

# Lutheran colleges and social reform?

Samuel Torvend

IN HIS EXPANSIVE STUDY OF REFORMATION thought, Alister McGrath notes that while Catholic reform in the sixteenth century focused on the renewal of clerical education and church administration, and while the Reformed or Calvinist project was attentive to worship and ethics, Luther and his colleagues were solidly rooted in the reform of theology (5–11). McGrath is careful to claim, and rightly so, that these emphases did not preclude reforming interests in other areas of church life. Certainly, Martin Luther was a reformer of the liturgy, and Ignatius Loyola was attentive to the humanist impulse in Roman Catholic theology. Yet the claim that Luther's project began with the theological question of the relationship between God and humanity stands. Similarly, various contemporary histories of early Lutheran reform narrate the existential anxiety that plagued Luther—the monk, priest, and professor—until his scholarly research and incessant questioning yielded a liberating insight tucked away in the letters of Paul: the just shall live by grace, a grace that makes faith itself possible.

From this primary and central teaching on justification, all other teachings flowed: the distinction between law and gospel, the anthropological claim that the human is sadly but not irredeemably turned in on the self and away from God and neighbor, the utter inability of the human to move toward God, and a requisite passivity before that grace which alone can place one in the paradox of being a “forgiven sinner,” the teaching on the two kingdoms, and the appropriate way to interpret Scripture first as a revelation of Christ as gift and only second as a model for ethical behavior in the world.

Together, these and other streams of thought that flow from the theological assertion of justification by grace have generated lively ideas about God, humanity, and the world for Lutheran theologians, lay people, bishops, musicians, and pas-

tors. Indeed, the vitality of these ideas is testified to by the remarkable flourishing of Luther studies, Lutheran biblical scholarship, and Lutheran theology that continues to thrive some twenty years after the celebration of the five hundredth anniversary of Luther's birth.

What is frequently overlooked, however, is the degree to which that initial reforming impulse of the sixteenth century moved from its roots in theology to social reform. Perhaps this oversight has more to do with the impression given by twentieth-century writers who claimed that Luther and the early Lutheran reformers were largely concerned with theology and were, at best, “conservative” ethicists, who countenanced “quietism” in the face of troubling social structures. Ernst Troeltsch and Reinhold Niebuhr come to mind (Lindberg, 161). Yet one already can discern a theological impulse toward the world in a sermon preached by Luther on Palm Sunday in 1519 (*Two Kinds of Righteousness*, 155–164). Electing to speak on the epistle, Philippians 2:5–11, the great liturgical hymn to the self-emptying Christ quoted by Paul in the letter, Luther set forth a distinction between two kinds of righteousness:

The first is alien righteousness, that is, the righteousness of another, instilled from without. This is the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies through faith....This righteousness, then, is given to people in baptism and whenever they are truly repentant....The second kind of righteousness is our proper righteousness, not because we alone work it, but because we work with that first and alien righteousness. This is that manner of life spent profitably in good works....This [second] righteousness consists in love to one's neighbor. (155, 157)

That the two cannot be reversed in their order—serving one’s neighbor in order to please God and gain God’s favor or grace—was repeated throughout the many other sermons and written works of Luther in a manner so adamant and exacting that only the most thick-headed of Germans could miss it. The necessity of movement toward one’s neighbor and her well-being is made abundantly clear in Luther’s interpretation of the text: “This [second] righteousness follows the example of Christ in this respect and is transformed into his likeness. *It is precisely this that Christ requires.* Just as he himself did all things for us, not seeking his own good but ours only... so he desires that we also should set the same example for our neighbors” (158). Keeping in mind Luther’s fundamental anthropology—the human is born with the inclination to serve only the self to the exclusion of God and the neighbor in need—the power of grace mediated through the preached word, the sacraments of faith, and the Christian assembly can turn one outward, *curvatio ad extram*, to life in the world as that life, lived in common with others, is shaped by political, social, and economic forces.

**T**HIS IS TO SUGGEST, QUITE SIMPLY, THAT LUTHER’S reform project, while rooted in theology and church life, was also focused on the reform of society. In his work on the Lutheran reinvention of early modern social welfare, Carter Lindberg helpfully has pointed out what one can hear only faintly in the curriculum of many Lutheran seminaries and university theology courses: Luther’s consistent engagement in the social questions of his day. “The secular utility of Luther’s theological reorientation,” Lindberg writes, “is both destructive and constructive” (97). It destroyed, deconstructed we might say, the late medieval impulse to care for one’s neighbor because such care, so many believed, would contribute to one’s good works as a source of achievement in the eyes of the deity. It was constructive, notes Lindberg, because “salvation [was] now perceived as the foundation of life rather than the goal and achievement of life, the energy and resources poured into acquiring other-worldly capital [could] be redirected to this-worldly activities” (97). If one no longer had to

worry about how to “get into heaven” at the end of life, one was free, so argued Luther, to focus on life in this world.

### Luther’s social reform projects

As Lindberg claims, the social effects of this theological reform movement can be discerned by examining a wider range of Luther’s writings as well as the many “church orders” created by town councils and pastors in those cities that accepted the Lutheran reform in the middle- and late-sixteenth century. Such “church orders” enabled Lutheran cities and regions to respond to the pressing social concerns of the time from the perspective of Lutheran theology. While many of Luther’s writings have been interpreted solely as theological works, they can also be read, I would argue, as social, political, or economic works. In his *Ninety-Five Theses* (1517), for instance, Luther draws particular attention to the plight of the poor who are duped by indulgence sellers to hand over what little money they have for a promise that he claims is theologically questionable. Other theses make clear that Luther was acutely aware of Saxony’s poor and the manner in which the clever could take advantage of their poverty and consequent lack of education (see theses 41, 45, 48, 50, 51; Torvend, 49–50).

In another early work, *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods* (1519), he sets forth, in nascent form, what would become his proposal for a fitting social welfare system in which food is shared with those in need according to an equitable system of distribution. He also called upon the brotherhoods to stop wasting their membership dues on drunken brawls and instead accomplish the work for which they were founded: training unemployed workers in a trade that will gain them employment and thus enable them to care for their families or parents. Set aside the membership dues for real human need, he seems to advise, rather than for the payment of masses on behalf of the dead. This treatise exemplifies Luther’s practice of embedding his economic writings in his eucharistic writings, since he recognized in the early Christian practice of the Eucharist a model for sharing food and assisting the neighbor in need. What was implicit in the

1519 treatise on the "Blessed Sacrament" became explicit in his collaborative work with the town council of Leisnig in its efforts to create a long-lasting, equitable, and supervised municipal welfare system. This project was spelled out in his *Preface to the Fraternal Agreement* (1523).

Luther and his colleagues were also concerned with banking reform and what they considered the deleterious effects of what we might call a proto-capitalist money economy that was emerging in the expanding global market fueled by early trade between the "New World" and Europe. Throughout his public career, Luther wrote critically about the acquisition of capital as the primary goal of one's life. He preached against the high levels of interest that would keep people perpetually impoverished and in debt to the lenders of loans. Indeed, he called repeatedly for government regulation of businesses in a growing "credit economy." This line of thought began early in his career with a *Brief Sermon on Usury* (1519) and continued with the *Long Sermon on Usury* (1520), on *Trade and Usury* (1520), and his *Admonition to the Clergy to Preach against Usury* (1540).

In addition to promoting theologically grounded models of social welfare and questioning the economic system and business practices of his day, Luther insisted that formation in faith must take place in the home and the local congregation. So that people might read the Bible and read it in their own language, Luther translated the scriptures into German. When he despaired of the reform ever taking root among the people and their pastors, he wrote the *Small Catechism*. So that biblical and non-biblical poetry might take hold more deeply in the consciousness of those who accepted the reform, he translated and wrote a large body of hymns to be sung in both home and church.

Now, to the contemporary mind, these may appear to be limited initiatives when compared with the array of print, musical, film, and online media available in most western universities and

homes. A Bible, a hymnbook, and a catechism? Big yawn. Yet to insist that literacy take hold among Christians for theological reasons also created a body of public citizens who increasingly were literate and educated in all manner of knowledge. When someone is trained to read, he or she can read anything: contracts, invoices, scripture, literature, cartoons, journals, reports, love letters. Such insistence on literacy, as Luther argued in *To the Councilmen of all Cities in Germany that they Establish and Maintain Christian Schools* (1524) and *A Sermon on Keeping Children in School* (1530), invited the reform of education itself and made publicly-sponsored instruction a hallmark of Lutheran cities and regions.

Here, then, I have suggested that while there is a large body of scriptural commentary and theo-

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logical works that command ongoing interest among those who work in Lutheran environments, there is an equally significant body of work produced by Luther and his colleagues, as well as the "church orders," that bear on the reform of society: the reform of social welfare regarding the hungry, the poor, the chronically sick, and the unemployed; the reform of banking and business practices supervised by government regulators; the reform of education in the kindergarten (elementary school), gymnasium (high school), and

university. Indeed, from this sixteenth-century reform movement there sprang to wondrous life in the nineteenth century the many Lutheran colleges and universities in North America. Their legacy, I suggest, includes not only the theological insights of the Lutheran reformers but also their commitments to the reform of the social, economic, and political structures that shape life in the world.

That Luther's reform project began in a university and was nurtured by university professors is well-known though sometimes forgotten when the inheritance of Continental Pietism or American evangelicalism swamps Lutheran memory with a troubling suspicion of learning allied to

questions of faith. The fact remains: Luther and his colleagues never left the university or its environs. That theological disputation questioning the status quo would take place among university professors who championed the ideal of academic freedom underscores the continuing significance of most Lutheran-sponsored centers of higher learning. To overlook or dismiss the relationship between reform and education, the possibility that reforming initiatives can emerge in centers of learning that enjoy intellectual freedom, would be to discount an essential element of the genetic coding that marks Lutheran Christianity and Lutheran higher education.

### the context in which we teach

Not long ago, a Lutheran bishop told me that he thought “Lutheran colleges and universities,” including the one at which I teach, “do a fairly good job of producing students who fit into the larger society; you know, as good and responsible citizens.” At first I thought his assessment was a modest compliment for the faculty who teach at such schools. After all, who wants to educate students into an unscrupulous and lawless life? Yet the more I thought about this comment, about “fitting into the larger society as good citizens,” the more I realized that his observation matched that of my grandparents, themselves the children of immigrants, a generation that wanted to be assimilated into and participate in what they perceived as the benefits of American life, an assimilation effected, in part, by an education at a Lutheran college.

When my Danish, English, and Norwegian grandparents immigrated to Oregon and Washington in the late-nineteenth century, they arrived by train and horse-drawn wagon. They came as farmers and tree-toppers who read from the Bible, sang Luther’s hymns, and knew the *Small Catechism* by heart. What had begun in a small and relatively unknown German university town in the sixteenth century was found surprisingly alive four hundred years later and thousands of miles away in the farming communities of the Pacific Northwest. They shared the American dream of seeing their children and their grandchildren survive and flourish in this land, guided by a provident hand, hard work,

and the college education that would catapult them into the mainstream of middle-class American life.

In the course of their lives, however, the world shifted dramatically under their feet. Settling into ethnic communities centered on church and school, they never could have imagined at the beginning of the twentieth century that human beings would hold in their hands by the end of the century what virtually all previous generations had believed was a divine power: the ability to destroy human life throughout the planet with weapons of mass destruction, weapons invented, ironically, by German and American scientists. As people who drew their sustenance from labor in fields and forests, they could have had no idea that their grandchildren would be faced with a startling and unthinkable scenario: a planet so terribly poisoned by the wealthy few or warmed by the many that the future of its viability would become an open question.

From the upper campus of Pacific Lutheran University, it is possible to see one of the largest army bases in the nation. Daily one hears the sound of Air Force cargo and troop carrier planes taking off for Iraq and Afghanistan from the air base that borders the army installation. In less than forty minutes, one can drive to a Trident naval base, its submarines filled with nuclear missiles. We know that while Saddam Hussein could not have launched a missile that would reach New York or the Midwest, much less Puget Sound, we do know that our university and the surrounding population are located within striking range of a bellicose and increasingly well-armed North Korea.

The Pacific Northwest is marked by ever-increasing astonishing wealth generated by aircraft production, international flight and shipping, computer technology, and financial consulting services. Yet we also claim the dubious distinction of having one of the highest rates of child malnutrition and working class food insecurity in the nation. Homelessness and begging are on the increase despite government assurances that the economy here is beginning to recover if not boom after its losses in the wake of the September 11 attacks. As I write these words, the newspapers report that the rate of literacy is declining sharply throughout the region, the Washington

Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) and the No Child Left Behind initiative notwithstanding. Members of the university faculty are surprised to hear what they never have heard before: increasing numbers of incoming first-year students report that they have never read an entire book, fiction or non-fiction, in their high school education.

As sociologists and cultural historians at our university and others report, an undercurrent of social anxiety is cultivated by a seemingly intractable military conflict in two countries, the threat of terrorist attacks, the steadfast loss of jobs in a global economy where multinational corporations, interested in increasing profit alone draw on cheap labor from outside the nation, increasing incidents of personal bankruptcy created by unchecked spending and exorbitant interest rates, and fear that government-sponsored programs that benefit the sick and the elderly will be cut or become so confusing that they are rendered useless. For the second time in the history of the nation (the post-Civil War period being the first), a new generation is not able to “do better” than the previous one, to enter into what my grandparents understood to be the “American dream.” Now, two people must work full-time, if not more, in order to approximate the “life style” enjoyed by middle-class Americans in the 1950s, when only one salary was needed to buy a house, a car, enjoy a vacation, and send a child or two to college.

#### good citizens or agents of reform?

IN THIS CONTEXT, BOTH RELIGION AND EDUCATION can serve many purposes. Each can be used as an anesthesia to blunt one’s senses to the suffering alive in the world. Each can be used as a compensatory and comforting mechanism when faced with unfulfilled ambitions and personal loss. And each can be accommodated to the quantification of success so pervasive in American culture. Thus, it is not surprising that college presidents and Lutheran bishops, admissions directors and parish pastors are counting numbers and

studying demographic charts these days as if they were seasoned sociologists. When religion and education are imagined primarily as producing people who “fit into the larger society as good and responsible citizens,” both religion and education easily can become captive to the prevailing cultural ethos that will allow them to “support” the social fabric and the status quo, yet deny them the power to engage in a serious questioning of that status quo and the need to propose viable social reforms.

While Fortress Press is publishing many studies on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the theologian and

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social critic, it is not clear yet that those who teach in Lutheran colleges and those who supervise Lutheran churches have learned from the experience of German higher education and German church life during the previous century. One could argue, with some strength, that most German scholars and pastors forgot the critical “reforming” instincts that gave birth to Lutheran universities and Lutheran churches, instincts that were rooted in a theological reform that proposed serious and sometimes troubling social reforms. This is to argue that the colleges and universities

of the church, with their concentration of scholarly expertise and moral commitment, are capable of forming students in more than “good citizenship.” If we cannot imagine them as centers of vigorous public engagement that hold together the “deconstructive,” critical voice that calls the status quo into question and the “reconstructive,” reforming voice that imagines a more gracious and just alternative to the troubling world in which we live, then why not let these schools become centers for middle class *Gemütlichkeit* in which there is greater concern for sports competitions than global economic competition?

#### freedom to question and create

One of the clearest legacies of the Lutheran reformation was the very example of Luther himself: a priest and professor who called into question what so many took as normative. This “decon-

structive” activity not only criticized and eventually rejected a formidable body of theological work amassed over the previous three hundred years, it also proposed an agenda of social reform focused on real human need. Such work could take place where one was free of ecclesial, business, or governmental censorship. In other words, such serious questioning of “the way things are” in light of “what they might be” could take place where academic or intellectual freedom was cultivated and protected from external threats, especially from those who were and are more than happy to maintain the status quo and allocate to religious and educational institutions the role of supporting the current social fabric regardless of its inequities, injustices, and violence.

Clearly, Luther and his colleagues rejected the project of some Calvinist reformers: the desire to fashion a “pure” and “holy” society governed by “Christian” laws, a way of viewing the relationship between church and state that remains vivid in the minds of some Americans. Such a position was rejected by the Lutheran professors because they were acutely conscious of the human capacity to imagine that it could know the mind of God and thus subvert the central teaching on justification by forcing a religious model on others against their will, or by giving the impression that one was truly Christian only if one assented to a humanly constructed “Christian” society. They also rejected the proposal from Radical reformers who desired to create an “alternate” Christian community (a “society” within the larger society) shaped by deep commitments to non-violence and the pursuit of peace, skepticism of government, and rejection of military service. This position, as well, was rejected by the Lutheran professors since they thought it naïve regarding human nature: while forgiven, the human nonetheless retains the capacity for evil, and that evil must be dealt with in a realistic manner. Rather than pursuing a “holy” community separate from the larger society, Christians, so they argued, are called to work within the larger society, even when such work would be inconclusive and messy and place one’s ideals in jeopardy (see Niebuhr’s helpful yet critically assessed typology).

They argued, instead, for a steadfast *engagement* with the larger society, proceeding with

learned and loving persuasion (Luther’s more vitriolic moments notwithstanding), and marked by useful and effective proposals that would need to be tested within the public sector. This reforming proposal was rooted in two of the energizing legacies of the Lutheran commitment to higher education, two “freedoms” that asked to be held in tension. The first is the freedom to call into question any of society’s accepted norms and practices that could lead to intellectual, emotional, relational, economic, and political diminishment. The second is the freedom to seek and shape a life in common with others that is clearly attentive to the deeply moral nature of learning for the good of others (see Bellah). In other words, Lutheran higher education, on the one hand, rests in the freedom to question one’s own and one’s culture’s assumptions about this world and, on the other, the freedom to construct and affirm, again and again throughout life, a purposeful commitment to this world rather than a cynical withdrawal from its failures and tensions.

### **a reforming vocation?**

Many Lutheran colleges and universities are now wrestling with the task, funded by the Lilly Endowment’s Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation, of discerning what “vocation” might mean among North American students and faculty in the twenty-first century. Given such helpful prodding, I would suggest that the context in which we study and teach—one which presents us with the previously unimagined human capacities to destroy human life and violate the biosphere as well as the growing inequities that mark life between the wealthy few and many impoverished in both North America and the world—invites university faculty to consider this sometimes overlooked or unknown legacy of social reform. Certainly this does not mean that one would attempt to duplicate proposals and projects that worked or barely worked in the sixteenth century. It could mean, however, that in ways appropriate to our context, our distinctive disciplines, our methodologies, and the limited but real—real—capacity we have to influence students, we ask gently yet steadfastly: “How will your educational commitments serve not only you but the neighbor in need and so participate in the

project of 'reforming' life in this beautiful yet troubled world?"

Such questions and commitments asked by professors in the diverse disciplines of a college—from economics, nursing, theology, business, political science, and education to psychology, music, philosophy, journalism, history, and anthropology—might actually prepare students to engage the economic, social, and political powers that shape their world even when such engagement might lead to marginalization and apparent loss. And yet that should come as no surprise to many who teach in the colleges and universities of the church. After all, the central figure in the Christian story was not crucified at the behest of a political leader and by a military force because he conformed to the social fabric of his time. Nor, says the person of faith, was he raised to a new mode of existence only to return to the way things always have been.

Let us be clear: Lutherans and their educational institutions do not hold the monopoly on reform. That impulse already can be discerned in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, in the moral commitments of Jews, as well as in the troubling and gracious history of Christianity and the West. That such an impulse could be unknown, overlooked, or dismissed by faculty who teach in schools springing from social reform movements would be tragic. Such amnesia would deprive North Americans of a viable resource to aid serious, critical, and effective thought about the ongoing task of shaping a common life ever more just and peaceful, ever more marked by wisdom and grace. The capacity to remember, upon which Judaism and Christianity fall or rise, offers the

hope that we can yet receive, again and again, this reforming impulse from distant strangers who could not have imagined the contingent world in which we live. †

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