

2015

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Samuel Torvend

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Torvend, Samuel (2015) "'Greed is an Unbelieving Scoundrel": The Common Good as Commitment to Social Justice," *Intersections*: Vol. 2015: No. 42, Article 6.

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SAMUEL TORVEND

“Greed is an Unbelieving Scoundrel”: The Common Good as Commitment to Social Justice

I regularly teach a course entitled Lutheran Heritage, and now teach this course with a growing number of students who have little knowledge of or experience with Christianity, much less its Lutheran form. For me, there is something quite invigorating about all this as I lead students into what is for many of them a foreign territory. That being said, I enjoy introducing students to the *academic study* of the Lutheran tradition, a form of teaching appropriate and needed in a university that welcomes students from many countries, ethnicities, races, religious backgrounds and no religious tradition.

While we spend a good amount of time studying the context in which the Lutheran reform movement emerged as well as the prominent reforming insights of Luther and his colleagues at the University of Wittenberg, I also want my students to recognize that a particular insight or theological claim frequently, if not always, possesses a contemporary ecological, economic, political, or social consequence. For instance, the core Lutheran teaching on justification by grace alone—*sola gratia*—ruled out any human claim to inherited or achieved privilege in the eyes of God. This reforming conviction held that *prior* to one’s ability to make a decision for God or work diligently to enter into a good relationship with God or to merit divine favor based on one’s gender, race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status, God has already decided in

favor of humanity. If, as Luther suggested, God’s judgment is always a merciful one made tangible in the baptism of infants or adults, these newly Christian persons are free to live their lives in this world freed from anxiety about their eternal destiny (see Luther “Two Kinds”).

Of course, the assumption here is that one is anxious about one’s relationship with God and one’s eternal destiny—a condition or concern not found in all forms of Christianity and in other world religions. At the same time, one’s freedom from “anxious religion,” freedom from religion as conformity to rules and regulations, bears responsibility, holds forth an ethic of care for others in this world. That is, the justice and mercy of God are to be embodied by humans in a world marked by injustice and suffering (see Luther, “Freedom”). Such ethical responsibility, however, is always—*always*—exercised within the interwoven ecological, economic, political, and social fabric of life, never apart from it. Consequently, one is called to pay attention to this interwoven fabric of life that so significantly shapes human commitments and affections.



Samuel Torvend in the University Chair in Lutheran Studies at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington.

Troubling Markers in the United States

My Lutheran Heritage students—from Canada, China, Denmark, Kenya, and Norway, but mostly from the United States—are surprised to learn that the interwoven fabric of life in United States society does not necessarily match the nation's promise of life and freedom and the pursuit of happiness.

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For instance, the 2013 United Nations report on the well-being of children in 35 highly developed countries ranks the United States at 34, just above Romania (Fisher). Indeed, 1 of every 5 American children lives in poverty and thus suffers with food insecurity on a regular basis ("Child Food Insecurity"). As you might well imagine, the absence of regular and appropriate nutrition readily and negatively affects a child's neurological and physical development, his or her ability to learn in school, and the capacity to form healthy relationships with others. The report also notes that income inequality is a major contributor to this dismal ranking of the United States. The children of the prosperous few benefit while the many increasingly poor (now drawn from the ranks of the middle class) languish.

Much has been made in the news of the Affordable Health Care Act, some referring to its passage in Congress and its recent affirmation by the nation's Supreme Court as one of President Obama's major legacies. I do not want to diminish the good such an act has already engendered; nor do I want to give it a glowing endorsement. I do know that my students are surprised if not disbelieving when they read that the United States health care system is ranked *last* of 11 developed nations studied in 2013-2014 by the World Health Organization, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the Commonwealth Fund ("Mirror"). While the United

States healthcare system is the most expensive in the world and while the reputation of its research and training is stellar, the *quality* of healthcare provision, the *efficiency* of the healthcare industry in providing healthcare, and the measure of *equity* provided for all Americans merits the lowest rating when compared to Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Compared to these other 10 countries, the most troubling indication concerns the difficulty in United States healthcare of achieving better health outcomes. To my professional colleagues in Brazil, Germany, Italy, and Norway, it is remarkable, indeed astonishing, that this nation holds the highest level of obesity and the highest level of food waste in the world.

While studying contemporary Lutheran commitments to the poor and homeless, my students also read a number of articles by leaders in Lutheran political theology, or what is frequently referred to as liberation theology, which focuses on liberation of the impoverished and the homeless from the ecological, economic, political, and social conditions that keep them in perpetual poverty and thus diminish or degrade their God-given dignity and ability to flourish in society.¹ Last Spring, they had also talked with Helen McGovern-Pilant, the executive director of Emergency Food Network, and discussed the alarming increase in hunger and homelessness in the region. In a moment of utter exasperation, a Danish student raised her hand and said: "I grew up in a society where it is normal to help other people, where providing for such basic things as housing and food through higher taxes is accepted. Here is the one thing I have learned living in this country for the past four years: *you go it on your own and you just hope you survive.*"

The student's frustration was prompted not only by listening to a speaker but also by studying the 2014 Department of Housing and Urban Development report on the incidence of homelessness in the United States, a report that notes considerable growth in homelessness among children and teenagers. Indeed, the newspaper of the city in which I live and work only recently profiled the growing number of homeless elementary and middle school students in our *county* who must do their homework in a car that serves as home, a temporary shelter, or in a tent underneath a freeway (Schrader). In the United States, 1 out of every 30 children will experience homelessness in

this year alone, that is, close to 2.5 million children. By way of contrast, Denmark has counted its homeless population in the 20s and 30s. Yes, that's 20 to 30 individuals.

Aren't Charity and Service-Learning Enough?

While teaching at Brooklyn College and then Brandeis University, the developmental psychologist, Abraham Maslow, published "A Theory of Human Motivation" (1943) and *Motivation and Personality* (1954) in which he claimed that human development is rooted in and begins with a person's physiological needs and the ability to meet them. These needs are the physical requirements for human survival. They include (but are not limited to) fresh air to breathe, clean water to drink, adequate and nourishing food to eat, clothing appropriate to one's climate, and shelter for protection from the elements. To these he added the need for physical security and access to basic forms of healthcare. Maslow claimed that only after these basic needs are met and met consistently throughout life, does it become possible for human beings to consider other integral dimensions of human life: the yearning for love and belonging; a sense of meaning and purpose; and the capacity for self-transcendence, that is, the ability to recognize and respond to the needs of others, to see beyond the self to others as living subjects in the world and to join them in preparing and caring for a world in which subsequent generations will live.

I bring your attention to Maslow and his grounding of human development in fundamental physiological needs because it is helpful to consider the meaning of "the common good" in terms more concrete than abstract, more tangible than speculative. I doubt there are many who would say, at least publicly, that they oppose the common good (especially if it can mean *anything*). Indeed, many of our schools (or at least their websites) speak glowingly of "care for other people and their communities" (Pacific Lutheran), "community engagement" (St. Olaf), "education for the common good" (Gustavus Adolphus), "making a difference in communities" (Concordia), and "transforming communities and the world" (California Lutheran).

But I wonder whether professed care for other people and their communities, for community engagement, for

making a difference, and for transforming the world actually draw our students, staff, faculty, and trustees to human and ecological suffering, to the growing numbers in this society who do not breathe fresh air, have little clean water, survive with insufficient food, are homeless, worry about their safety, and receive inadequate healthcare. Or say it this way: support or care for the common good might entail the difficult labor to ensure that all persons who live in this land enjoy fresh air, sufficient food, clean water, clothing, shelter, and basic healthcare. And yet, as my students have discovered and as many of us know, there is a terrible discrepancy between rhetoric and reality. There is a great chasm, as Jesus indicates in the Gospel of Luke, between the rich man dressed in fine clothing who eats sumptuously every day and the poor man Lazarus who longs to satisfy his hunger with what falls from the rich man's table (Luke 16:19-21).

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In that school of spirituality known as Lutheran Pietism, a spirituality that has had considerable influence in the Upper Midwest and the Pacific Northwest and thus in a good number of our schools, the ethic of care for others and their communities has been expressed largely, though not exclusively, through charitable giving and works of mercy (see Gritsch). Such charitable work continues to do enormous good, an exemplary form of faith active in love. Indeed, Lutheran social service commitments

in the United States consistently outweigh those of other religious and humanitarian groups.

But here is the challenge: charitable work and its academic corollaries in college course offerings, in service learning and “community engagement,” may well respond to social symptoms (i.e., feed the hungry, visit the sick, build the shelter, tutor the child, run the relay) and yet never discern the economic, political, or social causes that produce such symptoms. Indeed, the remarkable presence of the academy and the church in public life, through acts of social service, can actually diminish the urgent need to ask why such service is needed in the first place. Asking questions about root causes moves us from charitable giving or actions into the far more challenging pursuit of social justice, of asking how the economic, political, and social fabric of our common life subverts the common good. Thus, to return to the Maslovian framework, we might ask:

- Who benefits from maintaining polluted air?
- Whose profit margin is served by feeding poor and middle class school children the worst possible diet in public school cafeterias?
- Why should water, what the Lutheran tradition claims is God’s free gift to all creatures, be privatized and controlled by companies whose one goal is stockholder happiness?
- Why is it that cities or state governments are able to use citizen taxes to fund the construction of shiny new sport arenas but somehow cannot muster the funds to build adequate and secure housing for homeless children and their single parents?
- Or finally: Who benefits—*who benefits*—from the keeping the hungry poor both hungry and poor? (Because, believe me, someone or some group always benefits from having a class of poor, hungry, and dependent people.)

Lutheran Education and the Promotion of Social Justice

There are a variety of ways in which we can discuss what “the common good” means or might mean, from the most abstract and ambiguous to the most concrete and tangible. To use the phrase from one of our schools, “education for

the common good” might well entail the difficult labor to ensure that all who live in this land, not just a majority of persons, enjoy fresh air, sufficient food, clean water, adequate clothing, protective shelter, and access to healthcare—for without these, the ability to discover and live a life of meaning and purpose is seriously inhibited if not doomed. In other words, education for the common good might entail something more than (as some of our schools suggest) “becoming a leader,” “a resourceful person in a complex world,” or “discovering one’s passion.”

“The first gift of Lutheran education is the ability to question the status quo, to call into question what you and I, our colleagues, friends, and families, our economic, political, religious, and social leaders may think is perfectly normal.”

One of my colleagues at Pacific Lutheran University claims that what academics are trained to do is argue in a civil manner with each other. Certainly, one of the primary and essential functions of any university or college is the advancement of knowledge that takes place through research, experimentation, publishing, presenting, and arguing with others. I suggest, however, that the first gift of Lutheran education is not so much argument as the ability to question the status quo, to call into question what you and I, our colleagues, friends, and families, our economic, political, religious, and social leaders may think is perfectly normal. This particular ability marks the DNA of Lutheran education in light of the founder’s charisma, that is, Martin Luther’s need to question presumptions of his own place and time. Luther questioned the method of education which had dominated the universities for the previous 300 years. He questioned the spiritual economy that favored the wealthy and disenfranchised the many poor. He questioned the time-honored authority of one man who lived in Rome. He questioned the bankers and lobbyists who controlled Germany’s early modern economy yet steadfastly resisted any form of government regulation. Of course, if you, dear reader, are generally satisfied with the ecological, economic, political, and social fabric within which we live

(oh, you know, maybe with some tweaking here and there), then rigorous questioning of the status quo may not be your cup of tea. After all, those who raise troubling questions frequently find themselves pushed to the margin or getting in trouble. You think you're qualified for and want that upward career move in the great honeycomb of academe? Then play it safe and leave the tough questioning to others.

It should also be of interest that the early Lutheran reform project was grounded in a deeply *communal ethos*. While Luther is frequently singled out as the great German hero (as he is in the decade leading to the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran reform), or as the great pastoral theologian who single-handedly took on the mighty edifice and power of the late medieval church, or as the voice of the individual's conscience (a view so beloved of American individualists and libertarians), he did not think, write, or act alone. Rather, Luther was an active member of that medieval guild we call the *magisterium*—the company of teachers or professoriate who worked together to advance the reform of church and society. It was this group of faculty, students, church, and civic leaders who, together, proposed social reforms that affected if not reshaped communal life, the common good. Let me point out two of these reforms.

Commitments to Literacy

The core Lutheran teaching on scripture alone—*sola scriptura*—led to the translation of the Bible from Latin into German, the language of the people. Since the impulse for reform was first discovered by Wittenberg scholars in the New Testament writings of Paul, the Bible as a charter for ongoing reform would need to be given to the community as a whole, rather than controlled by those few versed in Latin. And yet with the German illiteracy rate at 80-90 percent in the sixteenth century, what good could the translation effect if only a few could read it? Thus, early Lutheran commitments to universal literacy, expressed in the reform of education, emerged. Such educational reforms now welcomed girls as well as boys, and children from all socio-economic classes, and funded school by civic taxes—all of which was unheard of in previous human history. What we experience today as public education had its roots in this reforming insight and social project. It was, to say the least, an astonishing achievement given the amount of resistance from working parents who saw no

need to educate their domestic labor force (their children), as well as the resistance from wealthy merchants and landed nobility who saw no need to support the poor in education (Luther, "To the Councilmen").

Responsibility for Social Welfare

The early Lutheran reformers asked for the suppression of monastic and mendicant life because, in their eyes, it was wrongly viewed as a form of Christian faith and life far superior to that of the baptized lay person who lived in the world. But with that suppression, the thousand-year network of social welfare, sustained by monastic and mendicant communities, was dismantled in one fell swoop. Thus, there emerged from parishes and towns that had accepted the "evangelical" or Lutheran reforms a body of legislation called the "church order," which transferred responsibility for social welfare to city councils and congregations. This was both a religious and a civic reform that was funded by taxes, directed by laypersons, and instituted—please note—for the homeless, the hungry, the impoverished, the unemployed, the elderly, and for the maintenance of the newly created schools open to all

"The wealthy members of these towns saw little reason, religious or humanitarian, to pay the tax, make a donation, or establish funds to assist their fellow citizens. In despair, Luther wrote, 'Greed is a disobedient and unbelieving scoundrel, a ravenous consumption of what rightly belongs to all.'"

children in city or rural town. Again, there was resistance to this project in support of the common good. The wealthy members of these towns saw little reason, religious or humanitarian, to pay the tax, make a donation, or establish funds to assist their fellow citizens. In despair, Luther wrote, "Greed is a disobedient and unbelieving scoundrel, a ravenous consumption of what rightly belongs to all" (Luther, "Preface" 170).

What he did not suggest was the way in which a society or national culture, can shape, often unconsciously, the commitments and affections of its citizens.

When Educational Mission and Cultural Formation are At Odds

At the beginning of each school year at Pacific Lutheran, the incoming class of first year students and transfer students march from the upper campus to the large auditorium on lower campus where they will be welcomed by the university president at the opening convocation. Robed in splendid academic regalia, the university faculty process ahead of the students and then form, on both sides of the walkway, a living border of professors who clap their hands in greeting as the students process into the auditorium. As these new students walk by me, I find myself hoping that they will do well at our university, persist in their studies, discover interests and abilities previously unknown to them, learn to cherish the life of the mind, and find persons who will become life-long friends.

"I sometimes wonder if the vocation of a Lutheran college has become the calling to serve as the unwitting accomplice in such cultural formation."

I also recognize this: that they, and you, and I have been formed in a culture that has tutored them and us in a profound if not toxic individualism and its narcissistic tendencies; that has catechized them and us to be consumers whose choices are shaped unconsciously by a media that serves the interests of someone else's profit; that has educated them and us in disposability rather than conservation; that has persuaded them that the value of a college education is measured solely by job security and financial well-being; and, finally, that has suggested to them and us that successful assimilation into this culture can reap considerable benefits.²

I sometimes wonder if the vocation of a Lutheran college has become the calling to serve as the unwitting

accomplice in such cultural formation. That is, I have begun to think that the vocation of a Lutheran college has become the calling to serve as the unwitting accomplice in the acceptance of the status quo in which, ironically, we hope our students might discover their passion, their calling, their deep commitments.

And if this is so, how easy it will be to snuff out and smother that first gift of Lutheran education—the capacity to ask the deeply troubling question of what you and I, our disciplines, our expertise, or our trustees might take for granted, consider normal, even sacrosanct. Indeed, I wonder if it really is helpful to link the discernment of vocation, of one's commitments in life, with "making a difference" or meeting the world's great—yet rarely defined—need. After all, drug lords make a difference in their neighborhoods and the world certainly needs much more fossil fuel to burn—right?

Alternatively, is not the vocation of a Lutheran college to lead faculty, staff, students, and trustees to engage ecological and human suffering with which, as Luther says, the world is filled to overflowing? Is it not to do this challenging work together rather than alone? Is it not to ask why such suffering exists in the first place, and to see our many schools as centers of social reform, as places dedicated to the pursuit of social justice, a pursuit animated by intellectual rigor and that serves the common good?

A retired Lutheran bishop and former regent of Pacific Lutheran once told me that he thought our school did a fine job of "preparing students to fit into American society as leaders in their fields." I think he considered his comment a compliment. I, however, received it as a terrible indictment—an indictment of a school that looked little different from any other private college, albeit tinged by the rhetoric of "service" and "care" and "vocation." After all, asking supposedly inappropriate questions of the status quo, of what most of us consider normal and even helpful, can get you in trouble. Asking, in a wealthy nation, why there is unrelieved suffering within the ecological, economic, political, and social fabric, can be disturbing to some if not many. Wouldn't it be easier, so much easier, if you and I simply helped our students discern vocation as commitment to one's individual passion?

But, then again, no one has ever been crucified for being nice, for fitting in, for pursuing one's private dream. And no one has ever been raised from the dead to return to the way things have always been.

Endnotes

1. Examples include: Walter Aumann, *Luther and Liberation: A Latin American Perspective*, Fortress, 2013; Paul Chung, Ulrich Duchrow, Craig Nesson, *Liberating Lutheran Theology: Freedom for Justice and Solidarity in a Global Context*, Fortress, 2011; Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*, Fortress, 2013.

2. Concerning intentionality in cultural formation, see Michael Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture*, Paulist, 1988; John Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Culture: A Spirituality of Cultural Resistance*, 25th anniversary edition, Orbis, 2006; Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, Fortress, 1997; Samuel Torvend, "Lutheran Colleges and Social Reform," in *The Cresset* (2006), accessed 1 November, 2015, http://thecresset.org/2006/Torvend_L2006.html

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