

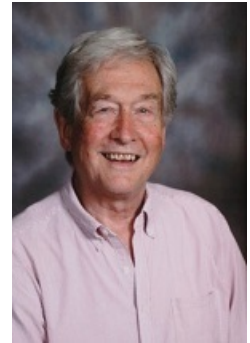
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APOLOGIA PRO VITA SUA: A Spiritual Life Report

1 Some months ago, David Brooks, the brilliant neo-conservative columnist for the *New York Times*, invited readers over 65 to submit to him what he called a Life Report. He promised to post those Life Reports on the *NYTimes* web page and to comment on some of them in his own subsequent musings in his *NYTimes* op-ed pieces.

2 His point was this: Current generations are too often unaware of the experience of their elders. Unaware, and thus deprived of such wisdom as that elder experience might provide.

3 I thought that was a dandy idea, and submitted to Brooks my own Life Report – ten pages of it! I never have checked to see if my Life Report has indeed appeared on the *NYTimes* web page; Brooks in any case did not comment on mine specifically in his columns.

4 But my own Life Report for Brooks was chiefly autobiographical, with a measure of my own observation and reflection on ethical issues, to be sure. But almost nothing of what you might call my own spiritual journey.

5 In this posting I'll make up for that omission. Herewith, an early version of my *Spiritual* Life Report. A Defence – an Apology! – for My Life.

6 One qualification: I have been unable to discover how to write the following paragraphs without appearing judgemental – or at least negative – about alternative spiritualities and pieties. I hope you can indulge me in this, faithful reader.

7 I am willing, that is, to believe that every human being can learn something useful from every other human being. No one religion or spirituality or piety can claim an exclusive monopoly on all truth. I am willing, that is, to be broadly tolerant of anyone's beliefs and opinions and practices.

8 That does not mean, however, that I am obliged to *respect* everyone's beliefs

and opinions and practices. There is a significant difference, I'm arguing, between tolerating and respecting. (Respect in the sense of accepting all beliefs and opinions and practices as equally valid or equally true or equally humane or equally life-affirming.) As I approach my eighty-third year of life on this planet, my experience has taught me that some human beliefs and opinions and practices are simply crazy; not in the least valid or true or humane or life-affirming. You'll allow me the grace not to respect such views.

9 Tolerate, yes. Respect, no.

10 So you will allow me to appear to be negative and even judgmental in some of what follows? Thanks.

11 I see my work dividing into three categories. I'll try to state my convictions both positively – what I admire – and negatively – what I find wanting.

12 **Why I am a theist and not an atheist.** Granted that many atheists and agnostics are more morally admirable than many religionists. Granted that many atheists are of the highest intelligence and of the most irreproachable character, putting to shame many religionists.

13 Still, I find myself compelled to acknowledge – to celebrate, to worship – some kind of Infinite Absolute upholding all of human life – indeed, upholding all of cosmic existence.

14 I don't find it necessary to think of God as some majestic Old Man with a Beard and Crown, after the manner of popular cartoons. Indeed, even the metaphor of God as Father is problematic today, with many people having only monstrous memories of an earthly father who beat them or molested them. I'm sympathetic to the attempt of many so-called Evangelicals who prefer to speak of Intelligent Design --without in any way endorsing their anti-scientific so-called "creationist" views of cosmology.

15 Paul Tillich's term for what we popularly call God was the Ground of Being. I'd go with Infinite Absolute as metaphor as well. Ultimate Mystery is pretty good, too.

16 A respected theologian-friend maintains you cannot sustain a moral view of human life beyond one generation without some kind of metaphysics behind it. That may be an unnecessarily extreme judgement, but I see some truth in it. In any case, human language and human imagination will always be confounded when we address such absolute matters. We will have to make do with metaphor – figures of speech – whenever we contemplate such wonders.

17 And that speechlessness in the presence of Ultimate Mystery remains a powerful argument, for me, for the necessity for ritual and worship. A sense of wonder – at human life, at the inexhaustible plenitude of our brothers and sisters in earthly flora and fauna, at the cosmos itself – that sense of mystery and wonder animates my own piety. "I will lay my hand upon my mouth," says the Hebrew Bible's Job. Worship, adoration,

awe, the singing of a hymn – these are the only proper responses to the Ultimate, in my view. And they're probably altogether sufficient, as well.

18 Yes, some of my best friends call themselves atheists. But they're missing something.

19 **Why I am a Christian and not a Muslim or Buddhist or Scientologist.** The Christian tradition has taken many forms through the centuries. And granted, throughout that long history, Christians of one type or another have accumulated a shameful record of inexcusable horrors – terrible, indefensible wrongs – to one another, to religionists of other faiths, and to our home the natural environment. Granted too that many representatives of other faiths, disciples of alternative world views, have acquitted themselves more nobly than many Christians: more nobly, more compassionately, more heroically – I was going to add “more Christ-like!” – than many Christians. Granted all that.

20 Still, the Christian religious tradition at its best is radically humane, and life-affirming. I like to think that the Christian tradition I represent is honourable, just, and humane, in ways that other faiths are wanting.

21 Eastern religions, enjoying a popular vogue today among many in the West, do not “honour the molecules” – respect the body – the way the Christian tradition does, in my view. As I understand Eastern pieties, they seek to free the individual from the physical prisonhouse of the body and from the vagueries of temporality, whereas in the Christian valuation I represent, the body is honoured. Those physical molecules are decisive, in Christian faith. It's no accident, I feel, that medicine, science, and technology should take firmest root in cultures that have been informed by a Christian piety. The pinnacle and summit of Christian worship – the Mass, the Eucharist, the Holy Communion – requires stuff, demands the presence of stuff: bread and wine – the molecules. See [Essay156](#) above.

22 Christian faith and practice is gloriously – and, to some, embarrassingly – incarnational and sacramental. “And blessed is the one who does not take offence...” I miss that incarnational and sacramental insistence in non-Christian religions.

23 I personally find the Origin Stories – among many other aspects – of faiths like those of Mormons or Scientologists too preposterous to entertain.

24 The three so-called Abrahamic Faiths – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – are all more compatible to my personal temperament. But I have serious reservations about the anthropologies, especially the place of women, in the more fundamentalist forms of Islam or Judaism, and corresponding reservations about how those anthropologies are acted out in their worship.

25 But I am willing to think of Christianity as a kind of sub-set of Judaism. Many Jews – and many Christians! – will not take that as a compliment, I am sure!

26 **Why I am a Lutheran and not Pentecostal or Presbyterian or Anglican.** The Lutheran Tradition has always been rightly counted among the four classic catholic Christian faiths: Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican. That's catholic with a lower case c. See [Essay 29](#). Luther himself went to his grave convinced he was a true catholic: adhering to the catholic and apostolic traditions of his own upbringing.

27 The Lutheran tradition in theology is the envy of many another mainline church. That theological tradition is not at all fundamentalist or literalist with its Bible or with its Confessional documents, and embraces the so-called historical-critical methods of interpreting those symbols without embarrassment.

28 I'm specially fond of Luther's insights about the Two Kingdoms. Classic Lutheran theology is a gift to all the churches. It's not without its dark side, to be sure. (A typically Lutheran pathology is quietism.) But I'm convinced there's a dark side to every theological position. Calvinist and Reformed fundamentalism is the default position of most North American Christianity. And the typical Reformed – and Roman Catholic! – pathology is triumphalism.

29 As for Lutheran worship, it is fully catholic in ways that other so-called protestants are not. Other so-called protestants have a kind of Morning Prayer, or even a kind of 19th Century Revival Meeting, as their chief service on Sunday. Lutheran Sunday worship at its best is always Word and Sacrament: the Mass. That tradition in worship is also a gift to all the churches.

30 Even Anglicans – even Roman Catholics! – do not have a more catholic worship tradition. Contemporary Lutheran worship expressions are fully that – contemporary – and at the same time historic and apostolic in ways that cannot be matched by any other Christian denomination today, including Roman Catholic (capitol c).

31 Granted that, in this day of heartening ecumenical consensus (See [Essay 166](#)), many other Christian bodies have made significant progress in moving toward a more fully catholic and apostolic worship tradition. Granted also that in many individual Lutheran parishes, the full glory of classic catholic worship is rarely on display. Nevertheless, a glance at our current worship book, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, will testify to the truth I am witnessing here.

32 Once again: I take my hat off to people of good will in every religious tradition, or none. We can all learn from each other. I'm simply laying out here some of the reasons I proudly call myself a Lutheran. By birth and by conviction.

