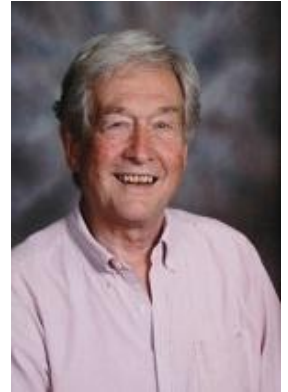


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PROTESTANT? OR CATHOLIC? Or Both?

- 1 I have heard it said that as you get older, The Big Picture in human life – the Really Important Stuff in human life – becomes clearer. I hope that's true. In any case, in recent days I have begun to reflect on my own journey. And a couple things have indeed become clearer, in my old age, at least as I see it.
- 2 As an example I cite my title (above) for this Essay. Let me explain.
- 3 I've begun to see that among Christians, there are two possibilities. Either you're a protestant (lower case). Or you're a catholic (lower case).
- 4 And I have come to appreciate that there are virtues in both. We can learn from each other!
- 5 I'd describe protestants (small p) as those who cherish the reforms of the 16th Century. Who want the church to be continually reforming. But who rarely look beyond those reforms back to pre-Reformation times. Protestants, in this definition, are a truly new thing. There can even be a scorn for anything in the Christian Tradition that dates before the 16th Century.
- 6 Catholics (small c) on the other hand cherish the entire scope of Christian history and tradition. Most catholics these days see the reforms of the 16th Century as an attempted cleaning out of the pre-Reformation Tradition. But not an abandoning of it. Catholics (small c) like to think of themselves as standing in continuity with the world wide Christian Church, and the ages-old Christian Church. Hence catholics (small c) can even exhibit a kind of scorn for protestants, as too new to the party.
- 7 In my reckoning, catholics (small c) include the Eastern Orthodox Churches in all their variety, Roman Catholics in all their variety, Anglicans in all their variety, and Lutherans in all their variety.
- 8 Again, as I see it, protestants (small p) comprise all the others.

9 Now full disclosure: I was raised a protestant; I became a catholic in Seminary!

10 My Dad, as I have told you, was a Lutheran minister, a third generation German-American pietist. Our Sunday Service was right from our worship book of those days, the Common Service Book. And compared to many another Christian church, it was highly “liturgical” for its day. My father wore the vestments of his time: First, a black academic robe, following Continental German Lutheran practice. And later in his life, cassock and surplice, and stole in the colour of the season, following Anglicans at their Morning Prayer. Lutheran worship included prayers “out of a book”, with vigorous liturgical exchanges between pastor and people. However, we celebrated Holy Communion only four times a year in my childhood.

11 So even then, Lutheran worship looked different from many other protestant parishes.

12 But when I came to Seminary, I discovered the richness of the catholic (small c) tradition. And it shaped me profoundly. The word protestant even became a pejorative for me. Protestants (small p) began to seem to me profoundly lacking in some Important Stuff.

13 (You’ll allow me to use the upper case from now on faithful reader? But don’t assume my Catholic means Roman Catholic. It doesn’t.)

14 I would now, at this point in my long life, describe the Important Stuff that Protestants lack as mostly *adiaphora*. That’s a favourite Lutheran put-down for anything pertaining to the First Article of the Creed. The Greek word means “bearing no ultimate significance”. It includes matters like liturgical forms, candles, vestments, rituals, time-structures like the Church Year, and the Daily Office (like matins, vespers, compline). In short, they’re matters that have little or nothing to do with your ultimate salvation – the Second Article of the Creed.

15 OK. I’ll buy that. But – and here’s my delight in them! – they teach. They speak. They communicate! They preach, even! Perhaps more eloquently than your sermon! What Lutherans often call *adiaphora* are Media of Meaning. My life-long interest in the arts is paying off: The arts actually communicate!

16 Take church architecture, for example. You are already being preached to, addressed, as soon as you enter a church building.

17 If your church building features a separate Nave and Chancel; if it is long and narrow with rows of seats in a Nave, facing an elevated Chancel with Altar / Table, Pulpit, and Lectern, you’re already being sold three disastrous messages.

18 First, it's a hierarchical space. Even if it's a Protestant church. The Holy Stuff and the Holy People are up there in the elevated Chancel, with God. The rest of us are clearly second class Christians, down here in the Nave. Hierarchy – also Greek – means “priests first”.

19 Second, the event you're about to witness is clearly presentational. Those people up front there, in the Chancel, have something to present to you that you do not have. You're not an actor *with* them in a Holy Drama. You're an audience. The building is essentially a long narrow theatre. Maybe God is in the prompter's box, whispering cues to the people in the Chancel. Kierkegaard's analogy.

20 Third, it's a space that discourages community, and encourages private, individualistic introspection. Private prayer. All you see are the backs of heads. You don't look into a human face. This will not be a corporate, communal event. It will be private, individualistic. You might as well take out your Rosary.

21 (Joke: You have heard that the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council are sweeping through the Church of Ireland? Now the priest says his Rosary facing the people!)

22 I could go on. But you get my message. So much of the Catholic Tradition – that Protestants have rejected for centuries – is mighty fine. And – Praise God! – it is rightly being reclaimed among many Protestant church bodies today as part of a Spirit-directed ecumenical consensus.

23 Protestants are becoming more catholic. They're learning how the arts communicate. (A Catholic gift!) I can't use “Protestant” as a pejorative any more!

24 And Catholics? I hope we realize the necessity for a Tradition that is always correcting itself. That's a Protestant gift. *Semper reformanda* – Always reforming! – is a watchword Catholics especially have to embrace. Particularly Roman Catholics, but not excluding Anglicans and Lutherans.

25 So we each have homework to do. Over the years, Protestants must become more Catholic; Catholics must constantly reform themselves.

26 That agenda is enough to keep us all busy!

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