

2010

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Caryn D. Riswold

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Riswold, Caryn D. (2010) "'Annoying the Student with Her Rights:" Human Life *Coram Hominibus*; Reflections on Vocation, Hope, and Politics," *Intersections*: Vol. 2010: No. 32, Article 8.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2010/iss32/8>

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CARYN D. RISWOLD

“Annoying the Student With Her Rights:” Human Life *Coram Hominibus* Reflections on Vocation, Hope, and Politics

The author of Col. 3:8 was writing to a divided community that needed to “get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language,” and was trying to give an account of hope to unify them. The various ways that our civic and political community is divided today are numerous. Is there hope, harmony, or any kind of unity in an age of ideological partisanship? Having survived the interminably long 2008 presidential election, pausing for a breath before the start of the 2010 midterm Congressional election, while already hearing speculation about the 2012 slate of presidential hopefuls, we are asked to think about the reasons for hope amidst the anxiety bred by a political climate that seems to be based on fear and mistrust. Our shared Lutheran tradition and our shared vocation as educators provide a context from which to speak and work, and they are reasons and resources for hope.

The 2008 election had a pretty significant presence on college campuses around the country, and data shows that 66% of 18-29 year olds voted for Barack Obama (CNN Election Center). That two major themes of his campaign were hope and change are obviously relevant to the theme of this conference. I want to share one curious encounter I had with a student last fall to provide entrée into some reflections on hope and politics in the context of our vocation and the Lutheran tradition.

Students in my political science colleague’s “Parties and Elections” class had been deputized to register people to vote on campus, so there was a community effort on campus to encourage students to participate in the election. The deputy registrars came

to classes with forms, sat in the student center during lunchtime, and set up tables outside of events on campus to catch the crowds and register new voters. For a couple of class periods before one such registrar was to come to my class, I was reminding my students that they needed to bring their drivers license and student identification the following week if they were going to register to vote. I talked about how exciting and memorable your first presidential election can be, shared stories about my first voting experiences, and emphasized why it is important to vote.

Finally, on about the second or third day of these promotional announcements, a young woman said with great exasperation, “I don’t WANT to register to vote.” I stopped in my tracks, a bit shocked amidst all the general election-fever, and said politely, “Who would like to tell Ashley [not the student’s real name] why its important to register to vote?” The other students in the class immediately piped up with all the proper responses: We are the ones fighting these wars. Our generation has to pay off these debts. We have to deal with the fallout from this economic crisis. We are the leaders of the future, and so forth. Ashley said, “Oh, I know about all of that. My boyfriend is about to deploy to Iraq.” I kindly said, “Well, then don’t you think you should have a say in how that goes?” She said, “I don’t understand it all and I don’t want to vote for the wrong thing and I just don’t want to be a part of it. If I register, then I have to vote, and then, I’m a part of the whole mess.” I gently reminded her that she already was.

CARYN D. RISWOLD is Associate Professor of Religion, Gender and Women’s Studies at Illinois College, Jacksonville, Illinois.

That was about the end of the discussion that day as we moved on to the lecture topic at hand. The interchange came up, though, one more time on my course evaluations at the end of the semester over two months later. Here was the anonymous comment: “Also, voting is your own personal right a right to participate and not participate so it was very unprofessional when you were annoying the student with her rights.” Annoying the student with her rights. That is a great description of my job, and our vocation.

By starting with the story of Ashley, I want to look first at some of the sources of anxiety and fear in the political arena, and some of the more disturbing consequences of those fears. Then, I will engage some of the resources of our Lutheran tradition in a way that might speak to these collective anxieties. Finally, I will reflect on how our vocation as undergraduate educators, and the vocation of a Lutheran college in general, provides a unique reason for hope in the midst of all of this anxiety and fear.

Our sources of anxiety: Fear of change, mistrust of difference

Back to Ashley: What was she worried about? Actually, it is kind of refreshing that she actually knew that she didn’t know enough to make a good decision, and in resisting the responsibility that comes with voting, she gets it in a fundamental way. There *is* a lot at stake in our political arena and with our voting decisions. You *should* know about all of the issues and candidates in depth before you step into the voting booth. Ashley was perhaps subconsciously aware of the change of her own responsibilities that came with being of legal age to vote, and she resisted because she was afraid. Rather than just view Ashley as an immature nineteen-year old shirking her democratic duties, I think we can also see her as properly humbled by the power of the democratic process and understandably afraid of change.

Of course, in our jobs as educators, we would like to see our students seizing the opportunity to participate in a democratic election. Everyone should read every candidate’s position statements, learn about and research issues that they care about, and understand the historical context for every decision that they make. This is much of what we do in our professional lives, and these are some of the skills we would like to impart to our students: the ability to think well, to read well, to write and communicate well. But we should not forget about how overwhelming all of that is, and how “annoying” it can be. Like me, a large number of my students are first-generation college students. For these young people especially, all that comes with a college education is simultaneously empowering and shattering. It is empowering insofar as it opens up the world in a way that their

parents may not have experienced. It is shattering because it makes it hard to go home again, because home has changed and so have they. We should not forget that this is a source of anxiety for the particular people with whom we spend our days and lives. The fear of change that comes with a college education and with grown-up responsibilities which we encounter in students like Ashley is natural, and to a degree it is understandable.

Fear of change is one thing that breeds anxiety in the political arena. This is especially true for anyone who has become comfortable with the status quo, or anyone who benefits from the way things currently are. This fear becomes sinister when coupled with another source of anxiety: mistrust of difference. The very thing that Barack Obama embraced to catapult him into the history books as the first African American president, change, is a source of hope for many while it remains a foundational source of anxiety for many of his opponents and detractors. One feared change, though, is very specific. In many ways he is similar to many other presidents: an Ivy league educated lawyer with humble family roots, a strong work ethic, a sharp mind, and a charismatic personality. We have seen all of these things in other presidents. What we have not seen before, literally, is the color of his skin on a president. This is a specific source of anxiety for many of his critics and it gets cloaked in other issues and language: the prejudicial mistrust of black men by the white establishment is the dirty secret of American racism that still pervades our culture and our history. Add to this a generalized Islamophobia and Obama’s Indonesian-schooled youth with a Muslim stepfather, and we end up with legal complaints that he is not a U.S. citizen (despite the release of his birth-certificate in 2008, something never demanded of any another president or candidate), blog and talk-radio rhetoric that refers to him as an “Islamofascist nazi” or “Islamofascist monkey,” campaign rallies last year where enraged audience members shouted “terrorist” and “kill him,” and the widespread use of socialist as a dirty word. All of this is meant to engender fear and hatred among an already anxious population. Fear of change naturally accompanies a young person into college, and often throughout the maturation process, but here in politics when fear of change is coupled with mistrust of difference, it takes on a sinister and destructive form.

Anticipated results of this fear of change and mistrust of difference led to the Department of Homeland Security’s April 7, 2009, report warning about a likely uptick in right-wing extremist violence: “...rightwing extremists may be gaining new recruits by playing on their fears about several emergent issues. The economic downturn and the election of the first African American president present unique drivers for rightwing radicalization and recruitment.” The report indicates that rightwing extremist organizations are stockpiling weapons and using the financial crisis as a specific

tool for anti-Semitic extremist recruitment. It reminds the public of “white supremacists’ longstanding exploitation of social issues such as abortion, inter-racial crimes, and same-sex marriage.” (Office of Intelligence and Analysis). One example cited in the report itself is the April 4, 2009, murders of three Pittsburgh police officers by Richard Poplawski, a white supremacist who talked about the influence of “the Zionists” and spread rumors about a coming gun ban under President Obama. (Anti-Defamation League). The release of the DHS report was roundly slammed, mocked, and chastised by conservative media personalities as ideologically motivated and inaccurate.¹ Within two months, the murders of Dr. George Tiller and Holocaust Museum guard Stephen Johns at the hands of right-wing extremists provided further sobering confirmation of the accuracy of that assessment.

The key motivator identified by the DHS is fear. I want to be very specific and talk about how race- and gender-based fear and hatred play a unique role in these two cases. Racism and sexism are at one level a mistrust of difference along with an insecurity about one’s own identity in relationship to that difference. Racism clearly motivated James Von Brunn to enter the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, with the stated intent to kill as many Jews as possible. He is an outspoken white supremacist and anti-Semite who is also on record as part of the “birther movement” insisting that Barack Obama is not a U.S. citizen (Stein). Racial hatred and fear was also echoed by Poplawski in Pittsburgh who wrote about promoting a new “racial awareness” among the young white population (Anti-Defamation League).

Sexism motivated Scott Roeder insofar as he bought into and repeated the rhetoric that Tiller’s Women’s Health Care Services clinic in Kansas City was a “death camp” rather than a medical services provider for women in extremely dire circumstances with no good options left to them (Fitzpatrick). At one level, the anti-choice movement capitalizes on a fundamental mistrust of women’s moral discernment and agency. The belief carried to a violent extreme by Roeder and others is that women, along with their families, doctors, and spiritual advisors, cannot be trusted to make difficult decisions, and that they need to be protected from doctors like Tiller. To that end, it is easy to find several websites that show detailed pictures of Tiller’s now-closed clinic from every angle to show its location and entrances, with its address and phone number, photographs of employees’ vehicles and their home addresses, and most importantly, chilling photographs of “churches that defend and comfort Tiller,” one of which is Reformation Lutheran Church in Kansas City where he was finally gunned down while ushering on a Sunday morning.

These cases of extremist violence occur when a fear of change coupled with a mistrust of difference take root in unstable and mentally ill people. While they are relatively rare, they are the red

flags that signal something gone very wrong in our culture, with our political discourse, demanding our attention. Poplawski, Von Brunn, and Roeder are terrifying examples of some of the consequences of fear-based divisions that infect our political arena. The confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor made plain the ways that racism and sexism infect political discourse in a less extreme but equally infuriating way. The line of questioning for those senators who opposed her nomination focused primarily not on her seventeen years of cases, written opinions, and summary judgments. The questions focused on identity politics, especially race and gender, highlighting the implications of the first Latina Supreme Court nominee. Eugene Robinson wrote in *The Washington Post* that “Republicans’ outrage, both real and feigned, at Sotomayor’s musings about how her identity as a ‘wise Latina’ might affect her judicial decisions is based on a flawed assumption: that whiteness and maleness are not themselves facets of a distinct identity.” One senator in particular repeatedly used terms like “classic American” and “objective view” of the law to describe what Sotomayor did not have. In context, these terms are coded references to the presumed white male neutrality that Robinson names.

What the players in all of these examples (my student Ashley, rightwing extremist violence, and the Sotomayor hearings) share is a fear of change and a real sense that there is a lot at stake in our public and political discourse. I would like to suggest that we have before us a tradition and a vocation that helps us respond to young people like Ashley, and delegitimize divisive racist and sexist rhetoric that serves in part to justify violence and hatred that fuels extremists like Poplawski, Von Brunn, and Roeder.

Our Lutheran tradition

Engaging the Lutheran tradition is one way to begin crawling out of the morass of anxiety and fear that affects us all in this age of ideological partisanship. It was not an accident that Barack Obama’s “hope” theme resonated widely across the country last fall, as we watched the markets collapse, saw the foreclosure signs in our neighborhoods, and heard family members’ stories of losing their jobs. Anxiety and fear were pervasive, and hope was an essential antidote. “Anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language” existed for the Colossians, and they exist for Americans engaging in politics. Martin Luther understood that anxiety and fear were characteristic of the human condition, and he experienced those things himself very keenly. The hope which brings people out of this morass had one clear source for both of these authors: God.

A major source of Luther’s anxiety was uncertainty about salvation, a fear that was calmed with his renewed look at justification by grace through faith, something also claimed in the Colossians text. Luther knew deeply and personally that he was

not good enough and could not do enough to earn God's favor. He was therefore liberated in his reading of Romans in particular and Paul's discussion in chapter three of

the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. (Rom. 3:22-25).

All have sinned. All fall short. Grace is a gift. I can almost hear Luther breathing a sigh of relief at really and finally understanding this.

With justification by grace through faith in Christ as a core concept, Luther discussed throughout his life's work the various ways in which the human person is therefore in relationship. Gerhard Ebeling, a Lutheran theologian writing in the 1950s, described four key ways that the human being is in relationship, using Luther's Latin term *coram*. I like the use of this term because it suggests an intimate relationality that extends in many directions. It is a Latin adverb (typically translated into German as "vor," and English as "before") that can be translated in several ways: in the presence of, before the eyes of, in the face of, openly, face to face, present, in person, personally. Those things which are before my face are things with which I am in relation.

“... it suggest an intimate relationality that extends in many directions.”

For Luther, Ebeling pointed out, human beings live first and always in relationship to God, *coram Deo*. This was the foundational source of hope for all of Luther's theology. While this relationship is most important and pervasive, Luther also took seriously the fact that human beings live *coram mundo* (in relationship to the world.) Many scholars and theologians have discussed at length his development of a “two kingdoms” theology, wherein human beings have dual citizenship in the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. The kingdom of this world as created and ordained by God is a key location for carrying out God's work. Human beings come to know what this work is because they live *coram meipso* (in relationship to myself). This is a more subtle discussion of personal existence, what Ebeling calls “existence in my own sight ... before myself” (199). Finally, Luther explores human life *coram hominibus* (in relationship to other people) as a

particular locus of relation and responsibility. I have explored two aspects of this relationality elsewhere, so here I want to mine his ideas about human life *coram hominibus* as a particular source of hope for our age of anxiety and fear (see Riswold, *Coram Deo* and “*Coram Mundo*”).

We first gain a little more insight into Luther's understanding of anxiety and fear when hearing his consideration of human life before the fall. In his commentary on Gen. 1:26, he says:

Therefore the image of God, according to which Adam was created, was something far more distinguished and excellent ... Both his inner and outer sensations were all of the purest kind. His intellect was the clearest, his memory was the best, and his will was the most straightforward—all in the most beautiful tranquillity of mind, without any fear of death and without any anxiety. (62)

Beautiful tranquility, without fear and anxiety. Whether or not this is the most adequate reading of the Genesis text, this is what Luther understands as human life *coram Deo* without the stain of sin and consequences of the fall: it is “freedom from fear.” He clearly notes that we have no real experience of this now, and in fact “we continually experience the opposite” (63). For Luther, the fall brought us the fear of danger and death with which we all live. Perhaps this is the ultimate fear of change.

When Luther talked about human beings *coram hominibus*, in relationship to other people, some of the more significant statements came in his 1520 treatise on “The Freedom of a Christian.” It is here where he expands on how a Christian is freed from working to earn salvation, therefore freed to serve the neighbor as a manifestation of Christ in the world. Thus, mutual service and care ideally characterize the relationships of Christian people in community. Ebeling describes “the freedom which a Christian has through faith is freedom to render the service of love. And it is only the service of love if it is carried out in freedom.” (212) Additionally, he quotes Luther's reflections on Matt. 5:38, that the Christian is “bound in his life to another person, whom he has below or above him, or even beside him, as lord, lady, wife, child, neighbour, etc., such that one has the obligation to defend, protect and guard the other when one can.” (206) This is what an obligation to mutual service looks like in this world, where each person has a role to play and a duty to carry out in relationship to other people.

A Lutheran ethic has therefore often been described as “faith active in love,” despite Luther's well-known criticisms of the Epistle of James and its claim in the second chapter that “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” (Jas. 2:17). Understanding that human life is both *coram Deo* and *coram hominibus* is the key to maintaining justification by faith (not works) as well as a

robust ethic of servant love. Brian Gerrish uses the twofold relationality to situate the proper place of human work in the world: “before God moral attainment, being always tainted with the disease of self-will, counts for nothing. Here a man is justified only by the righteousness of Christ, appropriated through faith, and the works of the law have no place.” (119). He restates the foundational nature of justification by faith: *coram Deo*, works have no merit or meaning. And he goes on:

In the Earthly Kingdom, on the other hand, as we face our neighbour, we do stand under the imperative of the law. For our faith does not benefit our neighbour; he needs our works of love. Indeed Luther is quite willing to assert that, before our fellow men, we should seek to be justified by our *works* ... (119).

He thus claims the place of service and work: *coram hominibus*, we are obliged to incarnate the love of God and live out of the righteousness made possible through Christ.

Alister McGrath similarly uses these two relationships to help his exposition of Luther’s ideas on righteousness and the value of faith: “viewed *coram hominibus*, it [faith] cannot [have value], as the inherent value of faith is so little; viewed *coram Deo*, however, it has a much greater contracted value.” (118) In relationship to God, what matters is faith because of the covenantal and sacramental relationship between God and human beings. In relationship to other people, what matters is what we do with and for them. Both are important. One gift of Luther’s idea about human life *coram hominibus* is the way in which it insists that we speak of an obligation to serve the other, and a humility in which we grasp that are all equally wretched *coram Deo*.

This manifold relationality, with its mutual accountability and communal humility are resources from the Lutheran tradition which we can use to respond to and understand fear of change and a mistrust of difference. Rather than be captive to fear and mistrust, we are all freed by the relationships that characterize our lives. Grounded in human life *coram Deo* which properly humbles all persons in relationship to a transcendent source of truth, justice, and compassion, we are called to live human life *coram hominibus* in which we are called to serve each other in proclaiming that truth, seeking out justice, and living with compassion.

Our vocation: Annoying students with their rights

Our final task is to consider more concretely how our vocation as educators in this tradition is a source of hope in an ideologically divided and dangerous time. This is how Luther’s discussion of the role of our work in the world is most relevant. We have already seen how he understands our work in this world as morally significant and important *coram hominibus*. Gustaf Wingren spends a good

amount of time in his discussion of Luther’s thoughts on vocation describing “co-operation” and how “Luther conceives of man as a ‘fellow-worker’ with God.” Specifically, Wingren says that “co-operation takes place in vocation, which belongs on earth, not in heaven; it is pointed toward one’s neighbor, not toward God. Man’s deeds and work have a real function to fill in civil and social relationships.” (124) Again, having sorted out the difference of human life *coram Deo* and *coram hominibus*, we see how the work and service that we do pointed toward our neighbor matters. A more modern construction of this idea is Lutheran pastor and theologian Philip Hefner’s idea of human beings as created co-creators. Hefner preserves a robust understanding of our fundamental created nature, while detailing how we work throughout our lives to bring about a world which God envisions (27-39). Human life *coram hominibus* is where we live our lives, do our work, and enact that which God purposes.

“We want people to be awake.”

Our work in this world is undergraduate education, so it is perhaps clear how this calling provides hope for the reality that my student Ashley voiced. When the overwhelming responsibility of civic participation and adulthood seizes young people, we respond by guiding, teaching, and empowering them to think carefully and decide well. Wingren even states in a footnote that “when the work of vocation is carried out, the neighbor is profited.” (125n) If we do our work well, our neighbors will benefit. In this vocation, our neighbor is our student. Mary Rose O’Reilly makes a key connection in her reflections on the power of education: “finding voice—let’s be clear—is a political act. It defines a moment of presence, of being awake; and it involves not only self-understanding, but the ability to transmit that self-understanding to others.” (58) Isn’t this what we want for our students? Isn’t this at the heart of institutional mission statements’ language about mind and character, leadership and service? We want people to be awake. We want them to have a self-understanding and we want them to be able to communicate and act on that self-understanding. We want to annoy students with their right to a voice.

But we also do that within a tradition that properly limits and guides our work. Because James Von Brunn was awake, and he had a voice that we all have now heard. O’Reilly also describes this “finding voice” process as necessarily “a socially-responsible political act.” (62) Luther reminds us that our lives *coram hominibus* are simultaneously *coram Deo*, and that perhaps what it means

to be socially responsible is to be accountable both to the neighbor and to God. Because of this, I as a professor have to remember that shattering assumptions and challenging claims made by students can be threatening. I have to do it with compassion and attention. Because of the context of the Lutheran tradition, we can understand that our work in the world should benefit our neighbor, not destroy her. The relationship with God serves as a foundational context for our actions and our institutions. This is one thing that holds our actions in check, and holds us accountable not only to one another but to a transcendent source of truth, justice, and compassion.

If violent extremism is the red-flag that something is wrong with our culture and our politically charged public arena, then our vocation to educate the mind and form the heart and character is one part of the antidote of hope that we need. By serving our students as responsible and effective educators, we serve the world into which they are called to live their own vocations. In 2007, Bishop Mark Hanson described two purposes of the colleges and universities of the ELCA: to “model moral deliberation” and “prepare students for engagement in the world.” If we do this well, we will in fact help Ashley figure out how to responsibly participate in the democratic process that governs her life, and we will contribute to delegitimizing radical extremism and violence by educating activists, leaders, and educators of the future.

The reason for our hope in the face of such despair and tragedy is the understanding that human life is lived both *coram Deo* and *coram hominibus*. We have a source for our vocation, and a neighbor to whom we are accountable. The vocation that we share takes place at the intersections of many relationships, and the tradition that informs us frames our responses to the world.

I conclude with the words of bell hooks, who describes the complexity of our work today:

The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (207)

Endnote

1. It was also pointed out that the **Department** released a report on left-wing extremists on January 26, 2009. This report spoke of animal rights and environmental activists expanding cyber-attacks and computer system hacking to disrupt the operations and economic

viability of specific industries. The unfurling of a banner by Greenpeace Activists on Mount Rushmore in July 2009 is an example of this kind of activity. See: “Leftwing Extremists Likely to Increase Use of Cyber Attacks over the Coming Decade.” Online: <<http://www.docstoc.com/docs/5601713/Leftwing-Extremist-Threat>>

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