

# HOW MY MIND HAS CHANGED

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## *How My Mind Has Not Changed, Yet Changed*

by TED PETERS

Would I sound stubborn if I said that my mind has not changed over six decades of study, pastoral ministry, and theological reflection? Would you think my head is made of hard wood? Impenetrable? Of course, new understandings have sanded my mind's patina. Social crises have drilled holes in my worldview. And I have had to do considerable reshaping. An evolving mind, I discovered, requires plasticity rather than rigidity. Yet, some core convictions have remained unchanged.

### *The Gospel and the Cross*

My mind has not changed regarding the gospel. The gospel is the cynosure of the Christian faith. At least if you are a Lutheran. I saw this right at the beginning. And I still do. Oh yes, defining the gospel morphed a bit over time. Here's my current definition. "The gospel is the story of Jesus told with its significance, articulated theologically as new creation, justification, and proclamation." With Martin Luther, I hold that the gospel lays the foundation upon which the church stands or falls. No change here.

The Theology of the Cross has deepened for me. Already as a seminarian I had elected to follow the galvanic Luther instead of the more pedantic Lutheran Orthodoxy. Proclamation of the gospel, I surmised, required Luther's Theology of the Cross in its epistemological form: the truth about God is revealed under its opposite. In the cross we see death revealing the God of life.

Later, when reading Jürgen Moltmann's book, *The Crucified God* (1974), I felt compelled to add an ethical dimension to the epistemological dimension: God suffers with the creation in travail. Moltmann emphasized that in Jesus' cross God in Godself experienced abandonment, suffering, and death. When looking at the cross, we can say "this is God!" The cross is not just the opposite of God. The cross *is* God experiencing what we experience.

For you and me to live a godly life following Jesus, we too will feel the pain of creation groaning in travail. Was the dimension of divine suffering already in Luther himself? Yes. But it was Moltmann who dug it out and showed it to me.

### *Racism in the Church*

I was ordained in 1970 to serve as pastor of an inner-city parish on the south side of Chicago. At that time, I was zealous for racial integration. I believed passionately that the church could not be the church of Galatians 3:28 unless worship included persons from a variety of races singing together in unison. I still believe this with equal zeal.

In those salad days of ministry when racial "integration" was still a good word, I discovered that liberal anthropology worked better for moral transformation than did evangelical anthropology. Evangelical anthropology presupposes that we are sinners in need of repentance. I discovered that condemning white people for racial prejudice and demanding that they repent only precipitated resistance, recalcitrance, and rejection.

What I found effective in matters of racial integration was capitalizing on the liberal view that down deep we are good people. Lifting a vision that good people affirm racial harmony was far more persuasive. It worked in my local situation just as it did largely on a national scale for Martin Luther King Jr.

Now, a half century later, I still yearn for racial harmony despite the observation that North American Lutheranism is more lily white than it was when I first began formal ministry. Something blocked the path to achieving Galatians 3:28. What was that? Before 1987, Lutherans in their various synods simply reflected the prejudices and

institutional habits of the surrounding culture. Then, when gestating the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA, born 1988), Lutheran leaders heroically eschewed racial prejudice and made the noble commitment to integrate. Hooray! At the time I celebrated with cartwheels, thanking God that our Lutheran communion was following the lead of the Holy Spirit.

But my early hot excitement gradually turned to ice. Rather than integrate, our white leadership decided to substitute words for action, ideology for transformation. How did they do this? By twisting and distorting spiritual self-understanding. By incorporating Hegel's unhappy consciousness. Paradoxically, the unhappy consciousness feels most righteous and most justified when being verbally whipped for being guilty of racism. Today this verbal whipping goes on and on with no reconciliation in sight. People of color get conscripted into servitude by this twisted unhappy consciousness. The result is perpetual divisiveness.

By keeping our focus on white guilt, we sharply define as privileged the white people within the Lutheran communion. Correlatively, this requires lumping African American or Hispanic or Chinese Lutherans into an amorphous category known as 'people of color.' What is the result? ELCA membership remains virtually the whitest denomination in America.

Imagine for a moment that you are a person of color who has just joined the ELCA. Immediately you are invited to criticize white people for being privileged and racist. The white people you criticize apparently feel good that you have condemned them. You might then ask, "when do I get to belong to this group?" Now, this is not merely hypothetical. I've experienced what I describe. "Why can't I just belong!?" exclaimed one of my African American seminary students when bolting out of an annual anti-racism seminar. I weep.

### *Neo-Orthodox Theology*

Despite my positive experience in the parish with liberal anthropology, an abiding theological question kept arising over the decades. Which better explains the actuality of human history and daily life: the moral progressiveness of liberal anthropology or the sin-and-grace

dialectic of evangelical anthropology, especially sin-and-grace in its neo-orthodox form?

Despite the empirical evidence in my ministry that already good people can be called to a higher level of goodness, I found I could never fully embrace liberal Protestant theology. In my student and teaching days, we constantly recalled the devastation of two world wars fought largely between Christians in different nations. Christians already saved by grace still sin.

The problem with the liberal tradition is its naive belief in the inevitability of progress, especially moral progress. Oh, how I wanted to believe in moral progress! But, alas, history proves this to be futile. The recent twenty-first century setbacks in overcoming American racism—right along with our inability to keep from going to war—demonstrate this futility.

Already as an undergraduate at Michigan State, my school of choice among theological options became neo-orthodoxy. I was initially inspired by Paul Tillich. I still am. No change here. In graduate school at the University of Chicago I assiduously studied under Langdon Gilkey and saturated myself with more Tillich right along with Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Barth, and Reinhold Niebuhr.

Oh, yes, under the influence of David Tracy and Paul Ricoeur I swam in the oceanic waters of continental hermeneutics. And yes, under the influence of Schubert Ogden I dove deeply into Whiteheadian process theology and Liberal Protestantism. And yes, under the influence of Carl Braaten I plunged into the eddies and swirls of the Theology of Hope and Revolution. And yes, under the tutelage of Langdon Gilkey and Martin Marty I floated in a theology of culture. And again, yes, I embraced the transformative vision of liberative justice in the 1970s lifted by Latin American, black, and feminist theologians. Yet, I found that the realism regarding human nature standing in need of divine grace voiced by the neo-orthodox could not be gainsaid.

This meant I should turn to the *locus* on sin and study it thoroughly. This I did as an exercise in grasping the significance of the story of Jesus in terms of justification.

*Sin, Self-justification, and Scapegoating*

I was already researching new religious movements when our nation got hit with the Satanic Panic of the 1980s. I already knew how to interview practitioners, so I applied the interview method to Satan worshippers, to alleged victims of sacrifice, and to evangelicals bent on making Satan serve as a steppingstone to taking Jesus as one's personal lord and savior.

I carved up the cultural pie into three contending slices: the Satanists, the anti-Satanists, and the anti-anti-Satanists. The Satanist category included hidden cults as well as public organizations such as the Church of Satan in San Francisco. The anti-Satanists were the evangelicals who thought that by terrifying us with Satan they could convert us to Jesus. The anti-anti-Satanists were the anti-evangelicals among New Religious Movements scholars. All three engaged equally in self-justification and scapegoating.

It appeared to me that we could nest Satanism along with anti-Satanism and anti-anti-Satanism within the *locus* on sin. What might be going on here? By this time, I had discovered a variant on the Theology of the Cross in the insightful scholarship of French literary critic, René Girard. Girard was a myth-buster. He made visible what was otherwise invisible, namely, the key to binding a diverse group together is to capitalize on the scapegoat mechanism.

Back to the gospel and its centrality. If the theological significance of the story of Jesus is that we are justified by faith and not by our own justice or righteousness, then I asked: what's the opposite? I concluded that the opposite must be human self-justification. Our resistance to the gospel consists of our fruitless attempt to justify ourselves rather than accept our justification as a gift of God's grace.

So, armed with the idea of self-justification combined with Girard's notion of scapegoat within the context of Satanic symbolism, I retrieved Martin Luther's interpretation of the Adam and Eve story in Genesis.

Here's the result. The key scene is God's interrogation of Adam and Eve following their snacking on the forbidden fruit.

“Adam,” says God, “did you eat the forbidden fruit?”

Adam responds. “Well, er, ah, yes. But it wasn’t my fault. It’s the fault of the woman whom you gave to me. She tempted me. She’s to blame.”

God turns to Eve and says, “Is this true?”

“Yes, sorta,” answers Eve. “I gave Adam the fruit. But it’s not my fault. The serpent beguiled me. And, God, we know who created that serpent.”

Luther perceptively observes that Adam blamed Eve. Eve in turn blamed the serpent. And indirectly Eve blamed God. Finally, says Luther, we all are Adam and Eve. And we all end up blaming God rather than ourselves. That, in a nutshell, is the human condition.

Or, to say it another way, our natural human propensity is to draw a line between good and evil and place ourselves on the good side of the line. If necessary, we will place someone else on the evil side of the line.

The one we place on the evil side of the line is called the *scapegoat*. We feel justified in sacrificing the scapegoat to save our own skin, to preserve our self-justification.

Included in the gospel, says Luther, is the message that God places the divine self on the evil side of the line we draw. In the cross of Jesus, we see how God volunteered to be our scapegoat.

By placing ourselves on the good side of the line we draw, we distance ourselves from the God of grace. That’s the Theology of the Cross applied to the actuality of our daily life.

### *Proleptic Ontology*

Now, to the significance of the story of Jesus for new creation. In sum, Jesus’ Easter resurrection is a proleptic anticipation of the transformation of creation God has promised.

Inspired first by Wolfhart Pannenberg’s programmatic essay, “Theology and the Kingdom of God” (1967), and then by Carl Braaten’s book, *The Future of God: The Revolutionary Dynamics of Hope* (1969), I decided to turn Paul Tillich’s “Ground of Being” sideways so that temporal future now replaces eternal depth. God’s future

redemption of all things provides the ground of all being, the source of all creaturely creativity.

This has led to the first principle of what would become my version of proleptic ontology: *God creates from the future, not the past*. With this reversal of causation, I felt I could find consonance between Genesis 1:1–2:4a and Big Bang cosmology.

Accordingly, the first thing God did for the world was to give it a future. Without a future the creation would be nothing. Referring to the finite beginning with the phrase *creatio ex nihilo*, then, means God's first gracious gift to the world was futurity. When thinking about the unfathomably dense ball of proto-matter and energy at  $t=0$  in Big Bang theory, we could think of God's first act as bestowing upon us an open future.

God bestows the future by opening up the possibility of becoming something we never had been before and by supplying us with the power to change. Big Bang cosmology suggests that everything we know in nature—from the existence of matter to the natural forces and laws that structure matter—is contingent and finite, having come into existence at a particular point in time and without any previous precedent. Not only does God release the exploding energy that drives the universe, but God also opens the future so that new things can occur.

This gift of the future is the very condition for the coming into existence and the sustaining of any present reality. From our perspective today, of course, we have the sense that we are looking back upon this first divine act. Creation seems now to be a part of the dead past. But we need to be careful because God is continuing to bestow upon us a future, even at this very moment. It is the continuing divine work of future-giving that is the source of all life and being.

On the first Easter, when God raised Jesus from the dead, God introduced into time and space the consummate reality which would conclude the long history of time and space. The new creation arrived ahead of time in Jesus' person, even though the remainder of creation still awaits fulfillment. This is my proleptic interpretation

of I Corinthians 15:20, "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died."

In sum, I have suggested since the late 1960s, when prompted by Joseph Sittler, that we should think of God's creative activity as a pull from the future rather than a push from the past. When God has finally pulled all things into redemptive fulfillment, we can then say with the Genesis author that the creation is "very good."

### *Science as a Source for Theology*

When studying under Langdon Gilkey at the University of Chicago, I learned how the mindset of natural science saturates modern culture like aspartame saturates Diet Coke. What I did not do at the time was to ask an actual Bunsen Burner scientist about this.

A big change in my mind took place about 1980. Shortly after arriving at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley in 1978, my colleague and friend Robert John Russell established the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences. This meant I would eventually work side-by-side with geneticists at the National Institutes of Health, stem cell researchers at the Geron Corporation and the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine, astronomers at the University of California and the Vatican Observatory, astrobiologists at NASA and SETI, along with other evolutionary biologists, bioethicists, and cosmologists. I even investigated Unidentified Aerial Phenomena for the Mutual UFO Network. Perhaps half of my published works are in the field of Theology and Science. Today I am still active in research projects involving the future of AI and CRISPR gene editing.

One evening when I was hosting some students in my Berkeley residence, I invited Charles Townes to hold forth. Charlie received the Nobel Prize in 1964 for co-inventing the laser and maser and was the chief scientist who put the first astronauts on the Moon in 1969. Charlie told me and the students, "you know, scientific discovery is a form of revelation." Well, I think he may have been right.



To engage in the dialogue between science and theology requires the theologian to engage the public outside the church. In this instance, church theology becomes public theology.

### *Public Theology*

My University of Chicago *Doktorvater*, David Tracy, laid on the theologian the responsibility of addressing three publics: the church, the academy, and the wider culture. This has led in recent years to my work in the field of public theology. Here is my working definition.

Public theology is conceived in the church, critically reasoned in the academy, and offered to the wider culture for the sake of the common good.

Whereas the Christian theologian for the most part addresses the church with faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*), as Augustine and Anselm had instructed, today's public theologian offers centuries of wisdom and insight to the world for the sake of clarification of the world's own discourse.

Current public discourse is decidedly pluralistic, so it cannot help but obscure an amalgam of fragmented if not contradictory assumptions regarding human nature. Discourse clarification along with worldview construction are gifts the theologian can offer the wider culture.

The public theologian can draw on two millennia of both revelation and wisdom regarding sin in both soul and society. And such traditional knowledge can help us predict tomorrow's outcomes of today's policies.

Early on in my academic career I tried without success to engage in public theology. I sought to speak prophetically to the wider culture on the matter of planetary degradation in light of the futuristic ontology adumbrated above. But voices such as mine were drowned out by the shouts of petroleum profiteering. What I thought to be a prophetic gift purchased from traditional wisdom and offered to the

wider culture was not greeted with gratitude. That's an understatement. Yet, I'm still at it.

### *The Next Generation*

My vocation has made me a pastor, scholar, fiction author, and teacher. When it comes to teaching, I have felt it to be my sacred duty as well as my intellectual joy to cultivate in my students knowledge, insight, and creative zeal. My students have become pastors and professors on every continent except Antarctica. I hope what I have taught has become a diving board, so to speak, for the next generation to plunge into newness.

Suggesting areas where my mind has not changed is by no means an outburst of bluster. Rather, I wish to affirm that certain theological commitments made early on have stood the test of time, experience, and reflective emendation. Even in their evolution