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A Theological Appraisal of Comparative Symbolics

Thoughts suggested by the second edition of *The Religious Bodies of America*

By HERBERT J. A. BOUMAN

THE religious scene in America presents a bewildering spectacle of about 250 religious groups maintaining a separate and often precarious existence. This multiplicity of denominations, sects, and sectlets, segregated not only by deep and basic doctrinal cleavage but all too often also by merely peripheral and even meaningless differences, is extremely confusing to a thoughtful observer. Even worse, the disunity of churches, all of which claim some relation to Christ and His Word, is bound to be a sore scandal. At first glance this ecclesiastical fragmentation seems to defy intelligent and intelligible analysis. A little stirring beneath the surface, however, reveals that there are really only a few fundamentally different themes in religion which recur over and over with slight variations and usually lead to the same refrain. After all, the possibilities from a Christian point of view are limited, as may be demonstrated by several basic doctrines. Concerning Christ, for example, either He is true God, begotten of the Father from eternity and also true man born of the Virgin Mary, or He is only a man, or perhaps only God, or some hardly definable half-God half-man. In the Personal Union either the two natures are inseparably linked together through the Incarnation, so that there is full communication between them without diminution of the Godhead or the humanity, or the two natures are thrown together in an accidental junction without sharing anything, or the two natures are confusedly intermingled. Theoretically man may be viewed either as spiritually dead or as healthily alive, or as half dead, half alive. Salvation is either the work of God alone, or that of man alone, or a combination of both. The Holy Scriptures are either of divine origin and authority, or the product of human thinking, or a jumbled mixture of divine and human, to be sorted out by the ingenuity of the individual. The basic distinction of Law and Gospel, of justification and sanctification, may be subjected to a similar treatment. The source of a church's doctrine, its formal principle, can be either *sola Scriptura*, or human subjectivity, or Scripture plus something else, whether that be tradition, or reason, or ecclesiastical decree, or some other human contribution. The Christian faith and life may be viewed either in relation to Christ and the dynamic of the grace of God, that is to say, evangelically, or as subject to an automatic code, that is to say, legalistically. Though there may be almost infinite variations on these basic propositions, it should be clear that these varia-

tions represent differences in degree rather than in kind. From this point of view it should also be clear that by cutting across nonessentials and focusing on what really matters, a workable classification of religious bodies is not too difficult. Such an approach is truly theological.

There are, of course, other ways of dealing with the various religious bodies. One way could be largely statistical. We could list the decisive protagonists of a religious group, the essential historical and geographical data, the relative size, an objective catalog of its beliefs, the core of its system, or its material principle, etc. Philosophical, sociological, or political concerns might suggest other possible treatments. However, no matter how important these considerations, individually and collectively, may be to the total picture, they would not do adequate justice to comparative symbolics. Only a genuinely theological appraisal will satisfy.

This procedure is relatively easy when churches maintain an unchanging attitude toward the classic statements of their faith. Lutherans, e. g., believe that their symbols as enunciated in the sixteenth century are a correct exposition of the content and purpose of Scripture; and since the teachings of Scripture do not change from age to age, a correct exposition of them is likewise of abiding validity and authority. This, of course, does not preclude the possibility or even the necessity of further clarification and amplification as the theological needs of the moment may require. Yet the truth remains unchanged. The majority of the other historic church bodies, however, do not so regard their symbols. Rather these are viewed as an expression of what the church believed at the time of their formulation. They do not necessarily express what the church believes today. Clearly, this kind of theological relativism makes it imperative that comparative symbolics be more comprehensive than laying the various historical symbols side by side and noting their divergence.

A theological approach furthermore involves a number of basic considerations. First of all, there is the presupposition expressed by Luther in the Smalcald Articles, "The Word of God shall establish articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel." Unswerving loyalty to the Word of God as the only source and norm of Christian doctrine is a prerequisite. "Is the doctrine Scriptural?" must be asked at every turn. It will be seen at once that this involves a definite commitment, one that demands more than recognizing the *what* of a man's belief. It also calls for a judgment on the Scripturalness of the *what*. The word *objective* is much misused. The scientific approach must be objective above all else. If by "objective" we mean that we must be scrupulously honest and fair in presenting the religious views of a body, without bias or subjective coloration, then, indeed, we want to be objective by all means. If, on the contrary, objectivity is meant to convey a cold, colorless, convictionless cataloguing, then a Christian theological approach cannot be objective, as little as the man in John 9 could be expected to be "objective" about his lifelong blindness and about Jesus, who had effected so marvelous a cure. As a Chris-

tian, I am committed to Christ, and opposed to all that is unchristian; as a Lutheran Christian, I am committed to what is Lutheran and opposed to what is not Lutheran.

A theological approach recognizes both the unitive and the divisive power of truth. The truth of the Word of God presents the magnetic rallying point for all who are devoted to it, as the emphasis on the *consensus* in the Lutheran symbols demonstrates. But the truth also creates sharp divisions. It alone makes meaningful separation between orthodox and heterodox, between true and heretical. Comparative symbolics, therefore, involves both thesis and antithesis.

As we come to grips with the opinions of those who "teach otherwise," a genuine theological concern must beware of a self-righteous, holier-than-thou, legalistic, and separatistic attitude, as exemplified by the Pharisee's "I thank Thee that I am not as other men are."

Nor, conversely, dare we adopt an apologetic mien. A Lutheran who apologizes for his faith and heritage presents a strange anomaly. Shall we be ashamed of the Lutheran doxology of the all-sufficient grace of God in Christ? And shall we shamelessly ogle the specious charms of all manner of isms that obscure that glory?

Again, to be sincerely theological, our treatment of other religious, specifically Christian, groups can never be an indifferent one, indifferent either to what is good or to what is bad. Whatever is contrary to a total acknowledgment of the lordship of Christ, no matter in how small measure, dare not be shrugged off with a "so what?" The road to unionism and a false ecumenism is strewn thick with the bleaching bones of a loveless tolerance. On the other hand, a loveless intolerance is bred by a blindness to what is Christian in one whom, as a matter of fact, I recognize as a fellow Christian.

To be theological in our evaluation of our fellow Christian of whatever name, we must be genuinely humble at all times. Rejoicing without measure in the miracle of divine grace which has kept him Christian in spite of doctrinal deficiencies, we must at the same time have the grace to blush at the meager evidence of our Christian life compared with his (cf. last paragraph of Preface in Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. I). Remembering that our approach to others dare never lose sight of its constructive purpose of "convincing the gainsayer" and of "gaining the brother," we must at all times speak out of firm, definite, positive convictions. We owe it to others to be unyielding in the things of which we have been assured; we owe it to them to spurn compromise in the things pertaining to God, things that admit of no compromise. We owe it to them to shun any semblance of ambiguity and theological *double-entendre*, than which nothing is more exasperating and unfruitful. Indeed, we owe it to them to engage in Scripturally approved polemics, tenaciously, earnestly, unequivocally, in meekness and in holy fear, in the pursuit of love, love for God and love for truth and love for the neighbor, so that the

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truth of God may triumph and shine resplendent in the heart and life of man.

And so, charitable withal. We want to remember that we are dealing with our fellow men for whom Christ died, to whom we owe the inescapable debt of love. Therefore we will not fight about words *per se*. If what the other man says is Scriptural and Christian, we will not compel him to adopt our familiar terminology. We will not indulge in attacking persons. We will put the best construction on the other man's words and recognize the presence of a "happy inconsistency," where the heart believes far better than the mouth speaks. Above all, we will ask the question, "What think ye of Christ?" and we will evaluate the member of another church on the basis of his answer.

Such an approach, in the opinion of many competent judges, characterizes the comprehensive study by the sainted Frederic Mayer, *The Religious Bodies of America*. In the preface to the first edition the author states: "In this text the author has endeavored to observe the following theological principles: an unqualified submission to the divine truth as it is revealed in the sacred records of Holy Scripture; acceptance of the Word of God as the absolute and final standard and rule of all Christian proclamation; the conviction that the Lutheran Confessions are a full and correct witness to this divinely revealed truth; a deep concern to preserve and cultivate the true ecumenical spirit which recognizes the spiritual unity of all Christians through faith in Christ, transcending all denominational lines, but which at the same time is conscious of the obligation to censure and to correct every doctrinal trend which threatens to undermine or destroy the unity of faith."

So great was the demand for this book that in nine months the sizable first edition was completely sold out. Now, under the conscientious and painstaking supervision of Dr. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, *The Religious Bodies of America* appears in a second edition as an even better book. The sainted author's own notes for a possible revision, extensive correspondence with denominational leaders, careful critical reviews in many theological journals, constructive suggestions by teachers and students alike—all these have combined to help in the eradication of errors in fact or judgment and in the removal of statements subject to misunderstanding. To every pastor and intelligent layman this book is recommended for a sober theological appraisal of the doctrines and practices of the various denominations and religious groups. A massive bibliography invites the serious reader to well-nigh unlimited further study of the denominational sources. A glossary of theological terms and an index of persons and subjects provide additional aids to intelligent study. No amount of talking about the fields of comparative symbolics and Dr. Mayer's distinguished contribution will substitute for a reading of the book.

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