

# Lundensian Theology in the United States

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I wish to begin with something that may sound a bit trivial, but I have good reason to begin this way. I wish to recall a late teenage memory of sitting in the barber's chair, making easy and enjoyable conversation while my hair was being cut. (In those days the job took longer than it does today.) All at once, out of polite interest, the barber asked me what course of studies I intended to pursue in college. Not sensing that this was a hostile question at all, I simply responded that I had been considering majoring in philosophy. Upon hearing this, the barber inexplicably dropped both his comb and the scissors on the floor. Apparently he was so astonished by my confession that he involuntarily lost his grip. After he calmed himself, he asked, «did you really say *philosophy*?» When I said «yes» quietly — hoping not to disturb him further, for he still had much of the haircut to complete), he replied with this question, «but aren't you afraid that philosophy will destroy your faith?»

Years later, when sitting before an examiner's committee at the theological seminary I was attending, I was asked some pointed questions that were calculated to test the same proposition. I confided to the group that the reading of Plato's *Republic* during my undergraduate years had been a significant learning experience for me. I said that I will always remember what it was like to read passages of that book the first time. Indeed, I found that I couldn't put the text down, so enthralled was I. One of the examiners queried: «but don't you think too much philosophy can be dangerous?» Again, recalling the episode in the barbershop, and wishing to avoid a show-

down, I tried to explain that I was not yet even close to such a large consumption of philosophy.

For many of us who were born and raised in the American/Scandinavian Lutheran theological tradition, issues of this kind have been with us for as long as we can remember. We have quarreled about the appropriate place of human reason within a framework where the definitive truths are understood to have been divinely revealed. We have persisted with questions about the extent to which intellectual initiative can be taken regarding subjects the knowledge of which is understood to be available through processes differently ordered from those of speculative intellection. The reasons these matters are crucial, we were taught, is that the human being cannot think his/her way toward the truths of the Gospel. Thinking may be useful to elucidate insights regarding such truth, but, within this sphere, can never be approached as an inventive or creative or creative organ.

Hence, the barber, as well as the examiners, were worried that I might have put myself into spiritual jeopardy by expecting philosophy to perform duties concerning which it had no proper qualifications. The truths which stand as the basis of authentic religion, they were eager to attest, are not the ones that are accessible philosophically.

It was when I was struggling with matters of this kind, as a college and seminary student, that I encountered the writings of Anders Nygren (1890–1978), noted Swedish Lutheran professor, author, and bishop. I was immediately attracted to his work for I recognized him to be an advocate

of a vital faith, who, simultaneously, approached philosophical reasoning with respect, seriousness, and consequent methodological skill. I sensed that he was dedicated to working out some effective rapprochement between the truths of faith and philosophical truth in a manner that would be mutually supportive, that is, if such formulae could be attained. Nygren's writings reflected an attitude that saw religion and philosophy as something other than natural enemies.

Of course, I learned this about Nygren's programmatic intentions gradually. First exposure to his thought came via his still best-known book in the United States, *Agape and Eros*, a study of the Christian concept of love, first published in 1932, which quickly became required reading for all thoughtful Lutherans. The companion volume, also required reading, was the book, *Faith of the Christian Church* (1947), written by Nygren's colleague, Gustaf Aulén. Nygren's comparative research was conducted in such fashion that the Christian belief tended to prove itself superior to the beliefs and attitudes of both the Greeks and the Jews. And Aulén's dogmatics provided a distinctively Lutheran description of the teachings of the Christian faith.

All of this, I supposed, was to be expected. But along the way I discovered that Nygren was rather secondarily interested in conversation with readers intent on reading church history. More crucial to him was the conversation he was having with certain theologians, philosophers, and writers from the past as to whether historical and dogmatic theological truth could be presented in a fashion that exhibited no metaphysical alignment or dependence whatever. Certainly the intellectual movements of the time, primarily linguistic analysis and logical positivism, had thrown large challenges before the disciplines of both theology and philosophy of religion. He recognized that these challenges created new opportunities for fresh thinking, and he wished devoutly to think such matters through as systematically as possible.

Later, when reading his intellectual autobiography, I learned that it was in conversation with Docent Torgny Segerstedt that, then doctoral student, Anders Nygren formulated his intellectual task. He recognized that both philoso-

phy of religion and systematic theology would not qualify as being scientific if they were dependent upon a fraudulent metaphysics. And this dictates his research program. As he put it: «The possibility of a purely scientific non-metaphysical philosophy of religion had to be fundamentally explored, as well as the scientific basis of dogmatics and moral theology.» The goal, he reiterated, was «to establish the philosophy of religion as a purely scientific discipline, while repudiating every form of metaphysics.»

I submit that this point of view appealed to Lutherans primarily in the midwestern portions of the United States, for we had no metaphysical commitments, were obligated to no philosophical tradition of this kind. If anything, whether we knew it or not, we were *pragmatists*, potential disciples of John Dewey, with some allegiance to Alfred North Whitehead and George Santayana, who read Walt Whitman's and later Robert Frost's poetry, and became well acquainted with the music of Stephen Foster. It probably goes without saying that first, second, and third generation immigrants don't spend many of their evenings trying to fathom Hegelian dialectics.

Thus, it was entirely appropriate that *Agape and Eros* would be the first of Nygren's books to be translated into English and published within the United States. I say it is significant that this is the first book that we were able to read rather than the treatises on philosophy of religion and/or on methodology. One could read *Agape and Eros* without knowing much at all about Nygren's overall intellectual program. But, as I have noted, we were given a companion volume, namely, Aulén's *Faith of the Christian Church*. Little did we know how thoroughly compatible Aulén's descriptive treatise was with the methodological orientation Nygren had worked out in such works as *Philosophy and Motif-Research*, and, most especially, his dissertation on *The Religious Apriori*. None of the propaedeutic mattered. One could read both of these books with great profit and insight. And this is exactly what happened. At least one generation of Lutheran ministers (and perhaps more) was trained at Augustana Theological Seminary in Rock Island, Illinois, chiefly on Nygren's and Aulén's two treatises, each of which was assigned as a re-

quired text. We all read them. In fact, during those years — I refer to the 1950s and 1960s — Rock Island was a kind of «hotbed» of Lundensian thought. And this is significant for a variety of reasons, not least of which was that American Lutherans, by this time, had not developed much independent theology of their own. But the other way of saying this is that Lundensian thought must have been sufficiently compatible with American church life that training for an American ministry could be undertaken under Lundensian theological inspiration and sponsorship.

My recollection is that much of this happened because there were outstanding leaders within the Augustana tradition who knew the Swedish language well, were also familiar with current Swedish theological publications, and worked somewhat diligently to make certain that the most popular of these books were translated into English. I refer specifically to Eric Wahlstrom, a remarkable professor of New Testament, who undertake the translation of numerous books of Lundensian origin. In this connection, one must also pay tribute to Conrad Bergendoff, who was president of Augustana College, and who is alive today at the age of 99, who brought to American Lutherans' attention the works of other Swedish writers, such as Yngve Brilioth, Einar Billing, and Ragnar Bring.

Significantly, we were primarily oriented to Lund, and not to Uppsala. The university up there north and west of Stockholm, we were informed, did less with theology than it was doing with the history/phenomenology of religions. These disciplines, at the time, did not enjoy a prominent place within the theological seminary curricula. Yes, if we got into biblical studies, we would hear about I. Engnell's book on *Divine Kingship* and there were other treatises of this kind that were referenced. But there was little dependence, if any, on the writings of Nathan Soderblom, whose work first surfaced, if I recall rightly, via his connections with the Faith and Order Movement, and, subsequently, with the World Council of Churches. It was only much later that I learned about Söderblom's book, *The Living God* and I didn't know about any of Söderblom's successors, Tor Andrea and Geo Widengren, in particular, until I journeyed to Lund and Uppsala, in the summer of 1972, and

stayed with our family in camping places nearby each city, so that I could explore the university libraries on my own. I have always known that there was more to the Lundensian story than the portion of it that was transmitted to us who studied theology in Swedish Lutheran places in the United States.

And this brings us to the question of Gustaf Wingren. I choose the words carefully, for it was *the question* of Professor Wingren, and not simply the writings or the theology of Gustaf Wingren that concerned us most. What we learned about Gustaf Wingren was that he was challenging the theories of Anders Nygren, and we knew that it had something to do with the doctrine of creation, and that it was pretty devastating criticism. It may sound rather strange to your ears, but most of us, in my judgment, hoped that Professor Wingren was wrong. Actually, we didn't know if he was right or wrong, and we didn't know enough of the details of the quarrel to make a reliable judgment, but this wasn't the issue. Our collective spiritual loyalties were with Nygren (who in so many ways gave us the language and method by which to approach Christian belief): we didn't want to see his views being attacked. Why? Because Anders Nygren, whether he knew or it, or would have chosen it or not, was our theological anchor. We didn't possess the rest of the story at the time — I refer to the longer theological history, from Kant to Schleiermacher to Ritschl to Troeltsch and beyond — to give us a broader perspective. And though we didn't deserve to be called fundamentalists, we had already accorded Anders Nygren's *Agape and Eros* and Gustaf Aulén's *Faith of the Christian Church* normative status. These were the texts that gave us reliable orientation to both the field of theology and to the tenets of the Christian faith. To take Wingren's criticisms of Nygren seriously would require an intellectual and emotional response that would truly have been disorienting.

There were other writers who came into our acquaintance or purview. I think I would have been powerfully attracted to the impressive work on dogmatics produced by Bengt Häggglund, for example, but they didn't appear in English until long after our foundational theological work was done. The same should have been true concern-

ing the writings of Knud Løgstrup, the Danish ethicist, but I suspect these works suffered because the author was primarily indebted to Bultmann and Gogarten. In my time in the seminary, Bultmann was highly controversial — if one had enthusiasm for his «de-mythologizing» project, one honored this enthusiasm in secret — and Gogarten was hardly known at all. Of course, the real problem for us was that Løgstrup was Danish, and our ancestors were Swedish.

Very few of us became expert at any of this. Yes, there were American Lutheran theologians who came to Sweden to study from time to time, and a number of them have done impressively well. And you have had some from Sweden who have come to the United States to teach there, notably, Krister Stendahl at Harvard and others not quite so well known. But the ones who have carried specific interest in Lundensian thought forward are rather few in number, and are being led, in my judgment, by two scholars, Thor Hall, of the University of Tennessee, and Bernard Erling, now professor emeritus at Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota. I frankly do not know how much traffic is moving in the other direction, that is, from the United States, to Lund, Uppsala, Aarhus, Oslo, Helsinki, and elsewhere. My hunch is that not very much theology «made in the U.S.A.» is being taught outside the U.S.A. except, perhaps, the writings of Harvey Cox, David Tracy, Walter Kaufmann, and the other prominent American theologians whose work is known to almost everyone.

The connection with Uppsala is an intriguing one, which, in my judgment, had greater impact on departments of religious studies — and programs in the academic study of religion — than it has on theological seminaries. Of course, by now this is a somewhat difficult distinction to make, for the history of religions (usually called *religionsgeschichte*) is having an increasing impact on theological education. In autobiographical terms, I was blessed, in Augustana Theological Seminary, by having a teacher named Nils Arne Bendtz, of Sweden, who gave us our initial course in phenomenology of religion, and even told us something about an «Uppsala School». By virtue of the fact that he was teaching these courses, on magic, myth, ritual, sacrifice, et al., while also teaching courses in systematic theol-

ogy, we were encouraged to believe that the two paths of disclosure and inquiry were compatible with each other. I will always be grateful for Bendtz' guidance because this meant, at least theoretically, and, of course, mostly symbolically, that we could harmonize Lund and Uppsala. This also meant that, as second or third generation immigrants, we could relate to the whole of Sweden and not just to selected portions of it. But Nils Arne Bendtz taught in the seminary for a very brief period. Consequently, few of us received Uppsala influence, while all benefited from Lund. This is why, to this very day, in pastor's offices throughout the country, one can find well-worn, well-used, dog-eared copies of *Agape and Eros* and *The Faith of the Christian Church* on the book shelves. No, the books have probably not been read or consulted for years, but the owners have no doubt appropriated their theses so deeply that the ideas and affirmations have become second nature to them.

What does this connection mean now in retrospect? How should one assess the influence of Lundensian thought on American Lutheran theology? How did it happen that systems of thought created in the place made their way across that large ocean, and informed thousands of pastorates from the Atlantic seaboard across the Great Plains all the way to the west coast?

As I have already suggested, the deliberate non-metaphysical character of Lundensian thought was strikingly compatible with the pragmatic orientation of those who had to make a go of life in the New World. I would also suggest that the clarity of the argument was compelling, in fact, in both instances. Both *Agape and Eros* and *The Faith of the Christian Church* were straightforward, tightly-organized, skilfully conceptualized, and theologically inviting. The first placed Christian truth within a broad-scope history of western philosophical and theological reflection. The second turned out to be a resilient commentary on The Apostles' Creed. Each lent remarkable accessibility to the truths they were communicating. Together they formed the kind of «primers» evangelical Lutheran Christians needed to make sense and application of their faith.

In addition, and this is not a small matter, they provided coveted connections to the Old World for people who were now living in the

New World. Yes, many of the immigrants who came from Sweden to America did not feel comfortable with established religion, for a large number of them had become marginalized by the harshness of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Swedish life. But after World War II, perhaps because they shared in the new prosperity, they could look back on the decision (either their own, their parents' or their grandparents') as a correct one. And in the midst of the so-called American «melting pot,» many of them became fiercely proud of their identity as Swedish-Americans. It is, therefore, understandable that the wave of nationalistic pride would include an openness to texts and other materials that could be imported from the «old country.»

How is Lundensian theology faring in the United States today? In all candor, I am not able to respond knowingly to this question, for I am not in the business of teaching theology, but am rather a member of the faculty in religious studies at a state university. I am confident I know what is happening in the States with respect to the academic study of religion; but I have only hearsay information about trends and developments in theology. My impression is that theological education no longer treats schools of thought as we did some years ago. That is, I suspect there is very little reference today to a Lundensian School, or an Uppsala School, a Marburg, a Tübingen, or even to, say, a Vanderbilt or an Emory School. My limited experience on campuses of theological seminaries tells me that theological education today is dominated by thematic orientations, for example, concern for the place of women in the church, gay and lesbian lifestyles, and the impact of new economic and geo-political realities on a global scale. I think I'd like to call this «special interest» theology, with apology to anyone who may take issue with this description. My impression is that contemporary theological education is far less theoretical — and, specifically, less formally philosophical — than it was when I was in school.

But my reference to academic studies of religion is not incidental. Neither is it inconsistent with the overall theme of this paper. Trained as I was in the form of Lundensian thought that was transplanted to the United States, I found my way to the academic study of religion, and have

been doing it for the last thirty years. Whether I am doing it correctly or not, or effectively or not, I am executing and practicing the very kind of program the possibility of which Anders Nygren was intent on creating. That is, I am engaged in the scientific study of religion in a way that I take to be thoroughly compatible with the teachings of the Christian faith.

But there is even more. In the hundreds of reviews that have followed the publication of *Agape and Eros* there has been some criticism of the author's intellectual history. As you recall, he takes «agape» to be the fundamental motif of Christianity, as «eros» serves Platonism and «nomos» is most characteristic of Judaism. The criticism is that this tripartite arrangement is so constructed that Christianity wins superiority on every count. I would have to agree with this criticism. But this does not mean that the overall methodological ploy is not a useful one. On the contrary, it is extraordinarily useful. I refer to the propensity to examine the religious traditions, within a comparative context, on the basis of their respective most fundamental motifs or driving forces. It was never Nygren's intention, in *Agape and Eros*, to provide a fullscale comparative analysis of the major religions of the world. And yet, this examination could be undertaken, if one chose to engage the religions this way. That is, one could select foundational or fundamental motifs — apart from which the traditions are not distinctive — and approach as well as portray their representative characteristics this way. In point of fact, current comparative studies of the world's religions — particularly approaches to the subject practiced by such scholars as Huston Smith and Arvind Sharma — proceed in precisely this way.

So I return to the episode in the barbershop. The barber dropped both comb and scissors when I testified that I wanted to study philosophy. Well, that was years ago. Since then I have studied philosophy, but under some powerful permission that was granted by some theoreticians who labored long and hard in the very institution in which I am privileged to deliver this lecture. I thank you very much for your attention, and I also want to say — I hope it shows — how proud I am to be linked to you in the extended manner in which I have described.