

Winter 2006

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Recommended Citation

Padgett, Alan G., "Generic Protestantism: The Gospel's Embrace of Culture?" (2006). *Faculty Publications*. 151.
http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/151

Published Citation

Padgett, Alan G. "Generic Protestantism: The Gospel's Embrace of Culture?" *Word & World* 26, no. 1 (2006): 99, 101.

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Generic Protestantism: Tolerance without Specificity

DENNIS BIELFELDT

After college I farmed for a time with my father in northwest Iowa. I vividly recall traveling with my hog-farmer philosopher friend Doug to Orange City, Iowa, to hear Martin Marty speak. In the question and answer session Doug asked Marty a question that deeply resonated with me: “You have spoken of the importance of *tolerance* in our religious commitments. This I understand. But how exactly is religious *commitment* possible in an age of tolerance?”

Doug’s question has remained important to me. In a culture that enshrines individualism, autonomy, freedom, pluralism, and tolerance, what becomes of commitment? Can one truly be committed to a view of things that one acknowledges deep down is merely one perspective, a perspective that is but one option among many justifiable ways of seeing and doing things? How is specific religious commitment possible in an ethos of general religious tolerance?

Recently someone asked a colleague in pharmacy what he thought about generic drugs. He responded quickly: “Generic drugs are cheap alternatives to name brands that are manufactured when excitement over the original has died out.” I wondered if his characterization of generic drugs might not connect to the problem of specificity and commitment in this time of pluralism and tolerance. Is not the move toward the generic precisely a move away from the specificity of the name brands? Why or how should we care any longer about name brands when we have a “cheap alternative”? Has the general become for us the cheap alternative to the specificity and commitment of “name-brand” Lutheranism? Have we embraced the generic general precisely because we believe the specific name brand does nothing more than its generic counterpart?

Lutheranism in North America stands at a crossroads. As a name-brand Reformation tradition, it emerged and spread on the strength of the specificity of its doctrinal positions and religious commitments. While some Lutheran traditions try to retain this ethos by repristinating a golden era—they try to bring back a time that is not our time—many within the ELCA have followed the general drift of mainline Protestantism towards the nonspecific. Accordingly, we now find a “generic Protestantism” widely practiced within the ELCA, a Protestantism that downplays the specifics of Christian dogma in favor of pluralism, tolerance, justice, individual rights and dignity, a Protestantism that postures as a “cheap alternative” to the original after excitement for the latter has “died out.”

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TO FACE

Generic Protestantism: The Gospel's Embrace of Culture?

ALAN G. PADGETT

Sometimes generic is good. With a generic product, one does not have to buy into a large marketing scheme or a particular brand: just give me the basic stuff. I remember when the generic craze hit American consumers several decades ago. You could buy a T-shirt that just said "T-Shirt," for example, or a pack of smokes that just said "Cigarettes." We think that generic is just as good as the brand-name product, but without all the hidden costs.

What works for T-shirts and medicine may not work for religion. Carl Braaten has recently condemned "liberal Protestantism" within the ELCA in particular, and mainline denominations in general.* I would certainly include my own denomination, the United Methodist Church, in the mix. What Braaten calls liberal Protestantism has in fact gone under many labels: culture-Protestantism, neo-Protestantism, free Protestantism, modernism, liberal theology, even Ritschilianism (gasp!). For the most part, this label describes an important and impressive movement in Christian thought during the nineteenth century. The greatest of its proponents were German, by all accounts, and included Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and von Harnack. Their students and followers in America helped to create the modernist-fundamentalist debates in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Unfortunately, in seeking a generic spirituality, and a generic god, liberal church leaders often leave behind the central truths of the gospel, including the full deity and humanity of Christ, and the particularity of the true God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Generic spirituality leads to a generic god who is too much the spirit of this age, and not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The biblical God, the Christian God, is not a generic deity but a Blessed Trinity. Salvation does not come through religious experience, working for justice and peace, or spiritual enlightenment. Salvation comes through the particularity of Jesus the Messiah: his incarnation, ministry, mission, death, and resurrection. There is no generic religion that is worth having. The power of the gospel lies exactly in particular facts, not in the generic spirituality of liberal Protestantism.

On the other hand, based upon decades of work with such liberal Protestant ministers and theologians, I believe that an irenic approach is called for. For the

*Carl E. Braaten, "An Open Letter to Bishop Mark Hanson," 11 July 2005; available online, e.g., at <http://wordalone.org/docs/wa-braaten.htm> (accessed 28 November 2005).

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Because “generic Protestantism” falls under the *genus* Protestant, while not itself being a species of this genus by way of its *differentia* with other species, generic Protestants cannot be a proper subset of the class of Protestants, but rather are putatively coextensive with the class itself. Because the “identity conditions” for the class of generic Protestants do not exclude any particular Protestant expression, they cannot logically affirm any specific expression either. It is here that we touch upon our topic: What, after all, is so bad about generic Protestantism? In an age of tolerance, pluralism, freedom, and individual autonomy, why shouldn’t we opt for the only game in town? The answer is simple: because this game is almost over. We have been playing in extra innings for years and have not realized it.

What is at stake in the question of the specificity of commitment in a time of generic tolerance are the truth claims of our theological and religious language. Generic Protestantism is committed to a semantics (a theory of truth and meaning) that departs significantly from that assumed by most of the Western Christian tradition and by most practicing Christians even today. Because it cannot make any definite assertions about the divine and the divine’s relation to us without becoming specific and thus violating the dictum of tolerance, any specific assertions it makes cannot be understood referentially, but rather expressively.

The game has been going on for a couple of centuries now. Since we cannot ultimately know anything about God’s being and his causal relations to other beings, we must understand our discourse about God to refer finally to human experience. Thus, if discourse about God is to be meaningful at all it must ultimately be about *us*, e.g., our attitudes, orientations, conceptions, and values. In a time dominated by individualism and autonomy it makes complete sense to understand the phenomena of religious pluralism expressively. Different religious perspectives express different individual valuational perspectives, contextualized within the different cultural arenas in which they emerge. Given a basic subjectivist or expressionist semantics, the only game in town is tolerance.

But the game is almost over. We cannot escape the Creator’s drive within us to know the truth. If we believe nothing specific about God and his relation to us, we cannot hold anything specific to be true. But if nothing specific is true, we cannot affirm that specific salvific actions on the part of God causally determine our destiny. But if God really hasn’t done these things, then what does Christianity really offer other than an avenue by which to express our own underlying values? But an expression of ourselves cannot save ourselves. If Lutherans, in their march towards the generic, no longer care about the specifics of the dialectic of sin and salvation, there isn’t much of enduring worth left in the Lutheran tradition.

Perhaps sometimes it is important to stay with the name brands. Perhaps faithfulness to the specificity of the cross requires we do so. ⊕

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most part, the hearts of these theologians are in the right place. They have grasped a key and important point, which the church of Jesus Christ can never give up: the gospel must enter into contemporary culture, and in doing so will often use and affirm what is good within it. This is the positive value of culture-Protestantism. Defensive postures and outright attacks will yield nothing positive.

Indeed, we can affirm what is important in the modernist movement within Protestantism. What is positive in culture-Protestantism is deeply evangelical, for it is an embrace of human culture at its best in order to communicate God's word. The gospel must be proclaimed and understood in our times, and that means in the contemporary cultural context. The word of God does not just come down from heaven like a stone, but is spoken by God through humans in particular times, places, and languages.

God has long used human culture and language to further the reign and realm of God on earth. None of this speaks against a proper critique of culture from the basis of God's word, but culture is not a wholly sinful, dark, and demonic realm. In our various human cultures, too, we are and remain God's creatures—created in the image of God and given responsibility for the earth as God's stewards (Gen 1:26–31). Even after the Fall, the blessings of childbirth and honest labor continue, including the gift of food (Gen 3:16–19). God uses these human goods to bring salvation and continue his worship on earth (Gen 3:16; 4:25–5:5). Culture is not wholly evil, but a mixture of good and evil. Right worship, evangelical mission, and works of love are done within cultures, not outside of them or beyond them. The gospel must therefore be brought into culture, in word and in deed, for the worship and mission of the church to continue according to God's plan of salvation (see the works of Helmut Thielicke and Lesslie Newbigin).

We should embrace contemporary art and philosophy. We want a theology that is in conversation with the most recent findings in natural and social science. We need a gospel that speaks to people today, not a dead orthodoxy nor a sterile repetition of past dogmas. We do seek peace, justice, and love in the name of Jesus. These basic values are what liberals get right. If we can embrace them in the beginning, we can begin to have a fruitful conversation with the leadership of our mainline denominations. Such a theological and ethical conversation is important, because the mission and worship of the church are at stake. ☩

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