rise and Fall of American Lutheran Pietism: The Rejection of an Activist Heritage" (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988), and Gustafson, "Lutherans in Crisis: The Question of Identity in the American Republic" (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) – though Gustafson's subtitle states the question helpfully – interpret the debate as if it were conducted in European categories of Pietism vs. Orthodoxy (A debate ended in Germany long before the 1860s) or between conservative Lutherans and the Schleiermacher-inspired Prussian Union. This is because the debate was finally ended not by a conclusion, but by a flood of German and later Scandinavian immigrants who found the debate and its two options irrelevant. It might be more helpful to see the debate between Schmucker et al. and Krauth et al. as a peculiarly American debate much like the debate between the Old School anti-revivalists and New School pro-revivalists in other Protestant churches at the time. The counterpart for Schmucker, then, is not August Herman Franke, but Jonathan Edwards or Charles Finney. Krauth finds his counterparts in The Mercersburg and Princeton schools. The debate over abolition can be put in the same perspective. Those of us who are heirs of the nineteenth century immigrants often forget how "English" the eighteenth century immigrants had become by the time our ancestors arrived here.
3. The analysis of this paragraph is based on Jürgen Moltmann, "Is 'Pluralistic Theology' Useful for the Dialogue of World Religions?" in "Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions," Faith Meets Faith Series, edited by Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), pp. 149-156; and on Lesslie Newbigin, "The Gospel in a Pluralist Society" (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, and Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989).
4. For an excellent analysis of this attitude and how it came about, see Charles Taylor, "The Malaise of Modernity," The CBC Massey Lectures for 1991 (Concord, Ont.: Anansi, 1991). This is based on the longer work "Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity" (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).



5. Martin E. Marty, "Introduction to William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*" (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985), p. xx; cited in Moltmann, "Useful?" p. 152.
6. The exception in some respects is Mexico, but I would argue that evidence of consumer homogenization is also occurring there. What is seen in Mexico is the contrast between the homogenization of the affluent and the homogenization of the poor. Cf. Ivan Illich, "Beauty and the Junkyard," *Whole Earth Review* 73 (Winter, 1991), pp. 64-68.
7. Dennis Pritchard, "Praxis: A Resource for Ethics and Ministry V," 1 (Spring/Summer, 1991), p. 22. While some Canadians are deeply afraid that free trade with the United States means the end of Canada, others rejoice in their ability to move their factories to the Mexican border where they can hire non-unionized workers at next to nothing per hour.
8. Joel Kovel, "History and Spirit: An Inquiry into the Philosophy of Liberation" (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), p. 11.
9. Cf. Gerard Fourez, "Liberation Ethics" (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982).
10. See Neil Postman, "Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Television" (New York: Penguin Books, 1986).
11. The analysis that follows is based on Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, "Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings" (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), pp. 41-42.
12. Merton P. Strommen, Milo L. Brekke, Ralph C. Underwager, and Arthur L. Johnson, "A Study of Generations: Report of a Two-Year Study of 5,000 Lutherans between the Ages of 15-65: Their Beliefs, Values, Attitudes, and Behavior" (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), pp. 100-129.
13. Peter L. Benson and Carolyn H. Elkin, "Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations – A Summary Report on Faith, Loyalty, and Congregational Life" (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1990), p. 13 and p. 69, n. 2: 67% of mainline Protestants "evidence difficulty in accepting that salvation is a gift rather than something earned."
14. Reginald Bibby, "Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada"
15. Moltmann, "Useful?" p. 152.
16. Orlando E. Costas, "Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom" (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), p. xiv.

17. For an excellent Roman Catholic answer to the problem which has ecumenical application, cf. John Francis Kavanaugh, "Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance," Revised Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

18. For an exploration of an ethic of stewardship not unrelated to a Lutheran understanding of grace, cf. Douglas John Hall, "The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age," Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, and New York: Friendship Press, 1990).

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