Response to Paul Santmire's "The Lutheran Liberal Arts College and Care For the Earth"

Arthur Preisinger
I found most of H. Paul Santmire's article, "The Lutheran Liberal Arts College and Care for the Earth," commendable and thought-provoking. The critique of the "back-to-nature" cult, the call for a holistic environmental ethos in the face of crass materialism and "sociopathic individualism," the suggestion of creating a cosmic liturgical praxis - all provide considerable food for thought and, indeed, action. Nevertheless, I take issue with Santmire on several counts relative to the section on classical Lutheran social ethics.

Santmire admits that much of White's argument "is historically justified, insofar as one can allow that religious faith can exercise in fact a significant historical causality. He goes on at some length to defend the ecological tradition in Western theology - as if Lutheran theology were something wholly apart from Western theology! Santmire encourages contemplation of the riches in the vaults of Western theology, advising us not to "conclude that all historic Christianity has to offer is anthropocentrism and the domination of nature." He encourages such contemplation of the riches of Lutheran vaults, too. But what are these riches? Only one, as far as I can see: "At its best, the Lutheran tradition has sent forth forgiven sinners to be good citizens and witnesses to the kingdom of God that has arrived in Jesus Christ." That is all the Lutheran tradition has to offer? He has damned it with faint praise. Why the bum rap for Lutherans?

What is wrong here, in my opinion, is a simplistic delineation of the two kingdoms ethic. Granted, the two kingdoms doctrine has been used by German theologians of this century to justify acquiescence to the Nazi regime. Did the regime itself use the "two kingdoms" to justify its actions? There is precious little evidence for that. If the two kingdoms really was one of the sources of Nazi mischief, it could only be so insofar as one can allow that religious faith can exercise in fact a significant historical causality. As a matter of fact, both confessional and liberal German theologians of the nineteenth century used a distorted and misinterpreted two kingdoms doctrine to separate ethics from the gospel.

Luther never wrote a systematic treatise on the doctrine of the two kingdoms. (The term itself, by the way, became common as late as the 1930's.) He used diverse terminology to come to grips with the ethical problems of the Christian of his day. One needs to examine the two kinds of dualities (antithetical and complementary) by which he explicates the doctrine. Luther does make a distinction between what he sometimes calls the "left hand" and the "right hand" of God. But these are elements of the "complementary duality," i.e., what Ulrich Duchrow calls the two governances of God. True, the right distinction must be made between the two governances; they must not be confused. On the other hand, they must not be separated. The temporal (Kingdom of creation?) and spiritual (Kingdom of redemption?) governances are not spheres that can be separated, but dimensions to be distinguished. I will not go into the complexities here. I suggest a reading of Karl Hertz, ed., Two Kingdoms and One World: A Source book in Christian Ethics; Ulrich Duchrow, Two Kingdoms - The Use and Misuse of a Lutheran Theological Concept; and Tom Strieter's excellent Th.D. dissertation, "Contemporary Two Kingdoms and Governance Thinking to Today's World."

If, in fact, the two kingdoms doctrine was the reason for all those German Lutherans jumping on the Nazi bandwagon, how does Santmire explain all those German Roman Catholics, who had no such doctrine, jumping on the same bandwagon?

I do not know what Santmire means by "classical Lutheran teaching." Sixteenth century (Luther)? Seventeenth century? What? If he puts the onus of intersection "only in the person of the individual believer. . ." on Luther, I think he is dead wrong. One should read, for example, Luther's commentary of Psalm 82, or, "On Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed."

Arthur A. Preisinger is Associate Professor of Theology/Philosophy and History at Texas University.
Santmire argues that the two kingdoms is admirable for the theology of God's grace, but it "leaves much to be desired as an affirmation and defense of the theology of God's justice." Again, I contend it is not the two kingdoms doctrine as such that is to be faulted, but its abuse and misappropriation. For a very insightful discussion of the evolution of Luther's views on law and justice, I suggest F. Edward Cranz, An Essay on the Development of Luther's Thought on Justice, Law, and Society, vol. XIX of the Harvard Theological Series, issued as an extra number of the Harvard Theological Review (1964).

It is ironic that Santmire brings up South Africa. The South African Council of Churches used the two kingdoms (correctly interpreted) in its fight against apartheid. I had discussed this very thing with Wolfram Kistner when he was head of the Theological Division of the Council. And Eberhard Bethge had lectured in South Africa on the two kingdoms, seeing it as a theological tool in the struggle.

It is a real stretch to link the two kingdoms doctrine with the alleged non-concern of church leaders for the "groaning of the earth and its masses in this era of global environmental crisis." I doubt if church leaders know much, or care much, about the two kingdoms. The issue of whether or not to "hold hands with the Episcopalians," it seems to me, has been driven by church politics rather than by theology. If theology were the issue, the agreement with the Presbyterians, the Reformed Church and the UCC would not so easily have glided through the ELCA Assembly in August.

Fundamental issues of social justice are being obscured in our time by many "circles" besides Lutherans. How do we know that "toxic waste dumps..." do not "appear" to be a matter of concern for "many" Lutherans today? Who are these "many Lutheran circles"? This is simply too general and too emotive to be taken seriously.

If we are to look for skeletons in our closet, let us search for real bones, not plastic ones. As far as I am concerned, the skeletons are not so much Luther as a departure from Luther. As Bill Lazareth has written, "There is nothing so sick about Lutheran ethics that a strong dose of Luther cannot cure it."

A RESPONSE TO PAUL SANTMIRE
Don Braxton

When asked if Lutheran theology and ethics has anything distinctive about it, my usual response - general but accurate - is that Lutheran thinking is above all else governed by a dialectical vision. Reaching back to Paul and Augustine, Luther's thought is thoroughly dialectical. Polarities such as Law and Gospel, Two Kingdoms, and Freedom and Bondage, are the driving dynamic force behind Luther's powerful Reformation theology. Paul Santmire's address to Capital University delivered on November 14, 1997, clearly embodies that tradition both in form and in content. Because they seem so well rooted in the normative traditions of our Lutheran liberal arts heritage, his suggestions offer the prospect of authentic guidance for the Lutheran college serious about its past - and its future.

Santmire's vision for the Lutheran liberal arts college in an environmental age is clearly dialectical. Formally, Santmire articulates three mandates, each of which is expounded in terms of its strengths and weaknesses, or as Santmire puts it, "skeletons in our closets and riches in our own vaults." This formal mode of presentation seems to me very important, for it articulates a basic insight of Lutheran thought on institutional structures. Namely, those strengths which enable an institution to thrive can often lead to the same institutions' decay, either through complacency and even hubris, or through blindness. While Lutheran liberal arts colleges need to draw upon their historical strengths, yet they also need to evolve as institutions to respond to the prospects and dangers of a dynamic world. In effect, they need to identify their social functions historically and serve those same functions today, yet do so under quite different societal conditions. In other words, they must do things differently in order to continue to do what they have always done.

On the content level, Santmire identifies three themes. The first theme is responsibility for spiritual particularity. Addressing a theme Santmire is uniquely qualified to assess, he calls for an honest owning up to the ambiguity of the Christian tradition toward the environment. Clearly, there

Don Braxton is Assistant Professor in The Department of Religion, Capital University.

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