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Th. Graebner

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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Professional Growth in Comparative Symbolics

The continued acquaintance of the Lutheran minister with comparative symbolics—not to speak of his growth in this field of theology—is beset with peculiar difficulties. The field is very large, comprising all the forms in which organized religion is represented in the world. Even if we limit the practical study of the subject to the religious movements found in the United States, the task of becoming acquainted with their doctrine is a prodigious one. Let us grant at the outset that much of the material related to comparative symbolics can never be acquired so as to be subject to recollection. What purpose would be served, indeed, if I were to memorize the articles of belief held by the various types of Dunkers or the Plymouth Brethren or by the different branches of the Methodist Church? But even if we grant that much of the detail of comparative symbolics need be available for reference only, the question just what should be regarded as authentic information on this subject presents a most difficult problem.

A concrete instance will serve to illustrate. Let me refer to the Anglican or Episcopal Church. The problem here should be a simple one since we are dealing with a body which has a definite creed. We are not thrown upon the resources of items in periodical literature, as we are in the case of all those bodies which have no formal statement of doctrine. The Anglican Church has the Thirty-Nine Articles, and it has the Book of Common Prayer. We study these documents and discover a large evangelical element. We find papal error denounced. We are dealing with a body that accepts the Scriptures as its authority of doctrine. It stresses the Atonement, and the Holy Spirit's work of conversion and sanctification. We read all this, and yet we find ourselves staggered when a parishioner asks: "What do they teach in the Episcopal Church?" The answer will have to be anything else but, "The doctrine of Reformed theology," or, "The Reformed doc-

trine mixed with a great deal of sound teaching, as in the Book of Common Prayer." There is probably not a community in which this answer would be in accord with the facts. Your local rector may be High Church with the full Roman practise, not stopping short of holy water, the adoration of the saints, and the reservation of the Sacrament. Or the local Episcopal clergyman is Broad Church. He welcomes every lodge to his service, proclaims himself an evolutionist, and preaches a sermon against the inerrancy of the Bible. Yet both these rectors are Episcopal. To define their religious stand as "Reformed" or "Protestant" would be indeed far from the mark. One is a Romanist and regards "Protestant" as a term of reproach; the other holds views subversive of the very fundamentals of Christianity. Neither is Episcopal in the sense of his creed.

We begin to distinguish sharply between the questions "What does the Anglican Church teach" and "What do they teach in the Anglican Church?" A book has just been published (April, 1938) embodying a report of the Commission on Christian Doctrine appointed by the archbishops of Canterbury and York in 1922. It is entitled *Doctrine in the Church of England*. Observe: not "of" but "in." The Commission consisted of the archbishops of Canterbury and York and other distinguished churchmen. On every essential point they have either straddled the issue or have announced tolerance for error. They side-step the question of the Virgin Birth, asserting that some believe in it, while others hold "that a full belief in the historical Incarnation is more consistent [!] with the supposition that our Lord's birth took place under the normal conditions of human generation." The majority believe in the "traditional explanation that the tomb was empty because the Lord had risen," while others "incline to the belief that the connection made in the New Testament between the emptiness of the tomb and the appearances of the risen Lord belongs rather to the sphere of religious symbolism than to that of historical fact." They are quite forthright on inspiration: "The tradition of the inerrancy of the Bible commonly held in the Church until the beginning of the nineteenth century . . . cannot be maintained in the light of the knowledge now at our disposal." Yet they declare that the Bible "may rightly be called 'the Word of God.'" This will suffice. In a signed letter contributed to the London Daily Letter of January 14, the Bishop of Willesden says regarding this report: "Of course, it will not change the Christian faith. That is impossible. It is not something to take the place of the creeds. Nor will it alter the forms of our Prayer Book services." Yet we have here a statement of "doctrines in the Church of England" which in a number of points definitely rejects those statements of the Anglican creed which in the study of comparative sym-

bolics we are taught to accept as the doctrine of Anglicanism. It amounts simply to this, that there is a doctrine of the Episcopal Church, of the Presbyterian Church, of the Evangelical Synod (now united with the Reformed Church) and doctrines taught in the Episcopal, the Presbyterian, the Evangelical-Reformed, etc., churches. The former are matters of historical record, the latter are the *actual doctrine*, and it is by no means said that the clergy of the same denomination in the same community will agree in its definition of what is to be regarded as Episcopal teaching.

The student of comparative symbolics has, accordingly, the choice of making his professional growth in this respect partake of an academic or of a practical character, and the two concepts are by no means a matter of attitude but affect the activities of the minister as counselor of his flock, as preacher and minister. We may distinguish between academic growth and practical experience in other fields of theological study. One can have a purely scholarly interest in New Testament Greek, and one may specialize in the study of the Greek New Testament for the purpose of building up one's ability as a minister of the Church. But there is a distinction that cuts deeper than this in the professional attitude of the minister towards comparative symbolics. In this subject a purely scholastic attitude will entail something of self-deception or delusion. I may read the Westminster Confession in order to acquaint myself with the Presbyterian doctrine. I may supplement it with a study of the Book of Discipline and the Larger Catechism. I will gather from these standards that the Presbyterian Church holds the Bible to be the Word of God, believes in Jesus as the Second Person of the Trinity, teaches His substitutionary atonement and the need of regeneration through the work of the Holy Ghost. I will note also a Calvinistic interpretation of election and of the Sacraments, and the presbyterianial view of church government. I may acquire all this information, together with the ability to quote chapter and page, and yet know nothing that is of true significance regarding the Presbyterian church in my own community. For all that I know, the minister may be an Auburn Affirmationist and as such a member of a very large group which has discarded great essentials, not only of Presbyterianism, but of Protestantism, yes, of Christianity.

I am in greater straits even when I am to form a realistic judgment regarding a communion like the Baptists. At least the Northern denomination of that name has given up in large measure the very first of the so-called Six Principles, namely, the supreme authority of Scripture, by which old-type Baptists intended to "exclude from doctrine and practise whatever is without Scriptural warrant." It is no longer true regarding Northern Baptists what was stated in the *Concordia Cyclopaedia* only ten years ago, that, while divided

into Conservatives and Liberals, "the denomination as such has always held, in a general way, to the plain teachings of the Word of God." Modernism has engulfed a great part of the denomination and today is in control of the theological seminaries. Of what practical value is it, then, to investigate the "Baptist doctrine"? There is no such thing. Even immersion is not insisted upon. Very similar statements must be made about the Methodist bodies, the Congregationalists, the United Brethren, the Christian Church.

The practical implications are important. We are in danger of acting on assumptions that have no basis in fact. To exemplify: we are engaged in a local canvass, and we discover among the cards a number of the entries "Church preference" followed by the designations "Baptist," "Methodist," "Presbyterian," etc. Acting on the purely academic judgment which classifies these denominations as Christian, Protestant, Evangelical, we lay all these cards aside as outside our possible interest in local mission-work. They cannot be "prospects" because they are members of a Christian church. As a matter of fact they may be members of an organization which has been under the tutelage of a rationalist these many years. We are sometimes astonished at the familiarity, on the one hand, which these people have with the Bible, and, on the other, at their utter lack of comprehension for Christian truth. The explanation is simple enough. In a nominally Christian church they have never heard the Gospel, and what preaching they have heard has served to prevent their understanding of the Scriptures and to close their eyes to such essential doctrines as those of redemption, atonement, justification. In other words, they have not been members of a flock guided by a shepherd who, with all his failings, is an undershepherd of Christ and whose office we must respect as a Christian ministry; but they have been sheep shepherded by a wolf.

What one should emphasize in the study of comparative symbolics today is not so much the historical teachings and spirit of church-bodies such as have been mentioned, as by a realistic attitude safeguard against unwarranted conclusions drawn from standards which are still referred to as the "creed" or "doctrinal basis" of the denominations but which have long ago yielded to a rationalistic and modernistic interpretation.

Crossing the denominational lines horizontally and diagonally are such movements as dispensationalism, revivalism, Oxford movement (Buchmanism), divine healing, socialism, pacifism, prohibition, and many others which today are far more characteristic of American church-bodies than their historic creeds. And since it is impossible to keep up with the literature of religious America, or even with the literature of one denomination, it behooves the minister of today to keep his eyes open for significant trends, un-

dertakings, and movements in the churches of his own community; gain such information about their origin as is being continually supplied through the pages of the **CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY**; and on the basis of such systematic study, supplemented by indexing and filing of pertinent information, equip himself more and more fully for the task of explaining to his people what separates them from Rome, sectarianism, and the cults and why such separation is a God-pleasing one.

TH. GRAEBNER

A Course in Lutheran Theology

(Continued)

Luther points out that the "free-will" heresy has "gained so much ground," p. 362.²⁶⁾ Indeed, in what period of history and in what part of the Church did it not make its baneful influence widely felt? It had and it has a strangle-hold on philosophy and theology. It is "the myth of all ages,"²⁷⁾ accepted and proclaimed as God's truth. The keenest philosophers have succumbed to it. Kant embraced it and Fichte and the rest. Emerson sang its praises: "For He that ruleth high and wide Nor pauseth in His plan, Will tear the sun out of the skies Ere freedom out of man."²⁸⁾ And people like to hear W. E. Henly declaim: "Out of the night that covers me, Black as the pit from pole to pole, I thank whatever gods may be For my unconquerable soul. . . . I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul." What about the theologians? Erasmus had many predecessors and many more successors. Justin Martyr already championed the cause of "free will." "Unless the human race has the power of avoiding evil and choosing good by free choice, they are not accountable for their actions, of whatever kind they be. But that it is by free choice that both walk uprightly and stumble, we thus demonstrate." (*Apology* I, 43.) Catholic theology has ranged itself on the side of "free will." The Synod of Trent declares that "men are called through the prevenient grace of God . . . , that so they who by sins were alienated from God may be disposed through this quickening and assisting grace to convert themselves to their own justification by freely assenting to, and

26) *The Bondage of the Will*, Cole-Atherton translation. — St. Louis edition, XVIII, 1944.

27) The subtitle to O. Schumacher's German translation of *De Servo Arbitrio*: Martin Luther, *Vom unfreien Willen*, is: "Eine Kampfschrift gegen den Mythos aller Zeiten."

28) And L. S. Keyser liked the song. He announces it with the words "Emerson has given us a bracing quatrain." (*A Manual of Christian Ethics*, p. 67.)