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Inner health made audible



But the most obvious fact about praise – whether of God or anything – strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honour. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise unless (sometimes even if) shyness or the fear of boring others is deliberately brought in to check it. . . . I had not noticed how the humblest, and at the same time most balanced and capacious minds, praised most, while the cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least. The good critics found something to praise in many imperfect works; the bad ones continually narrowed the list of books we might be allowed to read. The healthy and unaffected man, even if luxuriously brought up and widely experienced in good cookery, could praise a very modest meal: the dyspeptic and the snob found fault with all. Except where intolerably adverse circumstances interfere, praise almost seems to be inner health made audible. Nor does it cease to be so when, through lack of skill, the forms of its expression are very uncouth or even ridiculous. – C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1958), 93-94.

Holy, holy, holy: NALC at Anaheim

by Brett Jenkins



Anaheim played host August 9-12 to the “Lutheran Week” of the North American Lutheran Church. This event, combining a theological conference, mission festival, and national convocation, was themed “Holy God, Holy Lives,” and the temperate weather outside was a perfect match for the amiable atmosphere inside the assembly.

This was my first convocation as a rostered pastor of the NALC, so I have no past experiences of NALC convocations against which to compare my musings, and I am, so to speak, a “company man.” That does not mean I have no history with church assemblies, and on that count, what I had heard about previous NALC events was confirmed: the *esprit de corps* in evidence was a sharp contrast with my consistent experience of regional church meetings over the past thirty years, both synodical and seminary-sponsored. Even the official greeter from the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod felt compelled to comment on this atmosphere. There seemed to be a sense of optimism about the project that the young denomination has embarked upon, an optimism that has not diminished since I first had close contact with NALC people at the Lutheran CORE theological conference back in 2010.

The project to which I refer may be reasonably described as “broadly

confessional” or “merely orthodox.” This means a commitment to Scriptural authority and the Lutheran confessions as a doctrinal approach to those Scriptures; but it also exhibits a rather broader construal of what may be deemed *adiaphora* than you might find in other bodies that are self-consciously orthodox.

Pre- and postmodern

My wife teaches her undergraduates that one of the key defining elements of postmodernism is *pastiche*. In a culture governed by the ethics of *pastiche*, elements that would never have been permitted to occupy the same cultural space because they were deemed incompatible with one another are purposefully juxtaposed so that they may mutually illumine one another and their hitherto unappreciated deeper unity may be exposed. Perhaps *pastiche* may be better deemed an aesthetic than an ethic.

In this sense, the NALC national convocation was thoroughly postmodern. Since I had met many NALC pastors prior to the convocation, I was not at all surprised by the variety of spiritualities in evidence—not so much in the official worship services of the convocation, but in the conversations and spontaneous prayer to be found in the halls, coffee bars, and courtyard. Everything from Apollonian pseudo-monasticism to Dionysian pseudo-Pentecostalism seemed to be present somewhere.

For instance, when I visited the erstwhile “prayer chapel,” a small meeting room converted for that purpose, after offering intercessions for a parish concern going on back home, the person manning the chapel looked at me and with an air of having accomplished something significant said, “Now we have agreed upon this in prayer.” The confessional Lutheran watchdog in my breast immediately rose up growling that we don’t have to “agree in prayer” to offer our concerns to the Lord and be assured of him receiving our petitions, but I took the reassurance in the spirit in which it was offered and moved on.

Differing spiritualities

What did surprise me was the lack of tension between these spiritualities. I expect that my non-tendentious reaction in the prayer chapel was repeated many times by many others from many different perspectives throughout the four days of the conference and convocation. That is probably a good

thing. It is certainly part of the glue that is holding the NALC together and may be part of the fuel that will propel it towards its vision.

But this was more than simply a “live and let live” attitude that could be the polite face of an ultimately corrosive theological sloppiness. Also evident was a genuine engagement of these differing approaches to both theology and practice. Another anecdote may serve best to illustrate this. In a workshop on prayer with Pr. Trina Pederson, a more ecstatic approach to prayer was in evidence than I have ever experienced at a Lutheran gathering. Since my current pastoral work has me in close regular contact with this spirituality, I paid close attention. While there was some smiling recognition of Lutheran quietude and Pr. Pederson’s own highly *un-quiet* spirituality was on full display, there was no tacit belittling of the former or explicit exaltation of the latter.

What unites us

In fact, when she moved into explicit pedagogy, Pr. Pederson made it clear that when engaged in intercessory prayer with someone, though her style might seem reminiscent of the “Word of Faith” American evangelicals, the last thing we should be seeking is “a word from God” for the person in question; what we should do is apply Scripture to their lives in the form of prayer, which means having large sections of the Scripture, properly exegeted, committed to memory for pastoral use. In other words, at least in this pastor’s estimation, she was cross-pollinating American evangelical style with more solid Lutheran theology. This sort of work could be very fruitful for the future of the NALC and, by extension, for its partners in mission.

This brings us smack dab into what was distinctly *not* postmodern about the week in Anaheim. As the convocation received official greetings from several denominations, service agencies, and parachurch organizations, what was distinctively pre-modern about the assembly came into focus. Far from having a suspicion of metanarratives generally or the specific metanarratives of creedal Christianity, Scriptural authority, or the veracity and applicability of the Lutheran confessions, these things were received as a patrimony by and large to be celebrated, almost in a quantitative way. And so the conversations and mutual admiration with both the LCMS

and Swedish Mission Province continue, despite the outstanding disagreement over women's ordination. Apparently under the rubric of "what unites us is greater than what separates us," that particular issue, at least for the moment, is deemed a matter of interpretation, not Biblical fidelity writ large.

Holy God

This sort of theological ground, first and most famously plowed by C. S. Lewis with his concept of "mere Christianity," was also in evidence earlier in the week during the Carl E. Braaten and Robert D. Benne Lectures in Theology, where the idea of cross-pollination and inter-Christian dialogue and enrichment set the tone for what followed. The theme, "'Who is Jesus?' Lectures on the Person of Christ," was aimed squarely at the center of the creeds, making it fertile ground for exchanges of the generically orthodox. This is exactly what was offered, for while NALC pastors and theologians helped moderate the discussions at the conference, only one of the plenary presentations was made by a Lutheran theologian (Carl Braaten). In fact, most of the presenters were not Lutheran, and one (Dr. Mickey L. Mattox – ironically, the Luther scholar) was even a convert *from* Lutheranism to Rome! The presenting theologians represented the Anglican, Methodist, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran traditions, though in Dr. Phillip Cary, the broader American evangelicalism of which his university (Eastern) is a part had a voice too (though one that was criticized roundly by Dr. Cary himself).

Given that the theme of the week was "Holy God, Holy Lives," it is perhaps not surprising that the NALC drew on the resources of Christian traditions that have historically placed more emphasis on holiness than Lutheranism has done, with its focus on justification and imputed righteousness. But the presenters all spoke from a perspective that would resonate with a Lutheran audience. The presentations were of exceedingly high quality, and the conversations they sparked both at the microphones and at local watering holes afterward bore witness to this fact. Indeed, I do not know if there was anyone present who did not gain an insight from Mattox's nuanced presentation, which helped us understand Martin Luther's mature theology in continuity with his Augustinian formation as a Roman Catholic, and copies of Dr. Cary's little book *Good News for Anxious Christians: 10 Practical Things You DON'T*

Have to Do were sold out at the Brazos booth by the end of the week. I am quite certain that many pastors intended to hand them out as an act of pastoral care to their flock back home.

Holy lives

The overall effect was to have the premodern *cantus firmus* of orthodox Christology solidly established in the theological conference by a very post-modern bevy of scholars. The point that the true Christ can unite people across a wide range of practice and theology was made explicit in a particularly Lutheran way as the lectures morphed into the mission festival portion of the week. NALC Bp. John Bradosky said in his opening sermon, "Holiness is not a set of rules or guidelines. We are called into a relationship with a Holy God, not a holy set of rules." He went on to say, "Holy in the Hebrew is *hagadosh*. It means to be weird, strange, peculiar, different, set apart for a specific purpose. . . . It is a life that refuses to be conformed to the rest of the world and is, instead, conformed to Christ."

As noted before, the *ethos* of the whole week communicated that all those whose confession of orthodox Christology makes them weird, strange, peculiar, and different are set apart for the specific purpose of being a gift to each other in our diversity. Hence the mission festival theme, "Faith Is Made Whole In Community," built a successful bridge between the Braaten-Benne Lectures and NALC Convocation.

Holy friendship

As the mission festival transitioned into the convocation and business meeting of the church, the established sense of unity led to a denominational gathering that was remarkable for its lack of dramatic moments. The worship was dignified and moving, the preaching was solid, attendees were pleasantly engaged in the business at hand, and all seemed certain the church was on track and were ready to return home with smiling reports for their congregations.

Two moments were exceptions to this general reality:

The first was the Thursday evening keynote address by Anglican priest the Rev. Dr. Malcolm Guite entitled "C. S. Lewis: 'Friendship and Holiness.'" Perhaps because it tapped the "golden thread" that held the week together, undoubtedly

because of its theological weight and content, what could have been a relatively arid academic presentation instead brought the room to a standing ovation. This was no pep talk for the assembled, but a simple and profound excursus on the power of grace-inhabited friendship in the Christian life, and so a doxology to our Lord. The applause was clearly for Christ, who gives such gifts to his people, *through* his people.

The second “moment of moment” was far less pleasant. Treasurer Ryan Schwartz presented to the assembly a rather grim report on the national church’s finances, a shortfall caused by much lower than anticipated submission of benevolence from local congregations. Yet even this bad news was met with relative aplomb. Comments from the microphones amounted to “now that we know, we’ll fix it,” and “next time, let us know sooner.”

Holy hope

The overall effect of the week was remarka-

bly integrated; the postmodern *pastiche* successfully issued forth in a remarkably unified and unifying experience. It is undoubtedly true that the exigencies of our cultural moment have led to the new gerymandering of the boundaries between orthodoxy and *adiaphora* on display in Anaheim. After all, it was *Roe v. Wade* that led to the pro-life movement, which eventually birthed the theological project of Evangelicals and Catholics Together. Can the negotiation of such different theological space happen within a communion as well as between communions? The planners of this year’s Lutheran Week are to be commended for serving up an event that leads me to be optimistic at the prospect.

Brett Jenkins, STS, is pastor of Abundant Life Lutheran Church (NALC), Stroudsburg, PA, and a member of the board of directors of the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau.

Morality and law

by Thomas D. Pearson



It says right here in the *Washington Post* [May 9, 2016] that “North Carolina became the first (and so far only) state to restrict where transgender people can use public bathrooms and locker rooms, and gay rights advocates almost immediately filed a lawsuit challenging the law’s legality. Now the state is suing the government, and the government is suing the state. Basically, lawsuits all around.” So it appears that questions about what it means to be male and female, and any sort of public recognition of what it means to be male or female, will now be settled as a matter of law. In contemporary American culture, such issues are no longer to be resolved by thoughtful moral discernment, but by “lawsuits all around.”

It was not always thus. For most of human history within the multiple dynamics of Western culture, it was commonly understood that what was legal should be grounded in, and responsive to, what was moral. This was, for instance, the claim of the dominant natural law tradition. Civil law should reflect moral law, which was prior to

and authoritative for civil law. There was a broad consensus as to what the moral law stipulated; disputes as to what actually belonged to the content of the moral law arose only occasionally at the margins.

Aristotle, Aquinas and Luther

Start with Aristotle. His argument that public law is to be designed for the purpose of fostering human flourishing, and that human flourishing depends on developing a moral character, has been prominent in western thought. Then there is Thomas Aquinas, who is well known for his layered argument that positive (or civil) law was derived from natural law, which in turn was descended from divine law, with divine law a manifestation of eternal law; and eternal law coincided, for Aquinas, with moral law. So, in the end, civil law was a measured expression of the moral law.

Martin Luther often sharply distinguished “divine natural law” emerging from God’s commands, from “secular natural law” issuing from human reason, with the latter serving as the basis

for civil law. Nonetheless, Luther was inclined to insist that civil law possessed a moral core enabling that law to function as a curb on social evils and human treachery. Even as recently as 50 years ago, Lon Fuller wrote a book highly influential in legal circles, *The Morality of Law*, contending that an “internal morality” was embedded in the very acts of crafting and administering civil law.

Turning it on its head

But today in the American experience we have squandered this heritage, and turned such wisdom on its head. Now, what is moral is to be grounded in, and responsive to, what is legal. We pass laws (unfortunately including administrative law, typically disguised as “public policy”), and those laws serve as the framework for our public morality or “what we want our society to be.” So we have decided that law determines morality, and anyone whose “bound conscience” is troubled by the law has two choices: conform anyway, or pay the penalty (“suffer for your beliefs”).

What has changed?

In 1984, Richard John Neuhaus published *The Naked Public Square*, arguing that our common conversation in America on the fundamental ways of ordering our structures of social justice and institutional morality was increasingly deaf to religious voices, particularly Christian voices. But by the time Neuhaus wrote, it was already too late. Americans had already made up their minds on two crucial points: first, that the social norms governing our public life together as a nation are to be established by consensus, and that consensus is best expressed by legislation and legal judgments; and second, that all morality is a matter of private individual conviction. The public square was being fenced off long before Neuhaus offered his complaint, and the fence was designed to keep traditional moral considerations from invading the square and contaminating our mutual discourse about how we wanted our shared public life to be arranged.

Nothing more than private preferences

Thus, insofar as religious communities – and again, specifically Christian faith communities – insist on articulating traditional moral principles and practices, those communities must be excluded, as much as is possible, from our collective discus-

sions in the public square. It has been easy to justify this unspoken policy over the past several decades in America: since traditional moral principles and practices are really nothing more than private preferences and prejudices being imposed on the rest of us, they have no place in public deliberations on how the citizens of a large and exceedingly diverse nation should live together. The religious communities that harbor such eccentric ethical mandates should keep their peculiar ideas to themselves as well.

But if a common morality will no longer function as the social lubricant in American life (because, of course, there is no “common” morality, only an endless array of subjectively idiosyncratic moral biases), on what basis do we fashion a consensus on what is appropriate, and what is inappropriate, in our public collaborations as citizens? It cannot be anything as radically fragmented and divisive as morality. You can’t create a consensus from something which everyone agrees is already devoid of internal consensus. It will have to be something objective, reasonable, respectable and enforceable. It will have to be something like positive law – the clear rules for how to live like an American, constructed out of summaries from legislation and case law. Those laws are right there on the books for everyone to see. And we elected, or appointed, or otherwise sanctioned, the makers and enforcers of the laws. So they are *our* laws, and they sustain *our* consensus on how we want things done. If we change our collective mind on how we want things done, we change our laws. Morality never has to enter in to it.

The social contract

This is the manner in which a social contract approach works. People reach a covenant with each other on how they want their communities to be ordered, and that order is conventionally expressed as law, or promulgated as social policy. We are in charge of our public life – we organize, we petition, we vote, and we get to choose the assorted associations through which we now believe our identities are formed. As Americans have progressively migrated away over the last century from a secure sense that law, legislation and public policy are to reflect that which has traditionally been anchored in a natural law perspective – promoting the good for

each citizen and advancing the moral flourishing of our communities – we have seized on the positive law as an independent and self-defined substitute for the moral law.

In the end, for Americans today law is public and morality is private. Therefore the public square must be bracketed by positive law, which gives a formal warrant to our current dispositions on various social issues. In this sense, morality becomes simply irrelevant at best, and a menacing intrusion at worst. Churches and other religious organizations that invest themselves with a moral authority that claims to speak truly about social evils and public goods are not to be regarded as worthwhile contributors to civic discourse. They are, rather, a threat to the body politic.

Natural law ethics

Natural law ethics has been the traditional source for the position that morality is not merely the possession of the insular individual who conjures up her own inventory of permissible and impermissible behaviors, but is a universal template of ethical propriety applicable to all human beings. However, it has become altogether too easy for modern Americans to dismiss natural law as hopelessly archaic. Our scientific sophistication has redefined what it means to be “natural,” with biological functionalism trumping all association of “natural” with “created to be this way.” And “law” can only mean for us civil or positive law; a universal – or even unified – moral law has been fatally dismembered by all the atomistic, autonomous persons that properly comprise our civil society. We in America cannot make much sense of natural law morality; truth be told, we can barely tolerate it.

Lutherans have historically tried to force this kind of immense tempest into the teapot of Two Kingdoms theory, proposing that public life, as we experience it in this world, is always going to be a moral struggle, and that the best legal and political strategies are little more than hopeful approximations of the common good. What’s really important, what we need to be eternally vigilant about, is that we never confuse those clumsy social arrangements for the Kingdom of God, nor allow provisional ethical pronouncements to be mistaken for divine commands. But this tactic cannot evade for Lutherans the issue of the relationship between law and morality, and why, in 21st century America, we seem to have chosen law as our common denominator rather than morality.

Morality as moveable feast

The underlying problem is that Lutherans have never been able to decide what we think morality is, and what it is good for (nor did Luther, so it’s not surprising). Is human morality of divine origin? Is it of central theological significance for Lutherans? If so, what is that significance? Or is it the case for Lutherans – like most Americans these days – that morality is a subjective moveable feast, with no known parameters, attuned only to each individual’s isolated experiences, and thus of no particular enduring theological value? Unless and until Lutherans begin to engage those questions, we will have few answers for those who ask why the boundaries of the public square have been drawn by “lawsuits all around.”

Thomas D. Pearson is associate professor of philosophy at the university of Texas-Pan American in Edinburg, TX.

Reflections on the 9/11 anniversary

by Daniel Gard



I sat with my thoughts at 2:30 p.m. in Chicago on Sunday afternoon, the fifteenth anniversary of September 11. I had attended Divine Service that morning, yet my mind had not been on what I was hearing. I wish I could say that I was attentive but I was not. Only two things in the liturgy marked the tragedy of

September 11. One was a single petition in the Prayer of the Church. The second was singing “There is a Time for Everything” (*Lutheran Service Book #762*) by Steve Starke, written in 2002. It was played during the offering because our cantor, who has become like a daughter to us, snuck it in just for me.

After the Divine Service, there was a congregational lunch. My wife had to leave after worship so I went with my 13-year-old son. Soon he was off to sit with his buddies and I found myself alone. My mind raced back to the events of 15 years ago. Once again I was smelling jet fuel and wondering if I would ever forget what I saw inside the crash site. But then my thoughts replayed the years since. Once again, I was at sea on USS Saipan in 2003. Once again, I was in New Orleans sending marines and sailors to war, knowing that some would not return alive. Once again, I was walking the corridors of the detention camps in Gitmo. Once again, I was far away from my wife and children and feeling what every deployed service member feels—a tear in the heart that can only be mended with homecoming.

I have walked with heroes

I must confess that on that afternoon in Chicago I felt as isolated as I ever have felt in my life. Nobody there had the slightest clue where my mind was and, if they did, they would have had no way to relate with experiences they did not share. I am not in New York or Washington, D.C. or Pennsylvania. I am in Illinois with people who are separated from

these events by years and by miles.

I am not a hero by any definition, but I have walked with heroes. I have held the newborn child of a sailor murdered on September 11 and seen her beautiful eyes. I have held the hands of grandfathers and a 19-year-old widow when they learned of their marine's death. The faces of those who died and those who survived this war flashed through my mind.

I questioned whether all that these heroes sacrificed was worth it. Then I saw my son and his friends doing what eighth-grade boys do. I saw small children being what God created them to be. I saw a parish full of people of all ages who had heard the blessed Gospel and received Christ's Holy Sacrament. And for the first time that day, I smiled. In fact, I laughed—but at my own foolishness and questioning. To see my brothers and sisters in Christ, whether they are aged or babies, together in Christ answers the question.

Daniel Gard is an LCMS clergyman who currently serves as president of Concordia University Chicago. He is also a rear admiral (lower half) and Deputy Chief of Chaplains for Reserve Matters in the U. S. Navy.

Omnium gatherum



Wedding bell blues • One of my wife's gifts to me when I retired was a subscription to the Sunday *New York Times*, which

I thoroughly enjoy reading for a variety of reasons. I pay at least cursory attention to the "Vows" section which reports weddings. I like to track what percentage each week are same-sex couples—a few more than is the case locally here in rural Northern California. In one recent issue of the *Times* there were a bunch of weddings performed by rabbis (it's a New York paper, you know), as well as two weddings done by Episcopal priests, and one each by a Baptist pastor and a Lutheran pastor. But what really astonished me is how many of the ceremonies were performed by people who apparently were "ordained" specifically to do this ceremony, or who are ministers of weird quasi-religious organizations. This particular issue reported two weddings by a Universal Life minister (does that refer to a church or an insurance company?), and two more by peo-

ple who became Universal Life ministers just for the occasion. Four were performed by people authorized or certified or ordained (who knows?) by American Marriage Ministries. Never having heard of this group, I looked them up. They are, their web page tells me, "a non-denominational, interfaith Church, where you can become ordained to perform marriage." Their mission is "to ensure that **all people have the right** to perform marriages" (bold face in the original). So they ordain "people of all religious beliefs and philosophies" as long as they agree to three "core tenets": that "all people, regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation, have the right to marry," that "it is the right of every couple to choose who will solemnize their marriage," and that "all people have the right to solemnize marriage." They have more than 350,000 "ministers." The biggest number of them seem to be in California, not that this surprises me. There are four of them within 15 miles of me, though I've not met any

of them at ministerial association meetings. “No prior ministerial experience necessary.” They do, however, offer quick “wedding training” on line. “Ordination is free and does not expire.” Good to know. I don’t know what this all means about the state of marriage these days. Maybe I don’t want to know.

Curiouser and curiouser • The *Sacramento Bee* reports (August 31, 2016) that a transgender man (i.e., a woman transitioning to a man) has been denied a hysterectomy by a local Catholic hospital. The man was to have the surgery, but found the hospital had “abruptly canceled the procedure on religious grounds.” “I fell on the ground and cried uncontrollably,” the prospective patient reported. “It hurt because of the fact that I’m being discriminated against based on my innate and immutable characteristics, and it also hurt because it put everything in flux.” Seems to me “in flux” was in play before the hospital’s decision. Oddly enough, the “religious grounds” on which the hospital made its decision is that the procedure goes against its anti-sterilization policies. Not to worry, though; the procedure was rescheduled for Methodist Hospital of Sacramento, which has no such policy.

Isn’t this blasphemy? • One just never knows what is going to set off a reader. I had an email from Russell C. Lee who was offended by our opening quote in August from Lincoln’s “Second Inaugural Address.” He found “Lincoln’s theological perspective rather repulsive.” He sent me an essay he had written called “Nonviolence as a Way of Life,”

which helped me understand where he was coming from. I’m not unsympathetic, being an old peacenik and pretty much a pacifist myself. But Lincoln’s perspective “repulsive”? Isn’t that, like, un-American, or maybe even blasphemous? But Pr. Lee would probably be glad to send you a copy of his 119-page essay if you’d email him at leeabq@aol.com.

Here I stand • Another reader wrote to say that my essay “Summer of discontent” in that same issue would leave “little doubt in the minds of many readers as to where they think (correctly or incorrectly) you stand politically.” I want my readers to be correct. I’m a Democrat. My associate Pr. Speckhard is a Republican. We get along just fine, even in an election year. Though maybe it helps that we live 2,000 miles apart.

Thinking ahead • I’ve never been a guy who finds it easy to think more than a couple days in advance, but we’ve had to be making plans for Christmas already since our daughter is going to be giving us our third grandchild in December. You should think about Christmas, too. Who on your list would appreciate a gift subscription to *Lutheran Forum/Forum Letter*? And if everybody you know already subscribes (don’t get out much, do you?), there are many other wonderful options for books and other resources published by the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau. Do your shopping at alpb.org. And while you’re at it, remember to give a gift to the church at large by responding to the ALPB’s annual Christmas appeal. You’ll be glad you did, and so will we.

– roj

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