

2012

# Critical Engagement in Public Life: Listening to Luther's Troubling Questions

Samuel Torvend

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections>

---

### Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Torvend, Samuel (2012) "Critical Engagement in Public Life: Listening to Luther's Troubling Questions," *Intersections*: Vol. 2012: No. 35, Article 4.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2012/iss35/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Intersections by an authorized administrator of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@augustana.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@augustana.edu).

SAMUEL TORVEND

## Critical Engagement in Public Life: Listening to Luther's Troubling Questions

### **The World in which Lutheran Education Emerged**

I think it safe to say that between 500 and 1000 CE western Europe—the birthplace of the Lutheran reform and Lutheran education—experienced unprecedented dislocation and social trauma.<sup>1</sup> Such social instability was caused by a variety of forces: invasions from the North and the East that intensified in the 400s and lasted another 500 hundred years; the loss of a sophisticated transportation infrastructure, once the glory of the Roman Empire; the slow dismantling of an “universal” empire governed from Rome and then, with considerable disinterest in western concerns, from Constantinople; commercial decline due to road loss and increased brigandage; and a steady but high mortality rate. Add to this early medieval trauma the astonishing loss of life in the wake of the Black Plague during the late medieval period (1350-1500), and it is not difficult to understand why medieval Christian spirituality was suffused with a profound desire to enter, in the words of the Nicene Creed, “the life of the world to come.”

In the early medieval centuries, Christianity slowly expanded into northern and central Europe, an expansion made possible by monastic missionaries who vowed stability to one place, one monastery, and from these monastic centers, themselves oases of human stability in the midst of much social chaos, began to establish satellite monastic centers. Their work, over many centuries, reconfigured the map of Europe, creating a new cultural and religious landscape: villages, towns, and cities sprang up around monasteries; monastic schools were the sole centers of learning,

predecessors of the medieval urban universities which began to emerge after 1050. Monastic life was rooted in the local monastery where the cultivation of a common life and all that was necessary to sustain daily living took place (e.g., constructing buildings, producing a regular food supply, creating cloth for clothing).

And yet this seemingly down-to-earth existence lived in paradoxical tension with a focus on preparing for “the life of the world to come,” for union with God. This was due, in part, to neo-platonic impulses which had slowly but surely influenced the early and medieval Christian imagination. While the Jewish followers of Jesus of Nazareth would have imagined the human as an integral unity of body and soul, of matter and spirit, neo-platonic thought, shaped by matter and earth-escaping tendencies, posited a more dualistic sensibility in which the non-corporeal soul alone is the object of divine grace. The neo-platonic vision, which was welcomed by much but not all of medieval Christian life, suggested that this earth and all its creatures—who faced diminishment and death and thus experienced a corruptibility alien to the divine—simply did not matter in the end. Indeed, the Manichean temptation was and is ever lurking not far away from this dualistic thought form. The Manicheans taught that the earth was created by an evil god and thus the body, indeed all matter, is simply a terrible prison for the soul. That which was considered “spiritual” (i.e., incorporeal) received high religious value; that which was viewed as “material” (i.e., earthy, bodily) could be readily

---

SAMUEL TORVEND *is the University Chair in Lutheran Studies and Director of Reflection in the Center for Vocation, Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma, Washington.*

viewed as insignificant, as an annoying obstacle to be overcome or, at worst, as a terrible and horrifying mistake.

By the time of Luther's birth in 1483, the categories of "spiritual" and "temporal" had become a heuristic device to describe society itself from a medieval Christian perspective. Within the "spiritual" realm (what Luther knew as an "estate") were those persons, women and men, who had answered the call to the religious life as vowed members of an order (e.g., the Benedictines, Dominicans, or Augustinians) and those males who had a "vocation" to the priesthood, that is, to public ministry in the church. "Service to God" in the form of priestly ministry or vowed religious life was understood to be the only "calling" or vocation in Christian life. Furthermore, priests and vowed religious were frequently regarded as holier because of their distance from what were perceived as "worldly temptations" (e.g., sexual intercourse, pursuit of wealth, ambition for social status). Within the "temporal" realm were all other baptized Christians: rulers, barmaids, lawyers, teachers, peasants, soldiers, and mothers—to list only a few. Indeed, in this construction of late medieval society, baptized laypeople were taught to be passive recipients of the priest's active work, for it was believed that through the sacramental ministry of the priest alone that the grace of God was encountered.

One notices how these characteristics of medieval faith and life intersected with each other: life on earth as less significant than the afterlife; what survives death is the intangible soul, not the corporeal body; in order for the soul to enter the afterlife ("heaven" or "union with God"), one must work diligently in this life and follow the teachings and practices suggested or commanded by those in spiritual authority—the church's leaders. These marks of late medieval Christian spirituality shaped the milieu in which Lutheran education emerged—emphases which ironically were called into question by a monastic priest who yearned for union with a gracious God but during his early life found only a stern and terrifying Judge.

### Asking Disruptive Questions

If anything can be said of Martin Luther's sixteenth-century revolution, commonly called a reformation, it is that he reversed the focus of late medieval spirituality and, in reversing that urgent desire to "gain heaven," reshaped the imagination of the West. In the late medieval world of Luther's birth, the Christian was expected to cooperate with the divine grace received in the sacraments, a divine energy, as it were, through which one could seek God, become closer to God, gain greater favor in God's sight, perform spiritual works which would demonstrate the quality of one's faith and thus, hopefully, secure a favorable decision on that day of fear and trembling when Christ "will come again in glory

to judge the living and the dead." The young Luther drank in the need to work diligently to gain divine favor. Indeed, as monk and priest he worked so steadfastly and with such anxiety that he wondered if he could ever do enough—*do enough*—to receive a favorable judgment from Christ the Judge and thus enter heaven.

It was through his study of the letters of Paul—in particular, his letters to the Christians at Rome and Galatia—that Luther, the university professor who lectured on the Bible, discovered what many of his theological peers had seemingly overlooked, namely, Paul's assertion that one can do nothing to get closer to God, to gain God's favor, to work diligently in the hope of heaven. Instead, argued the early Christian missionary, it is God who comes to humans in their limitations and self-centeredness, in their misery, suffering, and dying with nothing less than mercy and grace. That is, God is always advancing toward God's creatures—with "life, health, and salvation," wrote Luther—advancing most clearly in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary and son of God. Indeed, this emphasis on *God's advance, in Christ, toward those who dwell in the earth* effectively overturned the long-held notion that human beings can or need to strive for, seek out, get closer to, or make their way to God. All that striving to make oneself pleasing to God was, in the end, rubbish in the eyes of Luther.<sup>2</sup>

### Who Benefits?

Such a scriptural discovery caused Luther to wonder if the previous 500 years of Christian teaching and practice had been terribly wrong, had led Christians into unnecessary anxiety, had duped them into believing that Christ was nothing but their judge, had encouraged them to believe that this world was to be scorned, had fostered the sense that one must indeed work hard on earth in order to gain eternal rewards. Such a discovery led Luther to ask a string of disturbing questions: Who fostered such a teaching? Who sanctioned the many spiritual works one must do in order to gain God's favor? And, who allowed the sale of spiritual favors to further one's entry into heaven, even after one's death? Would not the sale of spiritual favors actually discriminate against those, the majority of the population, who were poor? If the spiritual leader of the western church—the bishop of Rome, the pope—can, on behalf of Christ, offer the word and consolation of forgiveness to all Christians, why does he not abolish the practices which have made such free forgiveness into a marketable commodity?<sup>3</sup>

Continued study of Paul's letters led Luther to ask even more disturbing and disruptive questions: Is the separation of Christians into two "estates"—spiritual and temporal—fundamentally wrong? Does not Christian baptism initiate all persons

into one egalitarian state in which gender, race or ethnicity, and socio-economic status no longer hold sway? And, this, too: If all Christians, regardless of their place in society, enjoy all the gifts of God's Spirit, should they not be able to select and, when needed, dismiss their church leaders rather than wait for them to be appointed by someone higher up the hierarchical ladder? And, if one has been freed by God's grace from the need to work diligently to receive an eternal reward, where does the act of initiation lead one—into a private experience of the divine within *or* into a religious crusade to make one's society into the church, a "Christian" nation? In response to this final "either/or," Luther and his reforming colleagues offered a resounding "No." The advance of God continues, publicly, through the advance or movement of Christians into public life, not with the intent to establish a "Christian" society ruled by biblical law, but rather to engage one's society ("the kingdom of this world"), to offer concrete suggestions or proposals that would influence and shape the economic, educational, political, and social dimensions in which all citizens dwell. Thus, the Christian and the church are called to be "salt" and "leaven" within society, neither religious despisers of culture sitting on the sidelines nor religious conquerors of culture who will be tempted, Luther noted perceptively, to transform the Gospel of freedom into a new law of conformity.

### *Why Engage the Social, Bodily Realm?*

Although he was influenced, early in his life, by an earth-escaping and body-punishing spiritual milieu, the social consequences of a theology rooted in the teaching on justification by grace would eventually reshape Luther's perception of matter, the earth, and the body. Remember that he was hired to teach Bible and spent much of his life studying and commenting on what Christians call the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures. Luther's initial search for eternal salvation began within the austere life of the Augustinian Hermits of the Strict Observance, itself a reform movement within German religious life. Within the monastic enclosure, he punished his body with stringent spiritual practices (e.g., strict fasting, little sleep, arduous marathons of prayer, self-flagellation). And yet he abandoned monastic life for theological reasons and married Katarina von Bora, a former Cistercian nun ("The Judgment"). As a biblical scholar, Luther shifted away from an allegorical, spiritualizing interpretation to one that emphasized the historical and Christocentric. Thus, he would come to accept the Hebraic emphasis on the integral unity of body and spirit and eventually recognize that the gifts of body and earth—sexual intercourse, children, physical pleasure, food and drink, and the creation itself—flow from the generous hand of the divine Creator.

Moreover, rather than seeing the creation of the earth and all its creatures as one act of the ancient past, he would come to see the creative activity of God as something continuing in the present and into the future. Thus, it should not surprise us that later in his life, Luther would suggest that a school or a university is the place in which each discipline is called to explore and study life on this earth, a diversity of life forms continually being brought into existence by the grace and vitality of God. A school or university is that place in which students and teachers engage, rather than escape, this world and its real problems: "In order to maintain its temporal estate outwardly, the world must have good and capable men and women ... for it is a matter of properly educating our boys and girls to that end" ("To the Councilmen" 368).

### *Calling Whom and to What End?*

In the year 1520, Luther published a series of revolutionary texts that indicated his break with much (but not all) late medieval thought and practice and that constituted a recovery of Christian life rooted solely in the witness of the Bible. In his address "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," he asked princely rulers to promote reform, a reform which began with his powerful critique of the social stratification of the baptized into two separate spheres or realms—those in holy orders and religious vows and those living "in the world" ("To the Christian Nobility" 127-33). One might see his criticism as a deconstruction of the hierarchical world that most of his peers took for granted. Grounding his argument in the radical act of inclusion called Christian baptism, Luther suggested that the community of faith was one in which all the baptized enjoyed all the gifts of the Holy Spirit and thus a spiritual equality.

His emerging "democratization" of the church, however, did not only end with a community more egalitarian than one imagined by the pope or the bishops, but also a redefinition of the term "vocation." While many of his peers accepted the medieval notion that only the ordained priest or vowed religious had answered a "call" from God, Luther asked yet another unsettling question: Does not the act of God in baptism call a Christian, every Christian, into relationship with others: with the Holy Three, the church, the neighbor, and the world? Such a question and its implied response, suggested that the home, the workplace, and the public square were the very places in which each Christian is called by God to use their reason, employ their skills, and bear witness to the "life, health, and salvation" God intends for all. This is to suggest that Luther's evangelical reconstruction of vocation extended the medieval understanding to virtually every Christian—priest, barmaid, or lawyer—and placed one's calling, or many

callings throughout life, within this world, *this world*. Thus, he would write:

Just as those who are now called “spiritual,” that is, priests, bishops, or popes, are neither different from other Christians nor superior to them, except that they are charged with the administration of the word of God and the sacraments, which is their work and office, so it is with the temporal authorities. They bear the sword and rod in their hand to punish the wicked and protect the good. A cobbler, a smith, a peasant—each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops. Further, everyone must benefit and serve every other by means of his own work or office so that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, just as all the members of the body serve one another [I Cor. 12:14–26]. (“To the Christian Nobility” 130)

Of course, Luther the biblical scholar recognized that the central figure in the Christian story—Jesus of Nazareth—had been baptized into public life: “When you open the book containing the gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the gospel through which he is coming to you ... after that it is necessary that you turn this into an example and deal with your neighbor in the very same way, be given also to him (sic) as a gift and as example” (“A Brief Instruction” 121). As Jesus lived a public life in which he travelled “here or there” and persons were “brought to him,” so, too, the Christian, called forth from baptism into a life of service in the world, follows the example of Christ by caring for the well-being of the neighbor. Thus, the primal sacrament of Christian identity contained a profoundly public dimension.

And so, Luther the priest, pastor, and professor who preached in the university church and presided at the Lord’s Supper, the reformed Mass, recognized that at the center of Christian worship is a *public Christ*:

Learn that [the Lord’s Supper] is a sacrament of love. As love and support are given you, *you in turn must render love and support to Christ in his needy ones*. You must feel with sorrow all ... the unjust suffering of the innocent, with which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing. You must fight, work, pray, and—if you cannot do more—have heartfelt sympathy. See, this is what it means to bear in your turn the misfortune and adversity of Christ and his saints. Here the saying of Paul is fulfilled, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” [Gal. 6:2]. (“The Blessed Sacrament” 54)

Such a compelling exhortation was no invitation to a private life but rather a sacramental charge to “fight” and “work” in public among the needy and the suffering. In this respect, Luther was no innovator but rather a student of early Christian practice in which the sacramental table was extended into the distribution of food and drink among the hungry poor—a *public act*.

### Calling to Public Life

While Luther’s reform of the Christian understanding of the relationship between God and humanity was crystallized in the teaching on justification by grace and became the powerful symbol guiding all other reforms, his theology manifested its public character within a relatively short period of time. By the early 1520s and thereafter, Luther and his colleagues—all university professors—were called upon to deal with a variety of pressing public issues: the reform of *social welfare* among the hungry poor, the provision of *job training* for the unemployed, the establishment of *public schools* for boys and girls, the provision of *healthcare* during war and plague, the building and supervision of *orphanages* for abandoned children, the *legitimacy of war* and the taking human life, the nature of *obedience to the state* and the grounds for *public disobedience*, and the *function of law* in society. In other words, they were pushed to consider the relationship between contemporary public issues or crises and their learning, rooted in the study of scripture, theology, history, and ethics. Thus, their many writings on public issues and their construction of actual responses to public need suggests that the reform of theology and the church also contained the reform of ethics and society, not one without the other. Indeed, one could argue that the promotion of literacy—a prerequisite for reading the Bible newly translated into the vernacular—inspired the establishment of public education and the reform of university education undertaken by early Lutheran educators. One could also claim that the suppression of monastic life—the center of social charity for the previous 1000 years—prompted Lutheran city councils to reform social welfare as a civic, religious, and public project, a project which in its secularized form can be found in many countries throughout the world today. Yet the “genetic encoding” of Lutheran public engagement was not constricted to public education and social welfare.

Luther also would be led to write about *the power of lobbyists* who bribe political leaders, “lining their pockets with silver and gold.” He would urgently propose *government regulation of banks* which charge exorbitant interest rates on loans. Aware of the increasing power of merchant capitalism to shape a society’s values and practices, he asked, even begged, for the *supervision of*

*monopolies and multinational corporations* which hoarded goods needed by all people. He vociferously argued that princes, legislators, and city councils regulate and impose fines on those business entities which would wait until a crisis to charge astounding prices on the goods they controlled, making profit from the misery of the innocent.<sup>4</sup> While Luther's pleas for the regulation and supervision of the private sector thrust him and his university colleagues into the public light, he voiced dismay that those who had accepted the gospel of freedom seemed immune to its ethical and public implications.

### Who Benefits from Our Silence?

While Lutherans and Lutheran colleges have steadfastly promoted education for service in the world, such service has frequently been focused on remarkable charitable initiatives that respond to immediate need. A closer reading of Luther's works, however, indicates that the reformer was well aware of the systemic injustices which actually produce the need for charity in the first place. The power of greed in human life, he wrote, is an unbelieving scoundrel, a ravenous consumption of what rightly belongs to all. And yet Luther's works on social reform, the many *Kirchenordnungen* (church orders on worship and public initiatives) which blossomed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the history of social reform in the Lutheran tradition are infrequently—*infrequently*—studied in seminaries and university courses on Luther or the Lutheran heritage. One then wonders if the questions and the writings of the early-sixteenth-century reformers still await study, reflection, and—yes—cultural translation for those who are eager to see the inherent relationship between faith, learning, and public engagement today.

Lutherans and Lutheran colleges rightly resist the temptation to escape this public world into spiritual privacy and holy apathy.

They rightly resist the temptation, so strong in some sectors of American life, to urge the transformation of a pluralistic society into an allegedly Christian one.<sup>5</sup>

They rightly ask how teaching and learning at a Lutheran college or university, a teaching and learning marked by intellectual humility and charity, might yet prepare and inspire faculty, staff, and students for public engagement, for the promotion of a just and peaceful social order.

They rightly ask how one might resist the forces or presence of evil which diminish and degrade what God has created for life, health, and wholeness.

They rightly ask one last troubling question: Who in this world benefits if our graduates are silent and simply satisfied with way things have always been?

### Endnotes

1. Any brief historical overview of 500-1000 years entails the risk of oversimplification. Indeed, there are exceptions to what is narrated here and scholarly dispute over the construction of western ecclesial and educational history in this time period. Having said that, readers may want to consult the following for more detailed narrations of the period: Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 2nd ed. (Blackwell, 2003); Everett Ferguson, *Church History*, Vol. 1 (Zondervan, 2005); Hubert Jedin and John Dolan, eds. *History of the Church*, Vol. 2-3 (New York: Crossroad, 1980-82); David Knowles and Dimitri Obolensky, *The Middle Ages, The Christian Centuries*, Vol. 2 in *The Christian Centuries* (Paulist, 1979).

2. See Luther's sermon, preached in 1519, on "Two Kinds of Righteousness," in which he sets forth his understanding of justification by grace, using the dialectic of "alien righteousness" and "proper righteousness," and his theology of Christ the servant.

3. These questions began to emerge in the ninety-five theses, which Luther proposed for discussion and debate by the theology faculty of the University of Wittenberg in 1517. They are readily accessed at: <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/web/ninetyfive.html>

4. See my *Luther and the Hungry Poor: Gathered Fragments* (Fortress, 2008); Carter Lindberg, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor* (Fortress, 1993); Kyle Session and Phillip Bebb, eds., *Pietas et Societas: New Trends in Reformation Social History* (Sixteenth Century Journal Publications, 1985).

5. One is mindful of the typology created by H. Richard Niebuhr, and still exercising considerable influence, concerning the relationship between Christ (Christians) and culture: *Christ and Culture* (Harper and Row, 1951).

### Works Cited

- Luther, Martin. "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods," *Luther's Works* (American Edition), volume 35. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960. 49-73.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels," *Luther's Works* (American Edition), volume 35. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960. 117-24.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows," *Luther's Works* (American Edition), volume 44. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1966. 251-400.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Ninety-five Theses," *Luther's Works* (American Edition), volume 31. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957. 25-33.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate" *Luther's Works* (American Edition), volume 44. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1966. 123-217.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools," *Luther's Works* (American Edition), volume 54. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1962. 347-78.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Two Kinds of Righteousness," *Luther's Works* (American Edition), volume 31. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957. 297-306.