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Just Enough? Lutherans, Slavery, and the Struggle for Racial Justice

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A *Amazing Grace*, the cinematic celebration of the life and work of English abolitionist William Wilberforce, despite its romantic twists and exaggerated claims, rightly memorializes the official closing of the British Atlantic slave trade two hundred years ago. This bicentennial year also affords a propitious moment for pause and reflection about race relations, past and present, and the ongoing struggle for racial justice in nation and society. Here I wish to reflect on the relationship of Lutheranism to the twin struggles to end slavery and to extend to black Americans the burden and blessing of citizenship. My starting point is an implicit observation aired by eminent historian and churchman Martin Marty at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota four years ago: Lutherans have excelled building educational institutions, supporting their historic immigrant communities, and serving others through acts of mercy and kindness—and have fared less well doing the work of social justice.

This is assuredly not welcome news, but then historians can be as notorious as preachers in afflicting the comfortable. Marty's tacit distinction easily grabbed my interest as an historian but also piqued my curiosity as an adopted newcomer still sorting through the nuances, contributions, and legacies of Lutheranism in American society. Marty's idea is discomfiting, but as such it is all the more worth pursuing. Wanting further clarification, I instinctively turned to the troublesome history of slavery and its turbulent politics. How were Lutherans involved? What I discovered is a mixture of the predictable and unexpected, equally encouraging and sobering; standard fare perhaps of historical exploration. But the aggregate can finally, it is my hope, render some fresh perspective on the present, a compass pointing to where we are and where we would like to go.

Beginnings

Francis Daniel Pastorius inaugurates this story with a flourish. A recent Lutheran émigré from Windsheim in the region of Bavaria, Pastorius prepared and presented an anti-slavery petition, the first of its kind in British America, at a Friends' Meeting in Germantown, Pennsylvania in 1688 (Nothstein, 101–105). This was a remarkable first, probably helped along by the strong anti-slavery culture of early Quaker Pennsylvania and Pastorius's friendship with William Penn, but would it be a precedent? Looking forward a century-and-a-half, Lutherans resided across the regions of an expanding nation and figured somehow on all sides of the peculiar institution. In some instances, they became slave owners; in others, they opposed slavery, but rarely did they become ardent Garrisonians. Lutheran newcomers, from Pastorius's time to the first Scandinavian folk migrations of the nineteenth century, were naturally

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occupied with their own lives and daily concerns. The evidence reveals only scarce contact with free blacks or their organizations and communities.

Slave-Owning

That some Lutherans became slaveholders should come as no surprise. Despite regional variations, by 1700 slavery existed throughout British colonial America, including the Lutheran hearth of the Middle Colonies. One finds evidence of both slave and free black members in New York City's first Lutheran congregation as early as 1669. Much later, pastor Wilhelm Christoph Berkenmeyer, ostensibly concerned that slave members might leverage freedom based on their equal calling as Christians, anticipated and nullified potential claimants in framing the church's 1735 constitution. "In regard to the Negroes, a pastor shall previously ascertain that they do not intend to abuse their Christianity, to break the laws of the land, or to dissolve the tie of obedience; yea, he must have a positive promise that Christianity will not only be entered upon, but that the same shall be practiced in life" (quoted in Kreider, 56). The constitution addressed his own circumstance: Berkenmeyer owned a slave couple. He performed their baptisms and conducted their eventual marriage (Stange, 272).

Led by the Palatinate Germans who moved down the Shenandoah Valley into Virginia and the Carolinas, growing numbers of Lutherans settled in the South during the first half of the eighteenth century, and some became slave owners. The Salzburger Lutherans, expelled from their German homelands for religious reasons, began settling at Savannah, Georgia in the 1730s. Although they initially followed the lead of John M. Boltzius, one of their pastors who strongly opposed slavery, the Salzburgers began to accept the practice as a necessary feature of plantation agriculture. Religious leaders such as prominent evangelist George Whitefield condoned the use of slavery in Georgia, and Rev. Urlsperger of Halle, spoke to soothe Boltzius's troubled conscience: "If you take slaves in faith, and with the intent of conducting them to Christ, the action will not be a sin, but it may prove a benediction" (Stange, 276). The Salzburgers thus validated slavery as a means to protect bondsmen and to inculcate the faith, especially among the young. Halle's emissary and church organizer extraordinaire Henry Melchior Muhlenburg denounced slavery, but southern slave owners included clergy like George Samuel Klug of Hebron Church in Culpepper, Virginia, who identified with the colony's aristocratic gentry and favored the institution as a material blessing (Roeder, 140–141). Up to nine slaves toiled in Hebron's fields to offset church expenses and pay Klug's salary, a labor force that expanded after his pastorate ended (Stange, 274).

Aside from the Salzburgers in Georgia, we know relatively little about Lutheran efforts to serve blacks, slave or free, until 1818 when Gottlieb Schober of the General Synod advocated mission work among both slaves and free blacks in the South. "It is the duty of the elders of such congregations among which Negroes are living as slaves or free," he urged, "to provide a place for them in our churches; or when that cannot be done to build them a house adjoining or near to the church" (quoted in Johnson, 108). If Schober's call posed little to any political threat, it had little effect. At most, between 1820 and the Civil War, Southern Lutherans baptized or added to memberships perhaps 10,000 African Americans, using primarily a master-slave strategy, the least politically objectionable approach in which slaves were inducted into the faith and church of the master (Johnson, 123, 128–129).

After the Missouri Compromise, as opposition to slavery and the internal slave trade grew, defending slavery as a regional virtue received greater priority than Christianizing slaves. Passing a resolution in 1835, the South Carolina Synod condemned abolitionists' demands as "unjustifiable interference with our domestic institutions, [a subversion of constitutional liberties], and contrary to the precepts of our blessed savior, who commanded servants to be obedient to their masters, and the example of [Paul] who restored to his lawful owner a runaway slave" (quoted in Johnson, 122). Such pro-slavery positions, proofed by scripture, were indistinguishable from the South's defense of its unique way of life. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, the Virginia Synod expressed the sense of all the southern synods, being "fully persuaded" that the Confederate cause "is just and righteous" (quoted in Anderson, 49).

Anti-Slavery and Abolition

Eventually sectional tensions destroyed the unity that Lutheran leaders worked doggedly to maintain, just as they drove apart the fellowship of Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. The General Synod split along regional lines in 1862. But not all Lutherans in the South saw slavery as worth defending. For instance, debate surfaced among Lutherans in the Upper South during the 1820s about the morality of slavery. When the Tennessee Synod held sessions in 1822, one delegate impugned slavery as a “great evil in our land” (Johnson, 110). Such views were more common in eastern Tennessee whose mountainous terrain did not support plantation agriculture and whose residents owned very few slaves. Half of the anti-slavery men in the North Carolina legislature in the 1820s were German (Johnson, 110). As debates over slavery after 1840 brooked little compromise, some Lutherans in the Upper South, wishing to free their slaves, moved north of the Ohio Valley to do so. Most Lutherans, particularly in the Lower South, whether they were slaveholders or not, were likely committed to the Southern way of life, including slave-owning and white racial superiority.

In the North, Lutherans exercised even less evangelistic vigor among African-Americans, nor did they, understandably, agitate for the equal inclusion of free blacks in educational, political, and public life. At the time, very few whites challenged the northern color line. Samuel Schmucker, founder of the first Lutheran Seminary in North America at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania (1826), emerges as one figure who fused the tasks of building schools and seeking social justice that Marty observed were usually divided. An outspoken proponent of an American Lutheran church, Schmucker firmly opposed chattel slavery and used his offices to bring young theologians into the fold of abolitionism (Wentz, 167). Daniel Alexander Payne, foremost African Methodist Episcopal churchman of his generation, took his training at Gettysburg Seminary in the mid-1830s and later received ordination at the hands of the tiny Franckean Synod of New York. Payne made clear from the start that he wished neither to join the Lutheran Church nor to be bound by its theological positions (Johnson, 120–121). Still, it is worth recalling that Gettysburg Seminary and the Franckean Lutherans sponsored Payne’s influential career.

The Franckean Synod later adopted a radical abolitionist stance in declaring moral war against slavery. In 1838, seven years after initial publication of William Lloyd Garrison’s strident *Liberator*, the synod’s president rallied his listeners to break silence on the slavery topic and railed against the “apathy of Christians and the silence of ministers of [the] gospel... to rebuke the sin of slavery.” The synod passed with universal accord a Garrisonian resolution: “That we conceive it to be our imperative duty to speak boldly and plainly against this great national and heinous sin [of slavery]” (Heathcote, 54–55). In the 1840s, the Franckean Synod introduced anti-slavery resolutions at General Synod meetings with little success; only two small Ohio synods and the Pittsburgh Synod followed its lead in the 1840s. The Franckean alone called for action (Fortenbaugh, 76f). On the whole, Lutherans did not become strong anti-slavery advocates, nor did they champion the cause of free blacks in the North or the South. Historian Abdel Wentz notes the partial exception of Norwegian and Swedish newcomers who easily preferred the Midwest over the South and viewed slavery as unrighteous even as their clergy extemporized (Wentz, 164–166). Many probably harbored private qualms that slavery was immoral while outwardly, most tolerated or passively accepted the practice when they did not support it outright. Since racial slavery was the law of the land, tethered to the Constitution itself, Lutherans apparently followed a familiar pattern of firm, if not absolute, allegiance to the temporal governing authorities, as Martin Luther himself urged his followers at the time of the Knights’ Rebellion and the Peasants’ War of the 1520s. That such was the central tendency and not an inevitable outcome can be discerned in the appearance of individuals, congregations, and synods of the Lutheran heritage determined to abolish slavery. In 1850 the Norwegian Eilsen Synod denounced the “fearful sin of giving our consent to the slave traffic,” and advocated “all possible diligence in bringing about... the freeing of the negroes” (Fortenbaugh, 90).

Reconstruction and Beyond

Lutherans participated in the great national drama of Reconstruction as four million slaves were freed and the nation confronted with uncertainty the emergence of black citizenship. As early as 1861,

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Lutheran congregations and synods sent financial aid, volunteers, and teachers to the South. Renewed missionary efforts followed and a permanent church-planting enterprise began in 1877, even as the light of Reconstruction flickered out (Wentz, 166; Johnson, 146–148). Lutheran leaders in the South fiddled between, on the one hand, maintaining the status quo antebellum and, on the other, training and licensing black leadership to serve autonomous black congregations. Anticipating the future, the Tennessee Synod declared for the second of the two, “owing to the plainly marked distinctions which God has made between us and them, giving different colors, etc.” (quoted in Anderson, 211). Separatism as a strategy subtly recognized that freedmen, as in slavery, wished to form their own religious communities, showed little interest and less desire to follow white ecclesiastical authorities or church regulations. Realistically, Lutherans could not hope to compete with Baptists and Methodists who held many advantages in claiming or retaining African-Americans, since their style, structure, and spirit were more attuned to the existential situation of black folk.

Even so, results were unimpressive. In 1869 the South Carolina Synod stopped reporting figures on black membership. The project to sponsor separate black congregations gained little momentum, became caught in organizational indecision, and succumbed to dwindling moral commitment and meager financial resources. It petered out in the 1880s. “The only ordained colored Lutheran minister in the world,” as D. J. Koontz was known, provided the notable exception. His North Carolina congregations, set adrift by the General Synod of the South and rebuffed by the General Synod of the North, appealed finally to the Missouri Synod who dispatched a missionary in 1891 (see Anderson, 215–217).

Lutherans’ gifts to black citizenship were thus marked by parsimony and limited to acts of mercy, yet works of mercy and charity were certainly necessary. Retrospectively, one wishes there had been more, not less mercy, in this historical moment. Tragically, the larger cause of racial justice was deferred.

None of us can change the lived past, yet its history remains malleable, inviting, ever open to fresh visioning. It would thus be a grave error to forget that Lutherans boasted several earnest, not so quiescent, anti-slavery members. They sought to achieve a civic justice for black Americans by conforming the nation’s social and political institutions to standards of peace, inclusion, and democratic participation for all.

This brings us to the present, ground on which historians are reluctant to tread. Sadly, whether we care to admit it or not, evidence has mounted for some time that we are rapidly retreating as a nation from the political commitment and moral vision required to roll back racial injustice. Hurricane Katrina and the plight of black New Orleans shock us into momentary recognition but represent just a microcosm of our racially divided society and its woeful inequalities. Our collective values and priorities are surely implicated in a society that relegates black males to the nation’s jails and penitentiaries in grossly distorted numbers (Loury), whose schools and neighborhoods are as “separate and unequal” as ever (Kozol), and whose system of rewards and punishments favors the victorious and leaves the losers behind.

Adapting John Rawls’s concept of justice, Brown sociologist Glenn Loury would have us ask ourselves: “What social rules would we pick if we actually thought that *they* could be *us*?” (61). With this simple yet provocative question, Loury turns the racial tables by positing an alternative world where the privileged get demoted to the base of the social pyramid. Going beyond an imagined inverted world—and its potential to challenge business as usual in the present one—a gospel of Incarnation points to a more active, radical understanding: “Just as you did it to one of the least of these *who are members of my family*, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). No distancing from the other is conceivable here. The terrain on which the seed of injustice takes root and sprouts is taken up. What difference would it make if our witness and work to advance racial justice took this as its starting point? I would like to believe that the results would amount to more than just enough. †

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