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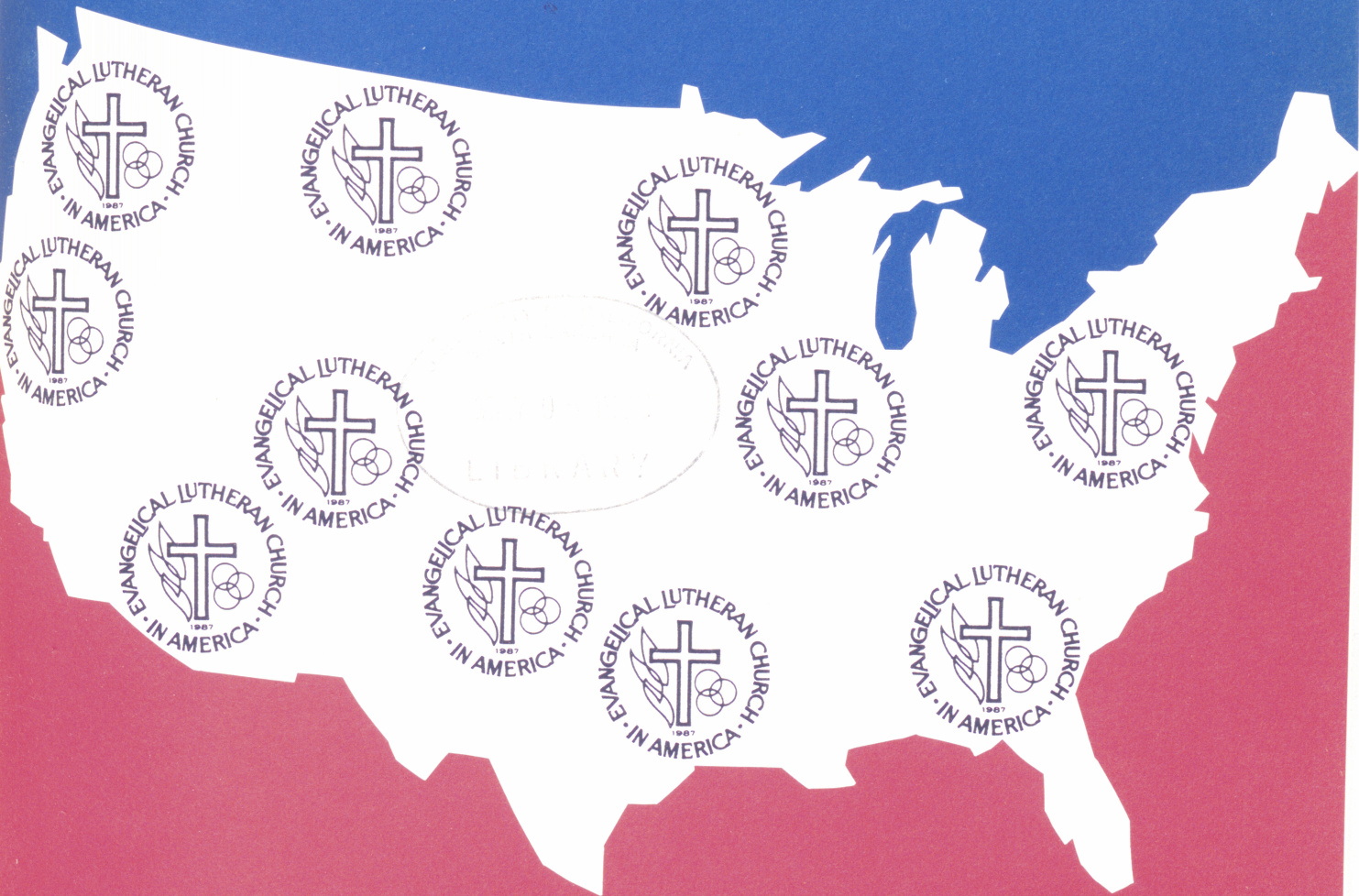
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by Bob Friederichsen
Minneapolis, Minnesota

generalize its specificities into universal principles. All foreign visitors must be reminded, if it is their first stop, that New York is not "typical." But is any place on the American map "typical"?

It is precisely this complexity spread over an expanse of territory unimaginable in terms of the scale of Western European dimensions that leaves many European observers both baffled and distressed. In many respects, America represents real novelty, and it is often difficult for Europeans, especially those with innate superiority complexes—cultural or religious—to accept such "newness" with equanimity.

So, when Mr. Berger hurls the ugly accusation of "apostasy," I, at least, am not absolutely sure whether his chagrin arises out of unsullied theological and sociological perception or from some vestigial and visceral European sense of scandal over the necessary indigenization of imported ideas and institutions.

At the heart of Berger's disquiet lies a serious theological error, one that has been all too prevalent in the Lutheran tradition. It is a lack of appreciation for the central importance of the doctrine of incarnation. Of all people, a Lutheran sociologist should appreciate the reality of the Word *made flesh*. But he appeals to the church "to preach the gospel" as though the gospel could exist without being incarnate. No way! The Word at the "crossroad," to be communicated, whether by spoken word or sacrament, will necessarily be American "fleshed," not a Gnostic vapor. In my opinion, the *Kulturprotestantismus* which has burdened American Lutheranism is not American syncretism but the European linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and psychological casings in which the gospel was delivered to the "frontier" and from which it was then never fully unpacked for action and proclamation.

PROFESSOR BERGER'S LAMENT

By Walter H. Capps*

Whenever he sets pen to paper—or finger to keyboard—there is never any question about what Peter Berger intends. He writes with distinctive force and clarity. In addition, he knows the field of sociology of religion thoroughly, and, from this vantage point, has made enormous contributions to the contemporary discussion (and debate) about the role of religion in our public life. Lutherans have every right be proud of the fact that Professor Berger continues to identify himself, his beliefs and attitudes, and his approach to human experience with them. His allegiances run deep. His passion for the Lutheran cause is self-evident. Even when being critical of the Lutheran Church—its theological posture, its social positions, and its organizational behavior—he understands that he is engaging in individual and collective self-criticism. He knows it to be self-criticism. He intends that it also be constructive.

In addressing the subject of "American Lutheranism at the Crossroads," Berger has made another statement on a subject that has been fundamental to his theoretical work over a considerable period of time. For example, in his *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*—his best-known study—he devotes virtually half of his analysis to expressed concern about the effects of the process of secularization on authentic religious experience. He understands religion to play a legitimating role in a society. In the early portions of *The Sacred Canopy* he states it succinctly: "Religion legitimates social institutions by bestowing upon them an ultimately valid ontological status, that is, by locating them within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference." In another place in the same section of his book, he explains that religion "serves to maintain the reality of that socially constructed world within which men exist in their everyday lives." In Berger's view, the human being is engaged in "world-building." Culture consists of the products of such "world-building." And religion functions to validate—by sanctioning and authorizing—the sociocultural construction of the world in which human beings have been engaged. In sum, religion functions to locate or place human activity within a more inclusive and comprehensive frame of reference. And when it is functioning well,

*University of California, Santa Barbara, California

human beings are afforded the opportunity to engage in such activity, and to know there is trustworthy meaning in so doing.

The problem comes when religion does not function effectively in its sociocultural operations. And this is another way of saying that the bestowal of meaning—as well as the legitimating of social institutions—does not occur simply as a matter of course. Human beings can hardly take religion's functions for granted. Therefore, when describing religion's constructive functional role, Berger also senses the obligation to treat the related subject, namely, the subject of *secularization*. Secularization happens, he suggests, when the dominant ways of social and cultural life are "removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols." His most graphic description of this process also belongs to *The Sacred Canopy*:

When we speak of society and institutions in modern Western history, of course, secularization manifests itself in the evacuation by the Christian churches of areas previously under their control or influence. . . . When we speak of culture and symbols, however, we imply that secularization is more than a social-structural process. It affects the totality of cultural life and of ideation, and may be observed in the decline of religious contents in the arts, in philosophy, in literature and, most important of all, in the rise of science as an autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective on the world. Moreover, it is implied here that the process of secularization has a subjective side as well. As there is a secularization of society and culture, so there is a secularization of consciousness. Put simply, this means that the modern West has produced an increasing number of individuals who look upon the world and their own lives without the benefit of religious interpretations.

So far we have covered the first two items in Professor Berger's orientation to the role of religion in the public domain. We have noticed, first, that he understands religion to play a legitimating role, and we have observed, at least in principle, what the reverse of this might be, as transpires, very specifically, when religion is secularized. But we haven't yet got to his understanding of the role of the churches, and the differences between Protestant and Catholic Christianity in relation to both legitimation and secularization.

Here Professor Berger's most cherished socio-religious instincts are manifestly "old world." That is, he likes the spirit of Catholicism since it is dedicated to recognizing and sustaining the "fullness" of the cosmic universe. Protestantism, by contrast, is "truncated" and partial: it reduces "a vast wealth of religious contents" to a severely restricted number of "essentials." When describing Catholic intentions, he uses the Greek word *pleroma*, meaning fullness, as opposed to the word *sparse* when portraying Protestant sensibilities. In his own words:

... Protestantism may be described in terms of an immense shrinkage in the scope of the sacred in reality, as compared with its Catholic adversary. The sacramental apparatus is reduced to a minimum and, even there, divested of its more numinous qualities.

As a consequence of this deliberate shrinkage, this enforced sparseness, "the Protestant believer no longer lives in a world ongoingly penetrated by sacred beings and forces." Instead, "reality is polarized between a radically transcendent divinity and a radically 'fallen' humanity." This implies that "God's creation," now denuded and despoiled, has become "bereft of numinosity." Which means, in Berger's words, that, "religiously speaking, the world becomes very lonely indeed."

Thus, before Professor Berger set out to jot down his thoughts about how he feels about the merging of Lutheran church bodies so as to form what is now called the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, he had some firm convictions about where Lutheranism stands in the wider spectrum of religious institutions. He understood Protestantism itself to be a product of the secularizing tendency. Protestantism illustrates how the secularizing tendency works to divest the sacred of its numinous qualities. And, if one were to ask, then, why Professor Berger would choose to remain a Lutheran, the answer must be that Lutheranism remains a somewhat ambiguous example of the Protestant spirit. When Berger chides Protestantism, he offers Calvinist (rather than Lutheran) examples. And when he speaks or writes directly about Lutheranism, he expresses hope that it will be effectively reunited with the catholic fullness to which it stands in the position of criticism (most of which is self-criticism) but from which it continues to receive its nurture.

It follows, then, that the merger stands as a very significant event in a persistent, long-term secularization process. With the merger, in Berger's view, the Lutheran Church has taken one more definitive and tragic step along the pathway toward an eventual complete negation or abolition of true, legitimating world construction. That is to say, before January 1, 1988, American Lutheranism still had a chance: it retained the possibility of developing one way or the other. But with the decision to create an institutional merger, the Protestantizing (and thus secularizing) process became formative, and Lutheranism sold its birthright. Sadly, in Berger's view, it has become disconnected from the fullness by which it might have been sustained. And And this, in his judgment, is to miss many great opportunities:

This new church will not even manage ecumenical communion with the Missouri Synod, let alone with anyone else in the vast and turbulent landscape of American Evangelicalism. What could also be meant, theoretically,

is an ecumenical move toward Rome and/or Eastern Orthodoxy. Equally clearly, this is not what is happening. "Ecumenicity" here means one thing and one thing only. The new Lutheran church will move toward the Protestant mainline.

The confirmation of this disappointing development, in Berger's assessment, is to be found in the new church's readiness to adopt social and political policies that represent exclusively Protestant mainline positions. In selling itself short in this respect—yes, in deliberately reducing a truncated version of the gospel to even more limiting social and political stances—the new Lutheran Church has lost whatever catholic soul Berger still hoped for. The merger, in short, symbolizes a decisive degenerative step in a thoroughly destructive process. In its own truncated, decimated form, mainline (or "liberal") Lutheranism finds itself espousing a specific political agenda. It has allowed what little is left of the content of its affirmations to become thoroughly (and wrong-heartedly) politicized. Politicization of religion is also a truncating, reductionistic product of the secularizing process. Along the way, as Berger sees it, the life-giving proclamation of the gospel has been pushed so far into the background that it is nearly impossible to detect. In fact, since there are no strong forces of opposition, his awareness that such secularization is both wholesale and progressive has driven Professor Berger to despair. As he sees it, the merger is not the occasion for a collective rejoicing—as in "thanks be to God," as in "Come Share the Spirit"—but stands instead as the formal epitaph to commemorate an authenticity that has passed away.

How should one evaluate Berger's proposal? How alarmed should one be if one had previously approached the prospect of a Lutheran merger with positive anticipation?

The answer to such questions is determined only in part by one's analysis of the present situation. For, as the previous paragraphs (we trust) have demonstrated, Professor Berger's lament is based on much more than a careful reading of the day-to-day, month-to-month deliberations of the working committees, and the specific terms of the agreement that brought the several Lutheran church bodies together. In point of fact, Berger has felt this way toward Lutheranism, and toward Protestantism, even before the merger process was underway. Had merger deliberations moved in another attitudinal direction, Professor Berger might have experienced some satisfaction. But, moving as they did, his response can only stand as a respectable rendition of an "I told you so" statement. He had suspected this all along about American (as opposed to a more orthodox, "old-world") Lutheranism. The culmination of the merger process only

confirmed for him that his suspicions were well-founded.

But there is no incontrovertible evidence—no ineluctable pressure—that would force one to interpret the realization of the merger Berger's way. He himself, of course, has no other choice, for he has already invested heavily in some theories about Protestantism, and Lutheranism's relationship thereto, that direct his interpretive instincts this way. But others need not be so led. In fact, before feeling constrained to share the sociologist's despair, other interpreters of the meaning and significance of current developments in American religious history might wonder whether Peter Berger has really identified the definitive plot line. Did he get the real story, or are his comments tangential and peripheral?

Were I telling it—in strict conformity to William Ockham's injunction that explanations need be no more complicated than necessary to make compelling sense—I would leave thoughts of progressive secularization behind altogether, and think fundamentally about institutional order. One need not invest very deeply in any of the available theories about the dynamics of social and cultural change to recognize that the organizational make-up of Lutheranism, prior to merger, had become increasingly frustrating and embarrassing. Throughout the church, that is to say, it was becoming more and more apparent that the divisions between segments of Lutheranism, based in significant part on transplantations of a pre-American European situation, placed the church in obvious disadvantage when it sought to be effective in a vastly more complex pluralistic society of today. Indeed, the Lutherans with whom I have shared the excitement of the merger have not urged its realization so that a particular ideological disposition might achieve prominence. On the contrary, ideological considerations have seemed to play no more than a very minor role both in giving impetus to merger negotiations and in effecting the same. But what has provided strong motivation is the prospect that the workings of the organization might be updated and made more resilient. If there are no other than circumstantial reasons for the divisions by which contemporary Lutheranism must be characterized, and if those circumstances no longer pertain, then why should the divisions be maintained? In this respect, it is significant that whatever controversy belonged to the merger negotiations had much more to do with organizational details than with credal and/or theological principles. Certainly it was only a matter of time before the formation of a more unified American branch of Lutheranism would take a decisive step. Its occurrence on January 1, 1988, hardly stands as some radically-trans-

formative, precipitous event, similar, say, to Anwar Sadat's bold journey to Jerusalem. It should be likened much more to the shift, say, from typewriter to word-processor, or perhaps, from soft to hard disk.

But should the reader begin to suspect that this reviewer is trying to explain the merger strictly in technological terms, without reference to anything more substantial theoretically, let us consider another matter. In a pluralistic society, Lutheranism is a branch or mode of Christianity, and Christianity is one among several prominent religions of the world. Again through improved technology, the religious choices today are not framed by divisions within Christianity (let alone within Lutheranism), nor are they circumscribed by old distinctions, say, between Protestant, Catholic and Jew. On the contrary, citizens of today's world must encounter a plethora of religious possibilities. Just a decade or two ago, few among us had any direct or deep contact with persons of the Muslim faith. Today, in many quarters of the country, and, most especially, in prominent places in the world, such contact is a frequent occurrence. Indeed, some of the most significant events of our time involve interchanges of this kind. And what is transpiring on the international scene is becoming more and more common at home. When one thinks of Buddhists, for example, one need not engage in speculation about somewhat fanciful ways of life practiced in far-away lands. On the contrary, persons of the Buddhist persuasion may be one's nextdoor neighbors; they may be members of one's household. Products of Buddhist meditational practices are even known to the young people in Lutheran confirmation classes.

In a world like this the real question is whether Lutherans would submit themselves to the necessary rejuvenating process so as to be able to keep step. For Lutheranism has prided itself on being a global movement—that is, a world-wide representation of Christian conviction and activity. And when the analyst adds the interpretive elements that belong to the influence of developing nations, or the Third World, it is plausible to propose that the birth of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America symbolizes an increased globalization of the faith. It is just as plausible to view it this way as it is to try to believe that this birth represents some dreaded form of progressive secularization.

Professor Berger should find one or two items worrisome. The first is the fact that the theological complexion of the new church is hardly distinguishable at all from the theological complexion of the old church. That is, the merger did nothing very obvious to change the philosophical or ideational make-up of the Lutheran Church. If his theory about

increased secularization is to be compelling, there should be some forceful before-and-after evidence, some confirming or suggestive data. But there isn't any, or at least none that is cited.

The second matter is an observation that although Professor Berger pleads for the absence of political partisanship in the church, he himself is very much devoted to a neo-conservative political stance. He says that he wants only to hear the gospel, without being subjected to some political propaganda. "When my church proclaims as gospel a political agenda in which, in good conscience, I cannot participate, it is implicitly excommunicating me," he declares. What about promoting a political agenda, Professor Berger, in which you could participate? Would you feel better? And the witness that you understand to be so necessary today in the face of Rome, in the face of the Evangelical community, in the face of mainline Protestantism, is this witness to be articulated without political content? Could it be expressed without social content? Is the gospel politically-contentless, socially-contentless, ideologically-contentless? Is the gospel some pure *sui generis* element, some self-contained force or energy, that can only be expressed or described in self-definitional ways? It is significant, in this respect, that *gospel* is the only term in Professor Berger's critique of the current Lutheran merger that is left undefined. Yes, it is defined implicitly, perhaps, *in contrast*. But in these situations we are told what the gospel is not, but not what it is.

I confess that I suspect another agenda. Had the thoughts been framed as proposal rather than as critique or lament, I doubt that the political overtones would have been fenced, without significant remainder, by the doctrine of the two kingdoms. In other words, I do not believe that Professor Berger's own political convictions are immaterial in this situation. But all of this may be beside the point. The more compelling evidence is that the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is a subject to which Professor Berger can apply his theories about the degenerative powers of secularization, but is certainly not the occasion for them.