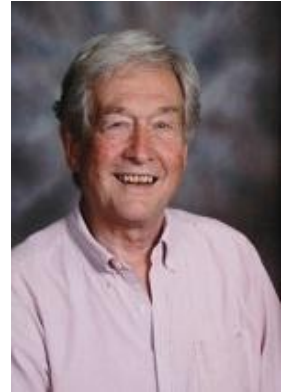


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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO APOLOGETICS?

1 Faithful reader: My Essay 197 “Love me; Love my religion?” of last year has prompted more conversations among my friends locally than almost anything I have written recently. What has exercised my readers has been my statement in paragraph 28. I’ll quote myself from that paragraph here:

2 *“So: Sorry, folks: My faith, my religion, my religious piety and practice may not be simply different from my neighbours’. But also, yes – I’m compelled to say it – better than theirs. More rationally respectable. Supremely: more humane. Even that of my more conservative Christian neighbours!”*

3 What I am doing, in the words quoted above, is to make what the theologians call an apologetic statement. I am trying to “give an account of the hope that is in me” (1 Peter 3:15). With respect and reverence! I would expect no less from you. You tell me what’s great about your religion! With respect and reverence!

4 Apologetics is that branch of Christian theology that is concerned with the defense and propagation of the faith. Apologetics is the inspiration for all the evangelistic enterprises, the missionary impulses – making disciples -- that have been a mark of the Christian faith since St. Paul. The Christian faith – until very recently – has been a proselytizing, evangelistic faith. It wants to make converts. Missionary work, proselytizing, evangelism, converting, making disciples: They are all part of the package of Christian faith. Unambiguously.

5 So the question in the title of my posting this month means to suggest that you don’t hear much – at least I myself don’t hear much! – about apologetics these days. There’s a kind of Political Correctness abroad in our era among Christians that makes us hesitant to reach any judgements about other people’s faith or practice.

6 Maybe this contemporary reticence with apologetics arises from an embarrassment about the excesses of the 19th Century Christian missionary movement. Those excesses often included an unwholesome identification with the power of empire, and an often ruthless colonization of indigenous peoples. Christians in Canada and elsewhere have ample reason to renounce and to apologize for the dreadful abuses of their Residential Schools, for example. And maybe that has made Christians gun shy, so to speak, about pressing our own claims to moral or spiritual superiority!

7 But maybe – let’s be honest! – this reticence with apologetics may even amount to a lack of conviction. Cold feet. An uncertainty among believers about “the certainties of faith”.

8 I’d want to make several observations to help clear up any misunderstandings before we proceed.

9 My first observation would be this: Human beings make judgements all the time. We are created to be judgement-makers. You make judgements about the stuff you buy: This soap is better than that soap. You make judgements about movies and music: *The Godfather* is the greatest movie ever made. *The Beatles* are better than *the ‘Stones*.

10 Human beings are judgement-makers. We should not shy away from that responsibility. It’s part of our glory as Christians -- and simply as human beings. The Apostle tells us to “discern the spirits”. To “give an account of the hope that is in us...” 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 and 1 John 4:1-21.

11 My second observation is a repeat of the Gregory Baum Principle that I acknowledged in Essay 197. Baum is one of the great Canadian theological superstars of our times. And he argues that Christians have no right to try to proselytize anyone who is happy in their present religion or culture. I’d endorse that. That principle is generous and open-hearted.

12 My third observation is the Paul Bosch Principle, one I have repeated numerous times in these postings, including again in Essay 197. Every human being has something to teach every other human being. Every religion has something to teach every other religion. Every culture has something to teach every other culture. You will have to admit: That too is a Principle of warm hearted generosity. You can claim to be an outright atheist, and you still have something to teach me. But by golly: I have something to teach you, too!

13 My final observation is to admit discomfort with my own religious tradition. Yes, I am a proud Lutheran. I believe the Lutheran Tradition is worth exporting. I further believe that the Lutheran Tradition is the very best of the various Christian Traditions. And that the Christian Tradition is the very best of the various world religions. Sorry about that. Perhaps you feel the same about your religion. Let’s talk, then!

14 But I do not regard myself as a knee-jerk Lutheran. There are aspects of the Lutheran Tradition that I question and dispute. I will lay out three of my discomforts with Traditional Lutheran ways of being. I will be confessing to three distinct heterodoxies. I won’t call them heresies; I’ll call them heterodoxies.

15 My first Lutheran heterodoxy represents an attempt to find the Fatal Flaw – the pathology – in the Lutheran Tradition.

16 (Aside: I firmly believe that ALL Christian varieties possess a Fatal Flaw, a defining pathology. The pathology, the Fatal Flaw for Lutherans – on hideous display world-wide from 1939 till 1945 – is Quietism. Lutherans tend to become obsequious before the Emperor. We're following St. Paul in this; It's in the Bible. Romans 13:1 and following. "Obey the powers that be...")

17 Curiously, for whatever it is worth to you, the Fatal Flaw for Calvinists is the same as the Fatal Flaw for Roman Catholics: A tendency towards Triumphalism. Putting the cross over City Hall. Both Calvinists and Catholics, that is, do not grant the secular orders a sufficient autonomy, a sufficient seriousness. Luther's Two Kingdoms position does. (With our Lutheran Fatal Flaw – Quietism, giving the Emperor too much – emerging almost immediately!)

18 This brings me to my second heterodoxy. Pacifism. Lutherans, and many other Christians, acknowledge St. Augustine's Five Principles that govern a Just War. I review those Principles in Essay 212 above.

19 With other Lutherans, and with other Christians, I affirm those Principles. But we Lutherans almost never conclude that this or that war is NOT justifiable. The Emperor says there are bad guys out there, runs up the flag, and Lutherans are almost always among the first to grab a gun. Quietism: "Obey the powers that be...".

20 But Augustine's Principles make clear: Some wars – maybe ALL wars, certainly all MODERN wars – are simply too horrible to justify, even by Augustine's standards. Even in Augustine's day.

21 (Aside: My own personal take on Augustine is this: He's trying to suck up to the Emperor, in the days when Christendom is just being established. But he's out-foxing the Emperor! He purposely makes his standards for a justifiable war so high as never to be realized! Augustine assumes, that is, that all Christians will remain pacifists. As they apparently were, almost unanimously, in the four centuries before Christendom arrived, to ruin things!)

22 The Quakers have a wonderful principle: Seek the Third Way. The First Way would be simply to capitulate to evil. That's no good. In a world where evil is all too real, you would not want evil to triumph. The Second Way would be to resist evil with evil – by war, that is. That's no good either, in anybody's reckoning. There is always a Third Way.

23 Martin Luther King found a Third Way. Nelson Mandela found a Third Way. Mahatma Gandhi found a Third Way. If our current leaders and politicians cannot find a Third Way for us, they have simply failed us.

24 Bottom line: It is high time for Lutherans – for all the mainline Christian churches! – to learn from today's Quakers and Mennonites. No modern war is justifiable. Lutherans must learn to be pacifists again, like the Christians of the first four centuries.

25 My third heterodoxy is universalism. This is a distinctly contemporary heterodoxy that argues, as Pope Francis himself has recently maintained, that there is no Hell. That a loving God would consign even a single soul to an eternity of the torments of the flames of Hell is just too terrible to imagine. The concept of Hell is simply a Medieval barbarism, in my view.

24 And I have the Bible on my side in this (although not the Lutheran Confessions, which endorse the concept of Hell.) I'm thinking of verses such as 1 Timothy 2:4 ("...God desires everyone to be saved...") and 2 Peter 3:9 ("... not wanting anyone to perish..."), and even Ezekiel 18:32 and Ezekiel 33:11 ("...I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked...").

25 Are Christians to maintain that God's intention, God's desire, will be frustrated? That God's will will NOT be done "on earth, as in heaven"?

26 It is unimaginable to me that God's purposes will not be fully fulfilled, fully accomplished! Hence: Universalism. And I'll regard the Lutheran Confessions as simply captive to their culture, in endorsing Hell. And I'll ignore them in this.

27 So I am willing to call myself an activist, pacifist, universalist Lutheran Christian! You'd have to read the preceding 26 paragraphs to understand what I mean by this!

28 Well. That's my version, of the Lutheran version, of the Christian faith. And I will still argue that it's better than many another religion. Now, you tell me why yours is better. I'm listening!

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