

1998

You Don't Seem Angry: Methodological Confessions of a Lutheran Lay-Woman

L. DeAne Lagerquist

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

Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Lagerquist, L. DeAne (1998) "You Don't Seem Angry: Methodological Confessions of a Lutheran Lay-Woman," *Intersections*: Vol. 1998: No. 5, Article 4.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol1998/iss5/4>

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.

YOU DON'T SEEM ANGRY: METHODOLOGICAL CONFESSIONS OF A LUTHERAN LAY-WOMAN

L. DeAne Lagerquist

Having just read my M.A. thesis study of four female abolitionists, a colleague puzzled, "You don't seem angry." This was in 1981. Women's history was not at its beginnings, but it wasn't mature either. The ERA's ratification was still a possibility so the term post-feminist was still in the future and there wasn't much talk of backlash. In my seminary classes there were more women than before, but still we were unusual enough to be noticed. I had been working as a volunteer advocate at a battered women's shelter. In most places some women were angry and most had legitimate reasons to be at least a bit annoyed with society or people, institutions or the past. Learning to acknowledge and to express anger went contrary to the ideals for feminine behavior many women had learned. Nonetheless, anger was present in scholarly as well as popular writing, discussion and activity.

Why didn't I seem angry as I recounted the lives of four extraordinary women whose lives were devoted to addressing the evil of slavery? Why didn't I sound angry as I considered how their own lives echoed the limitations of slavery? Why wasn't I angry as I realized that their lives were less than they might have been and that what they were had been ignored for so long? At the time I had a quick response. I noted that positive changes had been made. I suggested that the historian's evaluation must look both to what has been achieved and to what is left to be done. Those were legitimate and even handed responses to my colleague's question. At the time I was satisfied with them. I didn't stop to ask if I really was angry without being able for various reasons to express that anger.

A Narrative Account of the Emergence of My Method

Now, a decade and a half later, I have a more complex response which must include asking if I am angry. In the

L. DeAne Lagerquist is professor in The Dept. of Religion and Senior Tutor in the Para-College at St. Olaf College. She is the author of *From Our Mothers' Arms: A History of Women in The American Lutheran Church* (Augsburg, 1987).

years between I have earned a Ph.D. from the Divinity School of the University of Chicago; written lots of papers and read scores of books; taught hundreds of students; and engaged in unending conversations with colleagues. I have been angry about what I have read and have not been able to read, about what has been said to me, about not being heard, about things I have been asked to do, not allowed to do, and have done. The fault has been mine as well as others'. But when I listen to myself teach or to my contributions in conference discussions or read my own writing, I note that most of the time (there are exceptions), I still don't seem angry. This is despite my judgment that life, now and in the past, is unfair and my conviction that anger would be an appropriate and justifiable response to that unfairness.

My activities in that fifteen years have also pressed me to be more reflective and self-conscious about my pre-suppositions as well as about my methods of study and interpretation. The University of Chicago is famous (if not infamous) for its obsession with methodological issues. My first quarter there I heard Martin Marty lecture on methods in the study of religion and read all the assigned books. While at Chicago, and forever afterwards if one is a graduate, scholars are expected to be articulate about their method. And feminists make a similar demand for honest disclosure of one's own commitments.

Coming as I do from a confessional tradition both of these expectations seem reasonable, at least on one hand. On that hand, it is good to state clearly what one thinks and to give a good account of one's faith, as Peter exhorts us. There is, however, another hand. (For Lutherans there is always another hand.) On that other hand I have reservations about salvation by methodology. It is possible to get the method clear and still to come to bad or wrong conclusions.

From the professor whose lectures on methods in the study of religion I heard I also heard a maxim that I have often quoted. He said, "If the people you are writing about don't recognize themselves, you've missed them." I understood him to mean that even if your method is impeccable and articulated in heavily footnoted, dense prose, it is possible to

miss the subject of your work. This maxim has served me well. I added it to my earlier observation about evaluating in both directions and willingness to admit change for the better. Perhaps I was on my way to a method, even if it was something of an anti-method.

If I was, it produced the same result. When Marty wrote the preface to my study of women in the American Lutheran churches, he too noted, "this could have been a work inspired by anger. It is not."¹ Unlike my colleague, he was not puzzled by this. Rather he went on to say that the book (my book) "gives signs of care, or love." And he suggested that the love manifests itself in patience. Marty, and anyone else who has spent more than an hour with me, knows that I am not naturally patient. And he admitted as much when he concluded the paragraph, "There must have been good restraint here."

I got a job teaching students, many of them in their first year of college taking a required religion course that did not interest them much. Some of them got excited by the material; others stayed resentful. One of the later type taught me an important lesson about being a teacher. He came close to saying that his poor grade was my fault. He came so close to accusing me that I was compelled to examine myself to see if I was at fault, if he had come near to failing the course because I had failed him. (This sort of confession is also familiar to Lutherans.) Facing it straight on, looking at myself as clearly as I could, I found that I had not been without fault, but neither was my failure the sole cause of his. This was the moment in which I began to conceptualize my task as a teacher on analogy to a gymnastic spotter. The gymnast can be shown the moves and moved through them and caught when falling, but only the gymnast can perform the routine. The spotter can not be the gymnast. So I added to my method, take responsibility for what is yours, give others their own responsibility.

With graduate school friends I took part in an AAR session concerned with using autobiography as a source for studying women's history. I read autobiographies by late 19th and early 20th century American women: Vida Scudder, Dorothy Day, and Pauli Murray. They were leaders in their churches, though in uncharted ways; they stayed in their churches, though in provisional ways. I read some contemporary women's autobiographies and reflections on their own lives. And I wondered a good deal about why I

was so attracted to this sort of material. In the midst of the reading, writing, and giving of the paper I realized that encountering ideas clothed in lives--in the particularities of lives presented by the living thinker of the ideas--both gave me better access to the ideas and imposed an ethical claim on me. Because the ideas were embodied in persons shaped by the world around them I could see where the ideas had come from. Seeing that and knowing the thinkers of the ideas was like being a friend to the authors. Yet another piece of this method emerged.

The participants in that session, the ones who were alive and reading papers, are part of a group of friends with whom I have been having an endless methodological conversation for all these years. It circles around a question about feminist scholarship. Can one be a feminist scholar without studying women? And if so, what would distinguish the scholar/ship as feminist. We have no claim on this question as our own. Our intense and episodic discussion has been informed by others whose work we have read or with whom we have talked. We wrote papers about this issue and gave them together in front of our peers.

In mine I spoke of being both a feminist and a denominational (Lutheran) historian.² I considered the similarities in relationships of author, subjects, and audience. In the least developed section I tried to discern how being Lutheran influenced my historical work. I referred to my sense of vocation and I hinted that my understanding of simul justus et peccator might lay behind my willingness to measure both what has been accomplished and what remains to be done. But that was it. I couldn't see more.

When I wrote that paper, and ever since, I have been chipping away at the task of writing a history of Lutherans in the United States. I'm trying to write it with a different plot, not the one about institutional mergers. This plot is to be about learning to live with diversity, inside and out. I want this to be a book about being Lutheran, not just about the Lutheran churches. And every day that I work on it I know that it won't be all that I want it to be, nor will it be all that many potential readers are hoping for.

In this work I have been aided by teaching undergraduate students, many not Lutheran, few of whom will be historians, and by conversation with several colleagues.

With one of them I have become engaged in a second endless, if episodic, conversation about Lutheran culture. We ask if there can be such a beast. We wonder if it would have to be more than one. We suggest what these Lutheran cultures might have in common. We recall our experiences as Lutherans who have lived both in the Midwest and on the west coast and who study what we are. And we wrote a paper together.³ We really wrote it together. Some of the words are his; some are mine. Some of the ideas are mine; some are his. In some places I can tell which are which because we disagreed or because his language is more sophisticated than mine or because we captured the dialogue. In other places I've forgotten which is which.

In the last months, the connections between being Lutheran and how I do my work have come clearer and I can see more. The connections may still be like trees walking, but I can describe them. Three events have been crucial: the ELCA Convocation of Teaching Theologians, teaching a seminar on Christian Women in the Third World, and the Lutheran Women's Pre-meeting of the AAR/SBL. The topic of the first was pluralism.⁴ In the second I have been challenged by the witness of careful readers of the Bible whose starting points are other than my own. At the third I heard fertile discussion of papers in which Luther is read with unexpected partners, Mary Daly and feminist philosophy of science among them.⁵ One tender fruit is my "sudden" ability to articulate my method, to say why I hope not to seem (or to be) angry.

A More Explicit Discussion of the Method that Emerged

This method grows out of four Lutheran themes as they interact with one another. Although explanation requires that I present them in series and in a specific order, in practice all operate simultaneously and require one another. Together these four inform, and have long before I could say how, my approach to my work as scholar and teacher. Each theme might be taken to imply, or to generate, a step in the process of "interpretation." However, that is not to suggest that the goal of understanding is achieved by mechanically following a method. That would be counter to the first theme. And, in so far as understanding is finally a miracle (a gift of God's grace, though not a saving gift), I'm not at all sure that I'm willing to suggest that any human effort is alone enough for achieving it. Already my confession is

mixed in with my method. The mixture will continue.

I. The first theme is original sin, a doctrine not much in favor among moderns living and thinking in the post-modern age. Neither are Americans in general nor feminists in particular fond of this teaching which posits a profound crack cutting through all of God's good creation. Perhaps one evidence of such sin in me is the tenacity with which I cling to the notion. I hope that I do not do so naively. I am aware of how sin has been characterized in ways that have hurt women and I know that humans have connived ways to point to the speck in one another's eyes without tending to the log in their own. I have done it myself. Nonetheless, I am convinced by several witnesses--the Bible, history, and my own experience among them--that the world is flawed in fundamental ways that humans can not repair by our own effort.

In a larger systematic matrix the move from assertion of original sin is to questions of Christology and soteriology. But this is not a discussion of the whole of Christian teaching, it is a discussion of one Lutheran laywoman's method. And here the implication of recognizing the pervasive stain of original sin is simply the corollary that no interpretation is ever perfect. All interpretations are flawed by our shared state of sinfulness, by the limitations of our specific circumstances, and by the ways that sin inhibits our ability to understand one another.

Thus I assume that no reading of the Bible, or of historical evidence, or of the world today is ever perfect. This assumption requires an unwillingness to accept any particular reading as the final reading. This may seem a likely support for a hermeneutics of suspicion, but I intend rather caution. That is the attitude to be practiced not only toward others' interpretations, but also toward my own which is also flawed by the same forces. Perhaps this might be called the step of caution and humility.

II. The second step comes from Luther's Small Catechism, his explanation of the eighth commandment. This commandment may not spring directly to mind as what it prohibits is not a temptation much on our minds. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Luther does not limit this commandment to plagiarism. In typical fashion he begins his explanation with the injunction to fear and love

God and then turns the negative restriction into a wider ranging exhortation to positive action. That action includes defending the neighbor, speaking well, and explaining the neighbor's actions "in the kindest way."

Now, how can this be? If sin is so pervasive, aren't these actions of my neighbor likely to be ill conceived and perhaps even evil? Indeed. But here we are urged first to depend upon God ourselves and then to see others with divine eyes. It is true that no interpretation is ever perfect and no action or motive is ever pure. Mine included. In the marketplace this leads to the warning, "Let the buyer beware." We expect that the seller will try to cheat us by offering inferior or dangerous goods.

In the marketplace of ideas and interpretation, however there is a second move. After caution and humility must come generosity and forgiveness. These attitudes are no more popular in the academy than in the world at large. Yes, we can find the occasional, exemplary figure who truly is "a gentleman and a scholar." But enough graduate students have been told to go for the jugular when they diagnose weakness in someone else's work, or have left the seminar room bleeding, to convince me that urging generosity and forgiveness will sound odd.

Nonetheless, I am even more convinced that if all our understandings are cracked, we must be kind toward one another and gently bind up what is broken. A method beginning with original sin will recognize that humans (scholars included) come to their work with less than honorable motives and that the work that results is flawed and can be toxic. But if the next step is to obey the eighth commandment, then my method must also allow that the motives are mixed and can include honorable ones. Further it strives to attribute the best possible motives and to find the most true and useful reading of the work. Both imperfection and value are acknowledged in others' work as well as in my own.

III. This mention of others moves to the third theme. In the Catechism the Christian is oriented (that is to say turned) toward the neighbor. So too in On the Freedom of a Christian where Luther relocates good works. They are no longer an effort to attract God's favorable notice, but rather a grateful response to gracious divine action. As response

these works are done in God's presence but directed toward the neighbor in whom one sees Christ and for whom one reflects Christ. Seeing Christ in the neighbor is both a call to attend to the neighbors' needs as to Christ's own and an opportunity to learn of God.

In both ways the neighbor has a claim on me: to humbly offer the best, though imperfect interpretation I can make and to generously receive my neighbor's best, though also imperfect interpretation. The inevitability of imperfection in all interpretations combines with this orientation towards neighbor and allows me to see the necessary, corrective social dimension to interpretation of the Bible, history, or the world around me. Neighborly cooperation in the task will not achieve a perfect interpretation; nor can it overcome the reality of sin. But the exhortation to see Christ in my neighbor, to attend to my neighbor's needs, to be myself a "little Christ" compels me to try to overcome the distortions that sin creates between us and to work together for a more adequate, though still imperfect, interpretation.

IV. Then comes the question, what shall I (or now we) do with this work of the best, but still flawed, interpretation we can make together? The fourth theme is vocation--the call God makes to me to use what I have been given for the benefit of others. Perhaps this is merely re-sounding the third theme, the turn toward neighbor. Certainly it is the neighbor to whose benefit my gifts are to be used. Still, I think that there is more to be said about interpretation as a specific articulation of the common call to discipleship.

To place interpretation in the frame of calling is to locate authority with God in whose work I am delegated to participate. I am responsible in my work not only to my inner self, or even to my human community, but also to the one who is Truth. Both of these consequences increase the weight of the task and could prompt me to flee with Jonah onto a boat heading away from Nineveh. I am enabled to stay on shore when I recall that the calling comes after divine grace, not before. Further the calling that comes with, but after, grace is far larger and more encompassing than reading texts and trying to make sense of them. The fearsomeness of the task of interpretation is reduced when I recognize that there is other work to be done. Feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and visiting the lonely ground this heady, ephemeral work in embodied and immediate work.

This is all the work of discipleship, of following after Jesus to the places where he intends to go. And it is all done in the odd time described as already, but not yet, a time of incompleteness and imperfection longing for that which is not yet but will be.

Applying This Method

The true test of any method is in its application to specific cases. And mine is no exception. Even to write abstractly about how it might be applied is a step away from what needs to be done. Nonetheless, something must be said about how it might be done. I think that this simple method can be applied in almost any circumstance from reading a text to conducting a class. It works with the biblical texts, with theology, and with historical documents. No doubt its most vulnerable spots are precisely in its confessional grounding. I can not say if it will serve as well without that rootage.

I do know that these themes and their related steps undergird my approach to history and inform my understanding of Lutheran higher education. When I read about the past and humans in it I assume that they were flawed in common human ways and in ways specific to their time and place. I expect that their own testimony about their actions and thoughts are limited by those flaws and that my reading of their testimony is flawed in similar ways. I must come to them, their times, and their lives with caution and humility.

On the other hand, if I am to read, think, and write I can not be paralyzed by suspicions. Rather I resolve to not bear false witness against these folks, most of them dead and thus intensely vulnerable to the power of my interpretation. I look for their best hopes, their best actions. I allow them the limits of their circumstances and take account of those as I consider that for which they can be held responsible. I attempt to be generous and forgiving about what they did wrong so that I don't miss what they did right.

If I am able to see both their imperfections and their contributions, I am able to learn from and with them. Building on their work, I endeavor to move a bit closer to a more adequate understanding of this world we share, even across the barriers of time. And I do this not solely for my personal pleasure or professional advancement. I am

responsible in my work to God who is the source of life and is beyond time. What I learn must be of use to my neighbor.

The convictions behind this method, which I articulate in the language of four Lutheran themes, also stand behind my work as a teacher in a college associated with a Lutheran church. I find that a profound notion of the pervasiveness and depth of original sin is a realistic beginning for participation in any institution and especially for a college where our temptations are so often concerned with self-promotion or protection. Moreover, to be engaged in education requires that one regard the world and one's students as lacking in some way. If they were not, what is the job about? But I must not face colleagues or students self-righteously, without an equal sense of the depth of my own fatal flaw. The task of education begins with caution and humility.⁶

On the other hand, if I am to learn and to teach I can not be overcome with despair. Rather I resolve to not bear false witness against colleagues, or students, or the people we study together. We are all alike in that we are imperfect and we need one another's generosity and forgiveness. If I fail in this I will miss what these others have to offer and I will discover that they become increasingly unable to receive what I offer them. We all become the poorer, more ignorant, and to be pitied.

Claiming this commonality of imperfection and insight might go a long way toward overcoming the chasms widened by out polite unwillingness to speak for, or even hope to understand the speech of, someone unlike ourselves. For all the salutary benefits we have received by listening to formerly excluded voices, we have not helped ourselves if we replace one sort of privilege for another. One of the joys of having neighbors is the opportunity to share and to exchange. I borrow an egg from you; you enjoy my flowers' scent; we use your snow-blower to clean both driveways. The interaction is not without caution or without generosity. It changes lives, but we do not move in together and become one family. So too in the classroom. My students and I are compelled to look to our "neighbors", in person and on the page, with the hope that we will learn from them and the expectation that some of what we learn comes from the familiar and some from the difference.

What we learn does not stay in the classroom or on the campus. My college urges its graduates to "lives of worth and service." The task of interpretation--of doing history, of studying, of learning--is not an end in itself; rather all that is done with the gifts God has given is returned by use for the benefit of others. Finally my method is the expression of my

world view. It is my response to God's calling. I hope that in my work I turn toward my neighbor with humility and generosity as well as with caution and forgiveness. If I am angry, may it be the anger of grief at my failures, not rage against what can not be changed.

NOTES:

- ¹ L. DeAne Lagerquist, From Our Mothers' Arms: A History of Women in the American Lutheran Church (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987).
- ² . Published as "Who I Am and What I Do" in The Cresset, (March 1993).
- ³ . Michael Aune and L. DeAne Lagerquist, "Desperately Seeking Culture: Is There American Lutheran Culture?," RRA/SSSR 1996.
- ⁴ . "Martin Luther in Feminist Focus," Currents in Theology and Mission Feb. 1997, Vol. 24, No. 1.
- ⁵ . "Pluralism: Promise and Problem," Currents in Theology and Mission October 1997, Vol. 24, No. 5.
- ⁶ . Mark Schwehn writes about the cultivation of virtues in the work of teaching. In particular he addresses the need for humility. Exiles From Eden (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 44-65.