

My Religious Development

My mother grew up in a solid Lutheran extended family whose members were pillars of Zion Lutheran Church, Ann Arbor, Michigan, a congregation of the old American Lutheran Church. My father's family were Wesleyan Methodists, members of a small denomination known for its moralistic pietism as well as its leadership of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, a pre-feminist movement aimed at protecting women from the abuse of their drunken husbands and fathers. My father left his home in rural Indiana when he was 17 years old and took the train to Detroit both in search of his fortune and to escape the narrow religiosity of his home and community.

I didn't grow up in a pastor's home. My mother was a high school English teacher, my father the warehouse superintendent for a regional gasoline and auto parts distributor. Because of my mother's religious background, we identified ourselves as Lutheran, and I attended Sunday School scrupulously (earning little lapel pins for perfect attendance) at a nearby Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod (LCMS) congregation, although our family was not so regular about attending Sunday worship itself. I remember my father eventually being baptized and joining the Lutheran church, after which he became active in our congregation, serving on the Church Council and eventually as its financial secretary. Afterward I often went to church services with him.

I think I was the most devout member of my family as a child. When I was little I would play minister, "marrying" the other kids in the neighborhood and declaiming mock sermons to no one but myself. Later, I think by maybe the sixth grade, I was buying theological books from Concordia Publishing House and pouring through them, acquiring a heavy dose of orthodox Lutheran teaching. My first real job was serving as the church's custodian for the two summers after I turned 14. I would clean the church, cut the grass, take out the trash, and then read the books in the pastor's study. I became the pastor's pet.

Of course, I totally espoused the conservative LCMS theology of that time (the 50s). I asked my seventh grade science teacher if we could have a debate about organic evolution. I would argue against it; my classmate and friend, Bill Wedlake, would argue for it. He agreed. I then prayed fervently to God to let this be a sign: If I won this debate, it would mean that God was calling me to be a minister.

On the day of the debate I brought along to school in an AWOL bag the books from Concordia Publishing House that I had been digesting, and I presented the arguments against evolution I

had gleaned from those books. Bill described evolution and its various ages, but he didn't actually present an argument in its defense. The teacher declared me the winner. I had my sign. From that day on I thought of myself as a future minister, and self-consciously thought I ought to be conforming my life morally and religiously to that calling.

Unfortunately, I simultaneously was entering adolescence with its attendant arousal of intense interest in and curiosity about girls and sex. My religious and moral understandings provided me no foundation on which to construe my sexual awakening as anything but problematic. I was interested in girls and wanted to get close to them, to touch them, to kiss them, to see them naked. But churchly books and articles warned against such "lustful thoughts", the "evil embrace" of dancing, and self-abuse. So I shrank from playing "Spin the Bottle" at a friend's birthday party, was wooden and ill at ease at school dances, and worried that even my thoughts were evidence of some moral depravity. I could not bring myself to date. Other boys introduced me to masturbation, and once having begun to practice it, I enjoyed it so thoroughly that I could not stop, though I prayed to God for strength. Instead I explored its nuances and relished its intense pleasures, and then suffered from unshakable shame and guilt.

None of this deterred me from my destiny. I took courses as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan designed to meet prerequisites for seminary, primarily Greek, Latin, and German. I was active in the LCMS student center. I tried to be a good Lutheran boy.

But I lived in dormitories, and my dorm mates and I would have discussions late into the night about religion and politics and the meaning of life and girls. Some of my friends were appalled at my Christian beliefs. "Gary," Ross Powell would say incredulously, "you really honestly believe that all the people in the world who have not declared their belief in Jesus are going to hell?!!!" And I would say, "Well, yes, that's what the Bible says."

But after two years I couldn't say it anymore. I announced to my parents that I couldn't accept the church's teaching any longer, I had become an atheist or at least an agnostic, and I no longer was going to church because it would be hypocritical to do so. I used my languages to create a major in Greek and determined to go to graduate school to prepare for college teaching.

But the next academic year (my junior year) I elected to take a course in the "Psychology of Religion" and another on the "Historical Background to the Bible." These were my first introduction to a critical assessment of religion. The Bible course taught me historical-critical methodology. We read John Bright's *The History of Israel*. And the second semester, taught by George Mendenhall, we read his important monograph, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the*

Ancient Near East, his demonstration of the dependence of Israelite covenants on the form of Hittite suzerainty treaties. For the first time, the Bible began to make sense to me as an account of ordinary peoples within ordinary human history. Its stories fit within the broad context of the movements that shaped the larger history of the ancient near east. I also read Paul Tillich's *Dynamics of Faith*, a wholly different approach to theology from what I had known and one that affirmed doubt as intrinsic to faith rather than as its opponent. This was all very interesting to me, but not enough to bring me back to the church.

After U. of M. I got scholarships and went to Harvard to begin a doctoral program in classical languages and literatures (i.e. Greek and Latin). But, out of curiosity, I stopped in to the on-campus Lutheran Church in America congregation, where Henry Horn was pastor at the time and Krister Stendahl and Helmut Koester of the Divinity School were members, as was Werner Jaeger, one of the world's foremost classicists, author of the three volume history of Greek culture, *Paideia*. I found a brand of Lutheranism of which I had been totally ignorant. It was contemporary, critical, intelligent, informed, socially relevant. I dropped in on classes at the divinity school and caught a further taste of how different a historical-critical approach to Christianity was from the one-dimensional version I had grown up with.

Within a month I was thrown into a major crisis. I had just entered a doctoral program, and I wanted to return to the church and enter seminary. My compromise was to stay at Harvard for a year, complete an M.A., which was possible under the rules of the department, and then enter seminary. Stendahl smoothed the way by offering me a tutorial course in New Testament which counted toward my classics master's degree. He also encouraged me to stay in the LCMS, arguing that the denomination was in process of becoming more liberal and open to new ideas and that I should make my contribution to that positive change.

The following year I entered Concordia Seminary, the LCMS theological school in St. Louis, Missouri. I may have been the most liberal student in the school. I certainly was "high church" at that time. But I thought what I wanted to think, wrote papers as I wanted to write them, said whatever I wanted to say about any religious topic and never had any problems with faculty, except the one time I wrote an article for *The Seminarian*, the student journal indirectly but transparently critiquing an unpublished attack on Situation Ethics which one of our ethics professors had circulated on the campus. I was strongly encouraged by the dean to apologize to Professor Klann so that he would not try to block my ordination, an apology, with attendant groveling, I managed to pull off.

I did weather one other potential crisis during seminary. During the three years in St. Louis, I also taught one or two classes at one of the Lutheran High Schools there, one year in English,

the other two in Religion. When we had a unit on sex in the religion class, I was too permissive for a few of the parents (predictable, huh?), who complained to their pastor. I apologized for being insensitive or something like that, and nothing came of it.

During my year-long internship at First Lutheran Church in Boston in 1964-65, Martin Luther King, Jr., led his March on Boston. With some other members of the congregation I joined that march as well as a Freedom Vigil held by African American Lutheran pastor Vernon Carter before the Boston School Committee headquarters. I witnessed Jonathan Kozol (author of *Death at an Early Age*) address the weeping parents of his former elementary school children to explain why he had been fired from his teaching position for having his pupils read Langston Hughes' poem, "The Landlord." Harvard theologian Harvey Cox published *The Secular City*, other theologians were exploring the "death of God," and I was forming a theology shaped by racial politics and the new post-Christian secularist approaches to the Gospel that grew out of the social turmoil of the 60s. Another article that I wrote for *The Seminarian* during the period was titled "Inter-racial Marriage as a Sign of the New Creation."

After seminary I married and went with my new wife to England to begin doctoral studies of patristics (theologians of the early church) with Henry Chadwick at Oxford University. He influenced me to work on Augustine, a theologian far too much studied by countless others, so I found it difficult to come up with "original" discoveries. That is, it seemed as though all of my discoveries, however original to me, had already been discovered by someone else during the past hundreds of years of scholarship. Besides, I was increasingly disturbed by Augustine's thought. He was extremely punitive in his views of sexuality and increasingly violent in his understanding of salvation: One of the blessings of the saved in heaven would be to be able to watch the agonies of the damned in hell. This was a theology I found repugnant.

I terminated my studies at Oxford in 1968 and returned to the United States to a doctoral program in classics (once again!) at Princeton University. My plan was to complete the doctorate and then to teach classics in a church-related college. Instead, after completing the residence requirement and comprehensive examination in two years, I took an LCMS parish in a small town 50 miles south of Chicago, where I planned to get parish pastoral experience while working on my dissertation.

Our Savior Lutheran Church, Momence, Illinois, turned out to be an extremely conservative congregation in an equally conservative area of rural northern Illinois. I was accused of being unpatriotic because I failed to stand for the passing of the color guard at the annual Gladiolus Festival Parade, when I was sick and feverish with a urinary infection. I was accused of being a Communist because I would not absolutely condemn students demonstrating against the

Vietnam War who burned ROTC facilities. I was accused of demeaning Scripture because I smiled during my sermons. I was accused of being an antinomian because I stressed Gospel and God's love and acceptance and would not pound on the congregation's head with God's Law. It didn't help that, in the mildest possible way I could imagine at the time, I brought up in a sermon the town's problems with racism after an incident at our local high school.

Simultaneously the faculty of Concordia Seminary was being assaulted by a newly elected Board of Control, which aimed at ridding the seminary of its liberal ideas. In 1973 I was no longer prepared to fight its battles and determined to leave the LCMS. I left my parish, moved to Champaign, Illinois, and, using the resources of the University of Illinois library, worked on my dissertation for a year. I also served without incident as interim pastor at an LCMS congregation in nearby Philo, Illinois.

In 1974 I received the call to be campus pastor and director of continuing education at Grand View College, an LCA college in Des Moines, Iowa. I joined the ministerium of the LCA and felt as though I finally tasted peace and freedom. In 1976 I came to Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary to initiate a new Doctor of Ministry degree program for parish pastors and to manage continuing education for the seminary.

PLTS was in California, in the San Francisco bay area, in Berkeley. This was 1800 miles geographically and light years culturally from Momence. PLTS was and is a member of the Graduate Theological Union, an ecumenical and interreligious consortium, where Lutheran, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, Baptist, UCC, eastern Orthodox, and Unitarian Universalist faculty and students teach and learn and socialize together along with Jewish and Buddhist teachers and students. As a result, my theology has continued to broaden.

As director of continuing education I brought to our summer session, Bernard Loomer, a process theologian who had once been dean of the University of Chicago Divinity School, and I sat in on his class on process theology. I was introduced to concepts of "actual moments" and "richness" and "the self as an emergent from relationships" and "process modes of thought" and was attracted to the notion that God is in, with, and under each actual moment of existence and interacts continually with the creation by luring from each minuscule actual moment its most positive and hopeful possibilities. I continue to be strongly influenced by process theology today.

In 1980 I finally finished my dissertation and got my degree, but I only began to teach Greek as I neared retirement. My interests have always been practical and personal. In 1990 I returned to school to get my master's degree in counseling and in 1995 was licensed as a Marriage,

Family, and Child Counselor. I saw about 8-10 clients in a private practice in Oakland near my home, while I taught pastoral care and counseling at PLTS and the GTU. In 2005 I retired from my full-time teaching at PLTS and from my counseling practice, but continue to teach the required courses in Greek at PLTS.

The counseling studies, my own three years of therapy, and the continuing therapy I offered to others have continued to alter my theology. If the world is to have a god, I have come to believe that it needs a compassionate God, who does not carp, criticize, or condemn; who does not threaten punishment or visit eternal misery on anyone; who is ultimately empathic, i.e. understanding; unconditionally loving and accepting; unreservedly supportive of life abundant for the whole creation. Like Matthew Fox, I would place an emphasis on God's original blessing rather than on humanity's original sin (a doctrine designed by Augustine). To avoid harm I believe the Bible as well as all the dogmas, doctrines, and documents of the church, must be viewed critically in their historical context. God's living Word is not located in the texts themselves, but in the interaction between the reader, in the company of other contemporary readers, and the texts, in the light of the cultural changes that have occurred and the new realms of knowledge that have opened up between the writing and the reading. As my mentor Krister Stendahl would say, we need to emphasize and accentuate the distance between the world of the biblical authors [and the authors of our dogmas and official doctrines!] and our own rather than to collapse that distance, as though those writers could just as well be living down the street from us.

In my own life, in my counseling practice, and in my interactions with seminary students I have come to know the damaging effects that religious beliefs and practices have inflicted on the most devout of children and adults. On the other hand, the great world's religions at their best have provided comfort to their adherents, inhibited their aggressive impulses, and created communities of conscience and compassion. This [web site](#) is a stage on the way, even as my theology and my religious consciousness are on the way to a future I trust, though I cannot know its dimensions.