

Luther's Commentary on the Third Article as a Clue to His Theology of Other Religions

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In spring of 1997 the Mormons dedicated a new temple in St. Louis, Missouri, and the Bahai community opened their place of worship. Already "at home" beforehand in St. Louis were Hindu and Buddhist temples, several mosques plus some 20 additional religious communities alongside those called Christian. And St. Louis is heartland USA. When I was a seminarian here in the 1950s it was "Lake Wobegon." You were either Lutheran or Catholic. There were some other mainline denominations, but St. Louis was basically a Catholic and Lutheran town. Not so any more. Religious pluralism is here in the heartland.

So the "foreign" mission question is the "home" mission question. Why Jesus? Why is Jesus necessary? For anyone? Luther, I think, offers help. But his answer is largely unknown, it seems to me, in most of today's missiological world--even among the Lutheran missiologists.

Help From Luther

Toward the end of his explanation to the Apostles Creed in the Large Catechism Luther says: "These articles of the Creed, therefore, divide and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside the Christian church [*ausser der Christenheit*], whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites, even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing. They remain in eternal wrath and damnation, for they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit."

Surprise and Paradox

This statement surprises. Luther grants that people "outside the Christian Church" nevertheless do (or, at least, can) "believe in and worship only the one true God." Can he really mean that? Shouldn't Luther instead say that these people are worshipping false gods, not the one true God? That is what he said at the very beginning of the large Catechism in his explanation of the First Commandment.

In discussing the First Commandment Luther is fascinated by the verb "have" in the Biblical text of the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me." To

have a god, he says, is to “hang our hearts” on “that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need.” But he goes on to say that people who do not “hang their heart” on the Triune God are hanging their hearts on false gods, idols. He doesn’t even come close to saying that they “believe in and worship only the one true God.”

Instead he says that people of other faiths worship other gods, and apart from the one true God, all the other gods are not true. “If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true God. On the other hand, if your trust is false and wrong, then you have not the true God.” Only those who trust Christ are hanging their hearts on “true God.” All others are hanging their hearts on an idol--Luther’s term is “Abgott”--not on the “one true God.”

So are people of other religions believing and worshipping “only the one true God,” or aren’t they? On which side of the question does Luther finally come down? Are his words at the first commandment or those at the creed’s third article the “real” Luther? Initially what he says at the first commandment sounds right. And yet what was he thinking of when he makes the apparently contrary statement at the end of the creed?

Perhaps we could nuance Luther’s surprising statement at the end of the creed by taking the verbs “believe and worship” as subjunctive, rendering the clause as follows: “Even if they should believe and worship only the one true God,” or “Granted that they might be believing and worshipping only the one true God.” For most of the people he mentions, “Turks (=Muslims), Jews, or false Christians & hypocrites,” he could grant that these believers and worshippers intend to be worshipping the God of the Bible. Then the point of Luther’s assertion here at the end of the creed is that even with the “one true God” as their intended focus for faith and worship--whether actually or potentially--the “believing and worshipping” is nevertheless defective. One absolutely necessary component is missing.

Simply stated: their God and their worship is Christ-less. That is the substantive meaning of Luther’s expression *ausser der Christenheit*, namely, apart from Christ, Christ-less. And from that defect comes a host of others. “(1) They do not know what God’s attitude is toward them. (2) They cannot be confident of his love and blessing. (3) They remain in eternal wrath and damnation, for (4) they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, (5) they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.”

So they might “have” in some sense “only the one true God,” and yet not have salvation. Might this be the way to link the apparent contradiction between Luther on the First Commandment and Luther here at the end of the Creed? To have, believe, worship the only God that there is, and yet to do so Christlessly, is to be “having, believing, worshipping” a false God. False, not in the sense that there is no such God, but false to expect salvation from that God--for the simple reason that it won’t work. And to believe that it will work for your salvation is to deceive yourself, to be living un-truthfully.

The God Problem - God as the Sinner’s Primal Problem

This perspective on Christ-less believing and worshipping gains plausibility when we appropriate Luther's famous distinction between God hidden and God revealed [*deus absconditus, deus revelatus*], an "aha!" he discovered in the Old Testament. What does "believing and worshipping" God mean when God hidden is the one we encounter? When the Psalmist complains: "How long, O Lord? Wilt thou hide thyself for ever?" (89:46) he is not saying that there are no signals from God available at all. No, it is God's "steadfast love" (v.49) which has disappeared from the scene. Hidden in encounters with the hidden God is God's mercy toward sinners. Thus such encounters leave us "not knowing what God's attitude is toward" us, especially to us sinners.

Such knowing only comes when God becomes God revealed, letting his face shine upon us, finally shining on us in Christ, his beloved son. Even the God revealed in Christ still has a "hidden" element, namely, in Christ God's mercy is hidden under the cross. But the word of mercy and forgiveness to sinners is not hidden, even though what happens to Christ in the process does not look like mercy for him.

Luther learned from the Scriptures that the human race needs more than just general revelation of God's existence and action, even God's grace-full action in such gifts as rain and sun and life and work. And for our salvation we surely need more than God's self-revelations which Paul designates "revelation of the wrath of God" (Rom. 1:18). Self-revelation on God's part in the Bible does not automatically equal salvation. In the opening chapter of Romans Paul asserts that we need an "other" revelation from God in order to cope with that revelation of God's wrath. We need revelation of God's merciful attitude toward sinners. Such knowing cannot come through any sort of general revelation of God in human life and history, since such general signals are at best ambiguous, and at worst "bad news."

Apart from the "good news" revelation of God's desire for mercy in dealing with sinners, drastic consequences follow, according to Luther's creedal summary in the Large Catechism: "(1.) They cannot be confident of God's love and blessing. (2.) They remain in eternal wrath and damnation, for (3.) they do not have the Lord Christ, and besides, they (4.) are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit."

For purposes of inter-religious dialogue and Christian witness to people of other faiths, Luther's perspective here at the end of the creed has promise. For it grants the "other believer" that she may well be worshipping the same God that Christians do. But But there are differences. Yet the differences are not first of all in doctrine, nor in world view, nor even in standard theological ideas (the Muslim concept of heaven, the Hindu concept of karma). Luther would urge us to ask: what is it that you "have," what do you receive, from the one you believe and worship? In short, the issue is: what's the "payoff?" What are the gifts, what do you get from it all?

Summary

Luther's religious pragmatism, if I can call it that, asks a very practical question: what do you have and what do you not have from your believing and worshipping your god? He sees the Christian Gospel, God's revelation of mercy fulfilled in Jesus, as adding significantly to what sinners otherwise do not have. The simplest formulation is "having Christ as Lord," and from possessing that Lord come other good things.

For Luther this distinction is fundamental: believing in and worshipping the only God there is, and believing in and worshipping the only God there is when the believer "has Christ" are two different things. He mentions four deficits in believing and worshipping when Christ is absent.

It is important to notice that all the four deficits for believers who do not "have the Lord Christ"--not knowing God's attitude toward them, not confident of his love and blessing, remaining in eternal wrath and damnation, not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit--are all deficits in one's personal relationship with God. "Not having Christ" leaves people with a God-problem. God himself is what they need to be saved from.

Let's look at these four deficits one at a time. "Not knowing God's attitude toward them" is inevitable when our knowledge of God comes from our daily encounters with God in life and history. Sunshine and rain, good times and bad, sickness and health, birth and death, these leave us at best ambiguous about God's attitude toward us. Yes, and when the bad times dominate, when our world falls apart, when death is at hand, the sensible deduction about God's attitude is that God is against us. Hidden from sinners in those experiences is God's mercy, a mercy that overrides even the worst of the bad news. Such mercy comes into our lives only via the Gospel, good news proclaimed and trusted in the very face of the bad news we experience.

Apart from "having the Lord Christ," says Luther, we "cannot be confident of God's love and blessing." The word "confident" has the word "faith" (Latin: *fide*) at its very center. No one can trust a God whose attitude toward us is ambiguous, or at worst, malevolent. Unless God himself overrides his ambiguity, even more, his negative attitude, toward sinners, no sinner can be confident of God's "love and blessing." In Christ's death and resurrection, says the Christian Gospel, God has personally overridden his negative attitude toward sinners--making "him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God." If that's not grounds for confidence, nothing is.

Another deficit is "they remain in eternal wrath and damnation." Note that this is a present reality, signaled by the present tense of the verb "remain." It is not they will face God's eternal wrath and condemnation sometime in the future. Rather they are already there. This is what they have. They need salvation now. Apart from Christ [*ausser der Christenheit*] every sinner's relationship with God is finally bad news. Even those "believing in and worshipping" God, when they do so Christ-lessly, are (as the Augsburg Confession says, article II) "without true fear of God, without trust in God, and turned into themselves"--even in their striving for salvation. The consequence of that, says AC II, is "eternal death" unless they are "born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit."

Luther's last item in his list of have-nots is "not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit." To be missing these Spirit-benefits is another deadly facet of the sinners' God-problem. Just what are these Spirit-benefits? The Gospel's portrait of the Holy Spirit is nothing spooky. In the language of the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is the action of God in mercy to see to it that sinners get connected to Christ.

"Illumination" begins with the "Aha!" of sins forgiven, of seeing things aright for the first time. Along with that enlightening come "gifts of the Spirit," gifts signaling the very life of God now operational in forgiven sinners, such as love, joy, peace, patience, et al. . . according to St. Paul's listing in Galatians 5. Calling this transaction "blessed" is not simply saying that it's nice. No, "blessed" is a power word, as is its opposite, "cursed." "Blessed" is a relational term. It says: "You are now in the right place--with God, with your own self, with others." God's Spirit, the "wind" that blows from Christ's cross and resurrection, moves people stuck in the "wrong place" into that right place. That right place is both a new location for living one's life and new possessions for living there, "having the Lord Christ" and all the benefits thereunto appertaining.

Missiology and Dialogue with Other Religions

Among today's mission theologians and students of world religions Luther's theology plays a very minor role, as far as I can tell, even among the Lutherans in the trade. One exception--and there may well be others--is S. Mark Heim, who, I think, doesn't claim to be Lutheran. But he might be in view of his recent book **Salvations--Truth and Difference in Religion** (Orbis Books, 1995). The "s" at the end of his title term, salvations, is important. Different religions offer different salvations, he says. It is not just that different religions clearly propose different paths up the mountain to salvation; in actuality they are not even going up the same mountain. "Fellowship with the Triune God is not Nirvana."

How might this tie in with Luther's perspective? People of "other faiths" need not be viewed as believing in and worshipping "other gods," but can be seen as worshipping the "only God there is." Yet by not "having Christ," they are scaling different mountains in their believing in and worshipping, they are pursuing a different salvation. They may be seeking to be saved from the notion of selfhood, God's selfhood included (Buddhism), or from the rat-race of unending reincarnation and the wheel of karma that cranks the system (Hinduism), or just trying to beat the system (contemporary secularism). But none of those focuses salvation on the sinner's God-problem, that all of us are standing before God the critic without a leg to stand on.

Can notions of "other salvations" be linked to Luther's view? I think so. Let's go back to the Large Catechism again, Luther's explanation of the Apostles Creed. In his explanation of the creed's first article he speaks of a "faith and worship," a response to God, apart from the Christ of the creed's second article and the Holy Spirit of the third.

All humans are beneficiaries of God the creator's gifts. God gives us first of all our own life and all that it takes to keep that life going. [Lutherans who memorized the Small Catechism will recall the laundry list: "my body and soul and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still preserves them; also clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and home, wife and children, fields, cattle, and all my goods . . . all I need to support this body and life."]

Luther expects that everyone perceives that "none of us has his life of himself." From that he concludes: "Since everything we possess . . . is daily given and sustained by God, it inevitably follows that we are in duty bound to love, praise, and thank him without ceasing, and . . . devote all these things to his service." Luther grants that such "believing in and worshipping" God is present throughout the human race. Here we can say, using Heim's terms, there is common truth and no difference between the Christian message and that of many other religions.

Where the difference surfaces is when the question arises whether anybody actually succeeds in carrying out those "duty bound" obligations "to love, praise, and thank God without ceasing." The translation "duty bound" softens the punch of Luther's original German term "schuldig." "Schuldig" signals that I am not only obligated, but that I am in arrears in these obligations, already "way behind" in making my payments. So people knowing and worshipping God with only a first-article relationship "have" unpaid debts, and the size of the debt never ceases growing. That conviction leads Luther to conclude: "Therefore this article would humble and terrify us all if we believed it." For, he says, it is with all these gifts from God our creator that we do our sinning, our not fearing, not trusting, and turning into ourselves.

But that brings us back again to the Christian "difference" about salvation. Sinners need to be saved, not merely from their sin, or the death that ensues, but from God their creator who is now their critical creditor, their debt increase daily, before whom they stand without a leg to stand on.

Even among Christians today there are many who propose a diagnosis of the need for salvation much shallower than this. In ecumenical dialogue with fellow Christians, such differences in salvations need to be addressed. In conversation with believers and worshippers coming from other religions the same is true. How "much" salvation we humans need depends on how our religion diagnoses the human dilemma. Luther hears the Scriptures diagnosing our malady in these drastic terms. What is the diagnosis in the salvation proposals of other religions? That question must be addressed.

Luther's Theology of Other Religions with Implications for Christian Mission and Evangelism

1. In Christian mission and evangelism [hereafter CME]--whether to people of other world religions or to 'false Christians' of our own century--we can anticipate that they may already be "believing and worshipping only the one true God."

2. CME can anticipate that their primal problem is that “they do not have the Lord Christ.” Put into the format of the creed: they already “have” a first article relationship with God--in whatever form it may take -- but not a second or third article linkage with God.
3. So CME first of all listens as people tell of the God they believe in and worship, listens for what they do have, anticipating that since/if they do not claim the Lord Christ, they do indeed not have him.
4. Signals of such “not having” Luther portrays as: not knowing God’s attitude toward them, having no confidence of God’s love and blessing, remaining in eternal wrath and damnation, not being illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. CME seeks to remedy that, so that they do “have the Lord Christ,” which brings with him the other benefits Luther mentions.
5. All of these benefits are centered in one’s relationship to God, and all of them are a “having,” a possessing, that people did not experience before. E.g., the freedom that comes with “having Christ” is first of all a freedom at the point where it is often least expected: in our relationship with God.
6. In order for someone to “have Christ,” someone else must offer Christ. CME is such offering. It offers Christ to the receivers. The Lutheran Confessions make the point that the fundamental verb of the Gospel’s promise is “offer” (in contrast to the law’s fundamental verb “require”).
7. CME offers Christ so that people may “have” him. Changes (requirements?) in people’s prior believing and worshipping are secondary concerns. They may not even be the concern of those making the offer, but the agenda, the calling, of the ones who now have the Lord Christ, whom they did not have before.
8. Both Luther and Melanchthon complained that the medieval church often “made Christ unnecessary,” and with that it was joining the ranks of the Turks and Jews. CME listens for evidence of people’s God-problem, their need for salvation face-to-face with God. That need is the need for Christ, so CME “necessitates Christ” in the offer it makes for filling that need. At root any “good” sermon within a Christian congregation does exactly the same, doesn’t it?

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