

Friday, July 27, 2007

Open Source Religion

Bruce, at [Pagans and Lutherans](#), has expressed some necessary thoughts about something called "open source religion."

As an avid Open Source Software user, I have to add my own two cents. "Open Source" refers to the way software source code is treated. Source code is the human-readable programming code that is somehow translated into instructions that a computer is able to follow. Microsoft products have source code, but if someone like me wants to see it, I have to pay scads of money (as though they need more) and sign my life away first. Open Source (or "Free") software is different. Anyone can obtain the source code at nominal cost. What's more, anyone can use that source code to make new software, with only one major requirement: new programs that incorporate existing Free Software source code must themselves be Open Source. This guarantees that others can improve on Free Software that I write, and also that the source code of those improvements will always be available to me, in turn. For more information, check out the [Free Software Foundation](#) and the [Open Source Initiative](#).

The Free Software movement has spawned an industry in competition with the likes of Microsoft, and in my opinion, destined to outlive Microsoft. All of the programs involved in my writing of this post, for example, are Free/Open Source Software (sometimes abbreviated FOSS). That includes the operating system, the desktop environment, the text editor, the email client, the email servers, the web server, the programming extensions of the web server, and probably much more. I'm using it all right now, and it's all Open Source. What's more, some open source programs have proven so reliable and useful that they have become a major part of the Internet's foundation, and key elements of the Macintosh and other operating systems.

But what about "Open Source Religion?" Here's a brief criticism of the notion.

Religion has no source code, in the same sense as software. That's not to say religion is not based upon something. The Christian Science cult, for example, is based upon the writings of Mary Baker Eddy. But are they not available for anyone to read? If that's the source code, then it's already open for reading!

The same is true of the Bible. We don't have the original manuscripts, but we have many ancient and reliable copies. Anyone interested can obtain [the text of the Bible](#). It's already open for any to read. But it's not source code, to be altered, extended, or built into something bigger. The Bible is God's unchanging, proclamatory Word. That means it's not available for tinkering. If you don't agree, check out Galatians 1:8-9, or Revelation 22:18-19.

A prevalent thought through the ages is that religion is simply an accretion of mankind's beliefs and superstitions, as they might apply in any given context of place and time. In other words, religion is man-made. There are some calling themselves "Christians" who believe the same thing about the Bible. But how would the term "open source" even apply in that case? It comes from a different semantic context, and could therefore only apply by analogy or metaphor. Even then, it only applies to a small degree.

The source of religion can only be one of two things: human or divine. The term "Open Source Religion" assumes that it's human, and that people are trying to hide the basis for their religious beliefs. I don't see that happening, except in the case of certain cults where the leaders just make things up as they go along.

True religion must have its source in that which is divine. Otherwise, it's only a game, a guess, a hoax, or a means to influence others. That's why confessional Lutherans believe exactly what the Bible says; no more

and no less. Some might argue that we have added the Lutheran Confessions to the Bible, but not anyone who has read the Lutheran Confessions. And yes, [you can read the source](#), though if you want it in the original languages, you'll have to [buy it](#).

The term "Open Source Religion" makes no sense. It's a clumsy label for the desire to invent one's own religion, and that's nothing new. So many people have always wanted to treat the religious landscape of the world as a smorgasbord, taking in only a bit here and a bit there. Nobody can really stop them, but it's stupid anyway, and will prove to be self-destructive. Again, it assumes that all religion is man-made, which a false assumption. The truth is so much greater than that, because God has only revealed what we need to know in His Word. Isn't it about time to wise up and understand that God must be greater than we are, not lesser? Isn't it about time to recognize our human limitations and seek wisdom while it may be found?

I'll continue using Open Source Software, and I'll keep opening the source of my faith too, the Bible. I'll open it for myself and for those for whom I'm called to teach it. It stands open of its own accord. I thank God that He has revealed His Word to us, and that Jesus of Nazareth truly lived, died, and lives again: true God and true Man, to redeem us from the blindness and guilt of our sin and unite us again with our Creator!

Posted by Jesse Jacobsen in Doctrine, Technology at 12:54

P. Kretzmann and Visual Aids

Paul E. Kretzmann was on the faculty of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. He contributed the following book review for the Concordia Theological Monthly, which was published in the January, 1933 issue. He was reviewing *Screen and Projector in Christian Education* by Paul H. Janes. I include the review as a reflection upon how times have changed, yet good judgment does not.

The scope of this book is more exactly shown by its subtitle: How to use Motion Pictures and Projected Still Pictures in Worship, Study, and Recreation. The author rightly says: "With the addition of motion-pictures, projected still pictures, prints, photographs, models, maps, school journeys and reproduced sound, the educator has set out to stimulate a wealth of experiences to be used in the classroom to facilitate the understanding of the verbal symbols in books." (P. 14) We should like to emphasize the words "in the classroom" and add "in the church hall," because visual education has proved an invaluable aid in the work of our parish-school, Sunday-schools, young people's societies, and the various auxiliary organizations of the congregation. Every pastor who desires to have accurate information concerning the use of visual education helps will be glad to use the information contained in this book. We cannot endorse the larger part of Chapter V, on "The Use of Visual Aids in Worship," because the doctrinal and expository sermons of the Lutheran Church will rarely require, in most cases not even permit, the use of pictures. There are other dangers connected with the indiscriminate use of visual aids, especially if the emotional element is stressed. To such as will make use of the proper discrimination this book offers fine suggestions.

Full disclosure: two weeks ago (on July 8) I delivered a sermon explaining Lucas Cranach's altar piece in Weimar. The altar piece itself provides the Biblical basis for both painting and sermon. It was the first time I've tried such a thing, and I would consider it a success. You can find the sermon over at the [congregations' web site](#).

How is this different from other uses of motion or still pictures you have observed in a worship setting?

Posted by Jesse Jacobsen in Technology at 16:40

Brainstorm: Synods and Churches

Christian organizations in the world, such as synods and churches, are subject to order in two different ways. One way we may call God's Word, which is the expression of God's will for us, for all time. The other we may call bureaucracy.

Likewise, two kingdoms exist in the world by the authority of God.

The Kingdom of the Right is the Holy Christian Church. It's not to be seen upon the earth, except in its pure marks: the preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments.

The Kingdom of the Left is civil governance and organization, which is found in every country, nation, state and province.

This division between Right and Left, authority Spiritual and authority Temporal, is carried into outward Christian organizations, notably congregations and synods. Why? Because the Holy Christian Church is ruled only by the Gospel, in which we have complete freedom. It's not suitable to organize a group of sinners, which after all, describes every synod and congregation. Temporal authority is required.

So a congregation has articles of incorporation and bylaws. It elects officers and others to carry out its business. They do so with temporal or bureaucratic authority, not with the Gospel. The same is true for synods.

It has been asked what spiritual authority a synod has over its member congregations. There are two ways to err in answering this question. We would err by saying that the synod and its officers, as such, have been given spiritual authority over the member congregations, pastors and missionaries of the synod. Note this quotation brought up at the 2006 General Pastoral Conference, from Christian Anderson in 1927:

Much less ought the congregations assign to the general church body or its officers any power and authority by virtue of their resolutions -- even when not in conflict with God's Word -- could be construed as laws binding upon the congregations by virtue of divine authority, vested in them as superiors according to the fourth commandment. Such concession on the part of the congregations would make of the synod a papacy which might become just as anti-Christian as that of Rome.

Unsurprisingly, Christian Anderson agrees with paragraph 8 of the *Treatise* and with holy scripture (John 13:3-17 and Luke 22:25-30).

Then what are we to make of synodical discipline? It is entirely bureaucratic in nature, proceeding only under temporal authority. The reasons for it, and the manner of its implementation may be rooted in the Gospel, but it is not to be construed or understood as *Church* discipline.

The other way to err in describing what spiritual authority a synod has over its member congregations is to say that it has none at all. If the Synod is a churchly organization; that is, if it is composed of and for Christians, then it has the same spiritual authority that every Christian has: it may speak and publish God's Word.

If God's Word rebukes a congregation or pastor, then the synod may speak that Word of God in rebuke -- an element of church discipline.

If God's Word commends, encourages or exhorts a church or pastor, then the synod may speak that Word in such a spirit. Every individual Christian, and every congregation may do exactly the same, with the same authority. The synod has no spiritual authority beyond the Word of God.

Ist klar?

Now allow me to shift the subject a bit.

What ought to happen when bureaucratic necessity conflicts with the Word of God? For example, suppose a member of my congregation notices that our mission statement contains something that seems to be false doctrine, but our bylaws require that all our members agree to the congregation's teachings. It's a conflict between bureaucratic necessity and the Word of God. Here are some choices:

Release the member from the congregation and spend extra time on evangelism with the intent of forgetting that there could be a doctrinal problem with our mission statement. Under this option, the Word of God takes the brunt of abuse.

Suspend the bureaucratic requirement for membership until the mission statement can be examined and fixed, or its doctrine explained to the satisfaction of all parties. Under this option, the human and temporal organization takes the brunt of abuse.

If such a hypothetical situation ever arose in church or synod, we can predict with some certainty that the first choice would be followed. That may surprise you. But if you read enough Luther, you'll find that he often laments that it is God's Word and God's name that must suffer the worst abuse in the world. If you pay attention and live long enough, you just might see this theory tested.

Posted by Jesse Jacobsen in Doctrine, Synod at 20:56

Friday, July 13. 2007

Magnatune

I enjoy music, but several years ago I promised myself that I wouldn't buy any more albums. They were -- and are -- ridiculously expensive, and the rules for sharing, borrowing, and such were so restrictive that "buying" CDs no longer made any sense. Beside that, I have plenty of CDs already, but usually find myself out of range of a CD player.

(I don't spend lots of money on portable gadgets like music players. My only one now is a Palm Tungsten E2, which I use constantly and appreciate for its long battery life.)

Recently I've been listening to my music collection in digital form. I've ripped nearly all my CDs to [Ogg Vorbis](#) format, a flexible, high-quality, royalty- and patent-free encoding. Most recently I've been ripping to FLAC, a lossless encoding. One reason for my reluctance to buy a portable music player is the paucity of players supporting the Ogg Vorbis encoding and useful with a Linux desktop. There are some, however, and I think some day I'll take the plunge. Meanwhile, it's been nearly alarming to see the intrusion of the wma (Windows Media) format into the arena of digital recordings, and also the various drm (Digital Rights Management) -encumbered systems.

But now, there's an alternative that will have me buying new music recordings again: [Magnatune](#)! Get on over there and check it out. Apple enthusiasts will tell me "We already have this with iTunes!" Not so. Magnatune is an online recording label with a growing collection of quality artists from a broad spectrum of genres. According to a current [Linux Journal](#) article, fifty percent of the purchase price of Magnatune music goes directly to the artists. You can sample full albums before buying them. At this moment, I'm sampling a delightful album from American Baroque called *Mozart, 4 Quartets for Strings and Wind*. It's wonderful music to work by, and I'm only on the fourth track. I may actually buy this album, not only for the music but to support the great work that American Baroque are doing.

When I'm finished sampling this album, I'm going to check out at least one album from American Bach Soloists. They have a recording of Bach's Mass in B Minor. I already have an outstanding recording of that, but I'm curious to hear the differences of interpretation. I'm already tempted to buy their recording of Bach's *Cantatas Volume V*, and I'm excited to sample an album of Heinrich Schutz music: *Musicalische Exequien*.

Later, I'd like to hear the music of The Seldon Plan, just because the band's name caught my eye. (Since first writing this post, I've taken a listen. The Seldon Plan is pretty good, but I liked the bluesy guitar of John Williams even better. I'm tempted to buy one or more of his albums.)

So, how much will I pay for the albums I buy? According to the same Linux Journal article, there is a minimum cost of \$5 per album, and there is also a maximum. Within those limits, I'll pay what the music is worth to me. What a system! I hope Magnatune's business thrives. Understood in a non-theological sense, their motto seems to be right on the mark: "We are not evil."

Oh, and apparently, Magnatune also provides recordings in the Ogg Vorbis and FLAC encodings, among others.

Posted by Jesse Jacobsen in Fun, Technology at 08:13

Tuesday, July 10, 2007

Luther on the Limits of Temporal Authority

Martin Luther granted and even upheld the legitimacy of earthly government as an institution of God for the control of wickedness on the earth and the establishment of outward peace. He also wrote this:

The temporal government has laws which extend no further than to life and property and external affairs on earth, for God cannot and will not permit anyone but himself to rule over the soul. Therefore, where temporal authority presumes to prescribe laws for the soul, it encroaches upon God's government and only misleads souls and destroys them. We want to make this so clear that everyone will grasp it, and that our fine gentlemen, the princes and bishops, will see what fools they are when they seek to coerce the people with their laws and commandments into believing this or that. (LW AE 45, p. 105)

First, I thank God for what protections exist in the United States (and elsewhere for that matter) against a government establishing a religion for its people. This is a key provision in the American Bill of Rights for which all American Christians ought to be thankful.

Consider what is happening in public schools around the country. Many (most? all?) refuse to teach or celebrate Christmas and Easter, lest the government establish a religion. Generally speaking, this is admirable for the reason Luther mentioned above. In some cases, it has been taken too far, where the school effectively silences the private religion of some students, for example, denying them an opportunity to gather voluntarily at school for religious purposes. But overall, the sensitivity aimed at keeping the government out of the realm of faith is a good thing.

Yet...

There is a religion which claims not to be a religion, and could therefore be embraced by the public education system. It teaches religious tenets. For example, it claims to teach the origin of the world and life. It trains students to trust in humanity, reason, and even themselves above all things. It defines and teaches its own values of morality, which are based upon the notion that truth is relative, not absolute. This philosophy has the earmarks of a religion, but calls itself other things. Often it's called "science," though it should be sharply distinguished from real scientific study.

Unfortunately, this religion-that-is-not is being established by the government of our states and even our nation. Parts of it have crept into the "No Child Left Behind" act and other federal educational endeavors. It serves as a baseline of mutual tolerance for work in the public sector. Even those who promote the homosexual agenda and the murder of unborn children have tried to shelter under its roof.

A church transgresses when it dabbles in politics. But when the topic of political discussion is religious or moral in nature, then the line is blurred. I think Luther has highlighted a problem in our society. Even in the land of the free, our government has been establishing a particular religious perspective for some time now.

As a product of the public school system, I can vouch that there are many good teachers and administrators. That's beside the point. The problem is that this "non-religion" has weaseled its way into the *system itself*. What can be done about it? Christians should learn about it and then act together as citizens, parents and students. What each Christian does will depend upon several factors. You might begin by having a look at the well-documented book [FedEd](#) by Allen Quist.

Posted by Jesse Jacobsen in Life at 21:19