

Theological Observer

On the Morning After

The tragic crash of an Egyptian airliner off the coast of Massachusetts on the morning of October 31, 1999 muted press coverage of the theological significance of the Reformation celebration in Augsburg, Germany. In the city where the chief Lutheran confession was presented on June 25, 1530, Lutheran and Roman Catholic leaders consummated an agreement in regard to justification to live and to let live. Monday evening I caught the tail end of a PBS analysis of events in Augsburg on the previous day. Featured were two university professors, one from Harvard and the other from Columbia. The German born Harvard professor saw the significance of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* in bringing to an end the political divisions in her native country, where, until the twentieth century, the right to participate in civil affairs and hold office was determined by religious allegiance. The Columbia professor stressed the religious significance of the *Joint Declaration* and claimed that Roman Catholics now accepted justification by faith. No public person ever suggests that Lutherans now accept salvation by works. It may be that these two scholars, along with most of the Christian population, do not really know what the Reformation principle of justification by faith means. This does not keep it from being revered as a principle.

On the morning after, November 1, Francis Cardinal Arinze was at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Fort Wayne to say Mass and preach in honor of All Saints' Day. He had been invited to the area by the theological faculty of the University of Notre Dame. Since Vatican II, Roman Catholic theological faculties have shifted away from traditional church teaching. In attempting to mend the widening rift between the diocesan bishops and the theological faculties, Pope John Paul II issued *Ex corde ecclesiae* calling for contact between the two groups. What made the visit of Cardinal Arinze significant is that this African born head of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue is on the short list to succeed into the chair of Saint Peter. A chance to see the next pope was good enough reason to head towards the flagship church of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend.

An early arrival assured seats in the cathedral but it also assured having to listen to a half-hour cacophony of Hail Marys. It may have already been going on for a half-hour before that, but it kept the congregation occupied. During the distribution of the Holy

Communion a mantra of one Psalm line, “taste and see,” was sung over and over again for twenty minutes and had the same mesmerizing effect. Both lay readers were women, a practice that seems to have the status of tradition in that church. The Cardinal’s sermon had a Luther-like twist to it. Laymen and women, single mothers and children, had an equal chance with priests in achieving the holiness required for sainthood. You serve God by fulfilling the obligation He has given you. Among the examples he provided were the children who saw the vision of Virgin Mary at Fatima, a medical doctor who refused to undergo an abortion to save her own life, and Thomas More, who did not acquiesce to the divorces of Henry VIII. The word “holiness” is the crux of the problem. It is the code word for sanctification and occupies the same central position in Roman Catholic theology as justification does in Lutheran theology. Of course holiness is at the center of any Arminian theology, which includes Wesley’s followers. Strangely, Methodists and Roman Catholics are close on this point. Roman Catholics can accept the Lutheran formulation of justification *sola fide*, since this doctrine plays no significant role in their theology. Our sanctification or holiness counts, not Christ’s. This became evident on the morning after Reformation Day 1999.

Both at the beginning and the end of the service His Eminence informed the gathered congregation that His Holiness would give those receiving the Holy Communion two weeks of indulgence. The man making this announcement was no lowly Tetzels hawking indulgences with a drum on the side of the river, but a church official who reputedly is the third most significant person in the Vatican hierarchy after the pope himself and who has a good chance to succeed him. Several times the diocesan bishop reminded the faithful that the Cardinal had come from the side of Saint Peter’s successor and once called him “our father.” A span of time two weeks out of purgatory is not all that great, considering one has to sit two hours in the cathedral. How does one calculate the value of two weeks, when one cannot know how long one’s sentence in purgatory will be?

At this point I was overcome with the spirit of Luther. Who was the pope to have the right to forgive sins in Fort Wayne to people he did not even know and for sins he was not aware? Does his authority set a timetable after death for those present in that assembly? Roman Catholics have an admirable Communion practice. Just about everyone present goes. It was in connection with the Holy Communion that the most grievous insult and injury exists. The

Cardinal connected the two week reward of an indulgence with receiving Holy Communion with the implied intention that a papal indulgence gives something better than Holy Communion. Holy Communion forgives sins because it is Christ's body and blood sacrificed for sins. How can the pope's indulgence add anything to this? All this happened on the morning after October 31, 1999. It might have happened on the morning after October 31, 1517.

David P. Scaer

Ecclesiastical Geometry

My knowledge of geometry dates back to 1950. At a half century old it is probably not only outdated but replaced by something much more elaborate. As far as memory serves, geometry consisted of a number of theorems which were accepted as true simply because they were true. No one had to prove that a straight line consisted of an infinite number of points. Geometric theorems had to do with rules for circles, straight lines and triangles. Like geometry, theology also has, or at least it should have, its unproven theorems or hypotheses. In other words, we should be allowed to simply say something without proving it. Biblical criticism has its own unproven theorems; question them and you are out of the fraternity. Modern theology, in both its exegetical and systematic forms, has done this since the time of Schleiermacher. Barth defined the "encounter" as the meeting of an "I" and another "I." That other "I" is "you." Do you get it? If you don't get it, you never will and there is no use proving it to you, because you cannot prove these kinds of things.

I would like to offer the following two theories or hypotheses. First, "The greater a church's ecumenical alliances are, the smaller its membership becomes." The second is similar. "All churches participating in the alliance experience a proportionate decline." The opposite theorem, "the more the church isolates itself, the greater its membership will be," is not true. We want to stay with the ecumenical theorem; however, we want to offer some proof for our theorem, which may disqualify it as a theorem, because theorems cannot be proven. We will take our chances.

An article in the *New York Times* (one good argument for the article's infallibility) found its way to me in Pennsylvania through the August 31, 1999 edition of the *Palm Beach Post* out of Florida. Its author is Randall Balmer, an Episcopalian layman who teaches religious history at Columbia University and holds his Ph.D. from Princeton

University. Dated Chautauqua, New York (where the eastern intelligentsia summer), the article appears under this title: "A Lutheran is a Methodist is a Congregationalist is. . . ." Balmer comments on the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's alliance with his own Episcopal Church, which he calls "another unfortunate step down the blind alley of ecumenism." (Wow!) But that's just for starters. "If these denominations hoped that such actions can stanch the hemorrhaging of their members, I can't imagine a less productive strategy." So we have ancillary proof for our theorem: the greater a church's ecumenical alliances are, the smaller the membership of it and its partners become.

Back to Professor Balmer. He traces the drive toward Christian unity to the desire of the churches of the 1950s and the Cold War to present a united Christian front. And what better way to do so than having the participating denominations to place their offices next to the umbrella organization of the National Council of Churches in Manhattan. Passively this "taught us the importance of mutual respect and communication across religious traditions, but it has also led to a diminution of theological distinctiveness. Mainline Protestant denominations in America have suffered appallingly from a lack of definition, doctrinal or otherwise. It's no longer easy to distinguish readily between, say, a Presbyterian and a Congregationalist, or a Methodist and a Lutheran. To a degree, ecumenism has collapsed beneath the weight of its own pretensions." In preaching cooperation, "it aspired to unite all Protestants, but in so doing it ratcheted its doctrine down to the lowest common denominators of agreement: peace, justice and inclusiveness. Those are noble principles, but they are unlikely to inspire popular allegiance. . . . According to an empirical index—attendance, membership, giving—mainline Protestants have declined since the mid-1960s, while more conservative, evangelical groups have grown." Again our theorem has proof and perhaps is no longer a theorem: the greater a church's ecumenical alliances are, the smaller the membership of it and its partner churches will be.

Balmer's indictment is still not concluded. "Tragically, in an increasingly pluralistic society, mainline Protestants are the only religious group lacking a voice. Mainline Protestants have exchanged their theological and historical heritage for a mess of potage, an ideology so calculated not to give offense that its very blandness is offensive. These Protestants—Lutherans, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Methodists—must regain the courage of their

convictions. Their salvation lies in a recovery of their own traditions rather in than in the chimera of unity.”

In 1979 Baker Book House wanted to update E. H. Klotsche’s *The History of Christian Doctrine* and the lot fell to me to add a chapter entitled “Theological Developments Since World War II.” In it I made the outrageous prediction that the ecumenical movement would fall on hard times. The prophecy has come true and is still coming true. Churches in ecumenical alliances in which their distinctive doctrines have been compromised have suffered losses and are simply not taken that seriously. Recent alliances have eradicated distinctions between two such disparate groups as the Congregationalists and Lutherans—at least they were as different as water and oil in New England where I was a pastor. These alliances are also eroding their memberships and will continue to do so, at least according to Dr. Balmer’s evidence.

Here there is a warning for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. It is almost impossible that we will not be taken down by the ecumenical vortex. Organizationally we have kept our skirts clean, so the title, “A Lutheran is a Methodist is a Congregationalist is” does not apply to us. But someone looking at the praise bands in church and college chapel services may say “A Lutheran is an Assembly of God is a Church of God is a Methodist” You complete the sentence.

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