Two religions?

by Michael Root in the September 12, 2001 issue

Christian Contradictions: The Structures of Lutheran and Catholic Thought. By Daphne Hampson. Cambridge University Press, 323 pp., $59.95.

Is there some single basic difference between Catholics and Protestants? Did the Reformation spring from a theological disagreement so fundamental that schism was inevitable, and which no amount of good will could have settled? According to Daphne Hampson, the answer to both questions is yes.

Hampson, a post-Christian feminist theologian, thinks "Lutheran" and "Catholic" represent different structures of thought and faith so radically dissimilar that they are "incomparable." Her account of Lutheran-Catholic differences closely parallels that of certain German and American Protestants who have opposed the recent Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. At first glance, her explanation owes little to her own theological views, though, as we will see, there is a significant connection.

She focuses on the differing understandings of the self and its relation to God implicit within the Lutheran and Catholic understandings of the Christian's justification. The touchstone of her analysis is Luther's insistence that the Christian's righteousness is always the righteousness of Christ and never a quality that inheres in the believer. The self thus finds itself only outside itself. For Luther, the self is not an independent substance, but can be understood only relationally. Hampson contrasts this view with what she takes to be the Catholic understanding of the Christian's righteousness as an inherent quality. The notion of such an inherent quality goes along with a view of the self as a substance which itself possesses various qualities.

Hampson sees in these differing understanding of the justified self the expression of two structures of thought and faith which are reverse images of each other. What is true for one is false for the other. In the Lutheran structure, righteousness is external, the self is understood relationally and dialectically, the justified self is radically discontinuous with the natural self, salvation reinstates creation, God loves

the sinner. In the Catholic structure, righteousness is internal, the self is understood ontologically and in a linear fashion (that is, not dialectically), the justified self is essentially continuous with the natural self, salvation is the transformation of creation, God loves only those who are no longer sinners.

These differing structures are comprehensive; they form the context within which all that Lutherans and Catholics say and do are to be understood. Apparent agreements on, say, the Christian's dependence on God's grace are only apparent, for the differing structures of thought define "grace" in quite different ways. Hampson thus wonders whether ecumenical agreements such as the Joint Declaration "have any value, or are more deceptive than helpful."

In the end, Hampson portrays Lutheranism and Catholicism not as two ways of structuring a common Christian thought or piety, but as two faiths, or even as two religions. When each is defined so completely in terms of what it does not share with the other and these contrasts are taken to shape all that each believes, then the statement that each is in some sense Christian is emptied of any substantive content. She can thus say that what Catholicism often understands as sanctification is very close to what Luther thinks of as sin. And since the issue that defines the contrast, how the self relates to itself and to God, is so fundamental, other Christian groups either fall on one side of this divide (Anglicans on the Catholic side, for example) or represent questionable attempts to straddle it (Calvin and Barth as less dialectial versions of Luther). She considers Kierkegaard as representing a possible solution, but that chapter ends with doubt about whether such mediation succeeds. Hampson sees the issue not as a parochial Lutheran-Catholic one, but as "a real dilemma present in the Christian dispensation."

However, Hampson's approach so distorts both Lutheranism and Catholicism that neither finally seems truly Christian. She gives the standard Protestant picture of Catholicism, exaggerated by her schematic contrasts. For Catholicism, she says, "ethics (good works) leads to the relationship to God." She states that for the Council of Trent, the Christian will come to merit justification itself, something Trent in fact never says. Most strikingly, she concludes that for Catholicism revelation is not essential. Her point seems to be that for Catholic theology the relation between the human self and God can be described in terms of a natural theology of creation. Salvation simply transforms what is already there in creation. She ignores the common Catholic teaching that this transformation is "supernatural," in the precise sense that it lifts the creature beyond its own nature to God. A divine intervention

beyond creation is essential to such a transformation. She frequently hints that Catholicism is still rooted in the ancient, pagan philosophies the medieval doctors drew on. To be Catholic is to be not quite Christian. Catholic theology operates "as though the good news of the gospel has not been heard."

Her picture of Lutheranism is more sympathetic, but again deeply false. In contrast to Catholicism, she states, in Lutheranism "the human being does not make progress. . . . After all, what could 'progress' mean if one is speaking in terms of trusting not in one's own righteousness but in God?" True, if the Christian's authentic righteousness is Christ, that righteousness cannot grow. But the Christian can grow and progress within that righteousness, as Luther often says. In the Large Catechism, for example, he urges frequent reception of the Lord's Supper so that our faith might "become stronger and stronger. For the new life should be one that continually develops and progresses." After all, why can't the Christian make progress in trusting in God? Of course, if one were to come to trust in one's own progress rather than in God, all would be lost, but that is simply to say that true progress in the Christian life always contains an element of self-forgetfulness, a truth known to the saints of every age.

Similarly, in contrast to her stress on continuity between the old and new self in Catholicism, she finds in Lutheranism a "radical and complete break" between the old and the new self. But if the old and the new selves are not fundamentally the same person, then in what sense is the gospel good news to sinners? It isn't good news to tell the sinner that she or he will simply be replaced by an utterly discontinuous new self.

At the heart of Hampson's misreading is her reduction of Lutheranism to a dialectic between two ways of understanding the relation between self and God. This dialectic can be expressed in various ways--law and gospel, reason and revelation, works and faith--but the underlying structure is the same. The essence of Lutheranism is mastering this anthropological dialectic, which seems to be no easy task. Apparently, no one in the history of the church before Luther got it right. Philip Melanchthon, Luther's closest co-worker and author of the most authoritative Lutheran confession, "failed to grasp" Luther's insight and the "richness of Luther's sense of extrinsicity" was "quickly lost" in the Lutheran tradition. It seems to have been rediscovered only by 20th-century professors.

As David Yeago has noted in a critique of Gerhard Forde, the most eloquent American proponent of such an interpretation of Luther, in this scheme Lutheranism is reduced to a kind of gnostic sect. Christian faith is a matter of grasping a certain esoteric insight into the human self, an insight most of the Christian tradition has allegedly denied. That Luther and the Lutheran Confessions contended they had the core of the Christian tradition on their side simply goes by the board.

How could Hampson have gone so wrong? Is there some way of granting the truth of what she says (there are divergent structures to the way Catholics and Lutherans think about the faith) while avoiding her distortions? A clue to where the problem lies can be found in her various summaries of Lutheranism and Catholicism. She can explain the heart of each without ever mentioning Jesus, or by mentioning Jesus, but reducing him to a cipher for the one in whom Christians either do or do not find themselves. Jesus' concrete death and resurrection recede into theological irrelevance. This absence is of decisive importance. Hampson's focus (here her own theological interests come to the fore) is anthropological, and for her the Lutheran doctrine of justification is above all a doctrine about what it means to be human. (It is no accident that her ideal modern Lutheran is Rudolf Bultmann.) But when Luther sought to summarize "the first and chief article" of faith in the Smalcald Articles, he talks about Jesus, who alone is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We are justified only by faith in this Jesus, he insists. A dialectical structure can be found in how Luther speaks of Jesus, but it is Jesus who is truly essential; any dialectic only serves the right apprehension of Jesus.

The identity of this Jesus is not defined by an anthropological dialectic which Catholics and Lutherans may not share, but by the gospel narratives which they do. It is worthwhile to remember that Luther's favorite book of the Bible was not a Pauline epistle, but the Gospel of John. For Catholics and for Protestants, the stories that identify Jesus are the focus of a much larger set of biblical texts. These texts are themselves the focus of a liturgical life that Lutherans and Catholics (and Anglicans and Orthodox and, to varying degrees, other Protestants) largely share. At the heart of the modern ecumenical movement has been the discovery that what divides us is often embedded in a biblical and spiritual context that is deeper than our divisions. When a Lutheran and a Catholic each talk of faith, does each define the word by some comprehensive abstract system, or by the complex associations the word has in a great range of shared biblical texts, such as Romans 1 with its talk of faith as that by which we live, I Corinthians 13 with its association of faith with hope and

love, and Hebrews 11 with its definition of faith as assurance and conviction?

Lutheranism, Catholicism and other Christian traditions are not closed conceptual systems, but living, historical complexes of quite diverse practices: prayer, devotional reading, worship, communal life, and also reflection. When theological schemes are interpreted against the background of this wider reality, we can come to see that the concerns which have shaped specific theological positions are ones that other traditions often share, even if with a different emphasis and linked with other concerns. In this light, the genuinely different theological structures that typify Lutheran and Catholic theology can be recognized not as the closed, mutually exclusive systems Hampson has constructed, but as perspectives that overlap, clash and diverge in unpredictable but nevertheless consistent ways. Ecumenical theology's task is to discern when the traditions are saying the same thing in different ways, when they are disagreeing on a point that need not be church-dividing, and when the disagreement truly threatens communion.

For Hampson, Lutheranism and Catholicism represent mutually exclusive alternatives, each of which is unacceptable. For those who remain Christian, her book raises a fundamental question: must we go on thinking of the faith in terms set by division, or can we transcend those terms and, as Robert Jenson proposes in the preface to his recent *Systematic Theology,* contradict the contradiction of a divided church by the very way we think theologically?