

When “Farming and Faith Collide”: The Role of Agrarianism and Libertarianism in the Opposition to the ELCA’s Statement on Genetics and Faith

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[1] In 2005, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s (ELCA) Churchwide Assembly authorized the formation of a task force to prepare a social statement on genetics and faith.[1] The action initiated a three-year process that consisted of assembling a team of clergy and laypeople to address the use of genetics in medicine, agriculture and other areas of scientific research and development. Although the Churchwide Assembly voted to adopt the social statement in August of 2011, there had been an earlier controversy. In June 2010, in an article in the *Dakota Farmer* titled “Farming and Faith Collide,” the author questioned whether the ELCA was accusing farmers of “sin” for planting genetically engineered crop seeds.[2] Sarah Wilson, a North Dakota farmer, instigated the opposition through a series of posts on her blog, and she went on to be quoted in various news articles. The controversy spread throughout the farm media, culminating with the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA being interviewed on Orion Samuelson’s “This Week in Agribusiness” radio program on WGN in Chicago.[3] At least two churches in rural North Dakota cited this factor as a reason for leaving the ELCA. Seven synods with strong farmer constituencies proposed resolutions challenging the social statement.

[2] This case presents an opportunity to explore the role of the Church when taking positions on science and technology issues. We especially want to focus on how different ethical and political ideological beliefs have mingled with Christian beliefs in the US, which complicates the Church’s positions on issues. In the case of the opposition to the genetics statement, opponents to

the statement blended agrarianism and libertarianism with their Christian beliefs. Thus, when the genetics statement questioned the relationship between agricultural technologies and the common good, farmers and agricultural interest groups reacted negatively.

[3] We explore whether the controversy over the ELCA's social statement on genetics reflects a national struggle over the definition of the concept of the common good. By focusing on the common good as a contested political-economic and religious construct, we hope to shed light on both the role of religion in the national political-economic discourse and the controversy over the ELCA's genetics statement. We first define agrarianism and the common good in the context of a libertarian political-economy. We then explore how that blend of ideologies were expressed in opposition to the genetics statement. We conclude with reflections on the challenges the Church faces when making ethical statements in a libertarian age.

Libertarianism, Christianity, and Agrarianism

[4] In *The Peasant Wars in Germany*, Engels argues that the Reformation's religious arguments did not cause the peasant rebellion. Rather, they were "the result of that stage in the development of agriculture, industry, land and waterways, commerce and finance, which then existed in Germany."^[4] In other words, religious controversies often reflect deeper political-economic struggles. People hold strong beliefs about their vocations, politics, economics, and religions. Those strong beliefs may even blend together to the point where people no longer distinguish between their religious beliefs and other beliefs.

[5] We contend that the opposition to the ELCA's genetics statement in 2010 and 2011 was expressed in religious terms, but that this opposition reflected a blend of strong beliefs about vocational and political-economic issues. Specifically, we focus on how libertarianism and

agrarianism blended with Christian beliefs so that appeals to the common good seemed alien to the opponents of the genetics statement.

[6] Libertarianism has become a powerful political-economic ideology in the US over the past five decades.[5]Libertarianism refers to a movement that emphasizes individuality and markets to the point where it denies the existence of the public as anything more than an aggregation of private interests. It is hostile towards governments, claiming that “laws that interfere with the free market violate individual liberty.”[6]

[7] Christianity has not been immune to the influence of libertarianism’s beliefs about markets and individualism. The foundation for the merging of beliefs can be traced back to Adam Smith’s efforts to generate a theological foundation for market society that would make it acceptable to Christians.[7] More recently, Andrew Sandlin has argued that “Christian libertarianism is the view that mature individuals (professing Christians in the church, and all externally obedient men [sic.] in the state) are permitted maximum freedom under God’s law.”[8]

[8] A survey conducted in 2000 reveals the blending of Christian and libertarian beliefs in the US. That survey revealed that 75 percent of 1,002 respondents agreed with the statement that “The Bible teaches that God helps those who help themselves.”[9] Reflecting on this finding, McKibben (2005) observed that it is astounding, not just because the statement is not in the Bible, but that it is antithetical to the Christian faith. Nevertheless, libertarianism and Christianity have mingled in the US.

[9] Because much of the opposition to the genetics statement was driven by farm interests, it is also necessary to understand the role of agrarianism. “Agrarianism is the belief that ‘agriculture and those whose occupation involves agriculture are especially important and valuable elements

of society,’ and that ‘the practice of agriculture and farming establishes a privileged outlook upon fundamental questions of human conduct, and, sometimes, the nature of reality itself.’”^[10] The most prominent proponent of agrarianism in the US is Thomas Jefferson who claimed that farming helped to create virtuous citizens. More contemporary proponents include progressive commentators such as Wendell Berry and Jim Hightower.^[11] Conservatives like Paul Harvey also espouse agrarianism. In 1978, Harvey delivered a speech titled “So God Made a Farmer,” which built on the Genesis creation narrative by explaining how God made a farmer on the eighth day to celebrate the special virtues of farmers. Harvey’s speech became famous to a new generation when it was made into a television advertisement for Dodge trucks and ran during the 2014 Super Bowl.^[12]

[10] A brief analysis of statements made in opposition to the genetics statement reveals a blend of individualistic agrarianism, conservative Christianity, and libertarian political-economy. The initial opposition to the ELCA’s statement on genetics emerged on May 7, 2010, when a farmer in North Dakota named Sarah Wilson posted a comment on her blog about the genetics statement. Her original post on the subject was on May 5, but that post urged people to read the document and to participate in a conversation with church leaders that was scheduled to happen in her church on May 6. The May 7 posting offered her oppositional perspective:^[13]

My faith and my farming practices have always gone hand in hand. I feel farming is my God-given purpose in life. I am to do my best at farming by efficiently and effectively using the resources He has provided to feed His people so that they are strengthened and nourished to serve Him. I feel that one of the greatest freedoms we farmers have the luxury of is being self-employed. We choose the management practices that best suit the needs of our land, our animals, our families and our consumers. Each farm is as unique as

a fingerprint, even in small, close-knit communities. We have the choice of such a vast array of technologies—that in itself is a blessing.

The agrarian elements are most clear in the second sentence, where she indicates that farming is a God-given vocation. It is also evident in the statement that she accepts a global responsibility to feed people. However, that responsibility is later downgraded to something less than as important as individual liberty:

The basic principle I keep coming back to is that I do NOT believe it is the church's place to give recommendations on farm management practices. Similarly, I do not think it is acceptable that the church tell everyone in town what tires to put on their car, etc. We go to church to worship and study scripture, but from there it is up to individuals to apply the lessons we've learned in our lives.

This statement emphasizes a clear distinction between her role as a farmer and the role of the Church. According to her, the Church should not be making recommendations about the common good. It should only lead worship and promote the study of scripture.

[11] This emphasis on individualism becomes clearer in Sarah Wilson's October, 2010, blogpost, which was a response to a woman named Janet Jacobson.^[14] Jacobson argued in *The Dakota Farmer* that the ELCA's social statement was a "thoughtful and balanced document," and that the *Dakota Farmer* coverage of the topic was "profoundly one-sided." Wilson responded:

I respect the fact that there are likely folks who disagree with my take on things and everyone is certainly entitled to their opinion, but I believe it is the responsibility of each individual Christian farmer/rancher who is utilizing genetic technology to analyze the impact of each of their management practices, especially considering God's command for

us to be stewards of His creation. This individual analysis cannot be achieved through a social statement.^[15]

From her perspective, ethical decisions should be left to individual Christians. Since farmers are elected by God to be stewards of creation, the Church has no business asking if a farmer's decisions are contributing to the common good. This statement suggests that Christian farmers are beyond reproach.

[12] The debate continued in farm magazines and newspapers in North Dakota and, as we indicated earlier, extended to Orion Samuelson's radio program, "This Week in Agribusiness," on WGN radio in Chicago. During an appearance on the March 5, 2011, program, then ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson, affirmed agrarianism with the statement that "farming is a God-given call and that farmers are exercising that call as they feed the hungry in the world, as they care for creation, as they provide for their own families and communities." However, he took a reflective position when he stated that just because a technology is available does not mean that it should be used. He said that Christians must also ask "Should we, and for whose sake?" He asserted that "Those kinds of questions are faith questions for the sake of God and the stewardship that God has placed in our hands for God's creation, and for God's people to be fed." He also clarified that the ELCA's social statements are not intended to tell people what to do or what to think; rather they are meant to inspire theological deliberation on topics that Christians are concerned about.^[16]

[13] Despite the Bishop's comments, nine ELCA synod assemblies challenged the genetics statement. One focused on theological issues, and another on embryonic stem cells.^[17] Seven challenges were driven by agricultural concerns.

[14] The Eastern North Dakota Synod debated a proposal May 14-15, 2011, to withdraw the social statement from consideration. That resolution was defeated. Several synods sought to disrupt the process by altering the way social statements are developed or approved. Western North Dakota met June 2-4, 2011, and “voiced strong support of farmers and ranchers in their use of technology to produce safe and bountiful food, asking the 2011 ELCA Churchwide Assembly to do the same.” The Western Iowa Synod sought to adjust the voting process to require a two-thirds vote by all ELCA congregations to adopt social statements. The proposal was defeated. The South Dakota Synod proposed an amendment to the Church’s constitution that would have allowed members of the ELCA to petition decisions made by the Churchwide Assembly. Both of these procedural resolutions were defeated.

[15] Three other synods offered more direct challenges. The Nebraska Synod met June 3-5, 2011, and proposed to accept the task force’s statement as a study, but not as a social statement. The primary justification offered was that, in a farm state where genetically engineered crops are widely used, this genetics statement would sow too much division. That resolution passed.

[16] The Southwestern Minnesota Synod, which met June 10-12, 2011, challenged the breadth of the study and the lack of adequate representation from potentially affected professions. It questioned the “bias toward extreme environmental views.” It recommended breaking the study up into farming, medicine, and other fields, rather than addressing them all simultaneously. Furthermore, it recommended that “efforts be made to include representative individuals and organizations from a balanced set of ideologies in any policy or advocacy activity to more accurately represent the balance of opinion among members of the ELCA and the scientific community.” The resolution was rejected.

[17] The Northern Illinois synod introduced a resolution, June 17-18, 2011. Appealing to agrarianism, it sought to derail acceptance of the social statement. The resolution claimed that the ELCA's social statement on genetics failed to recognize that genetically modified crops are a tool that farmers use to meet God's command to be good stewards. That resolution failed.

[18] As we have already noted, despite the opposition, the Churchwide Assembly voted to adopt the genetics statement in August of 2011. Still, the opposition is relevant because it reflects a mingling of libertarianism, Christianity, and agrarianism. And that combination of strong beliefs from disparate sources provided the foundation for an oppositional position against appeals to work toward the common good.

Christianity and the Common Good

[19] The ELCA seemed surprised by the opposition to the genetics statement from farm and agricultural constituents, which is understandable. It seems incredible that the Church would be criticized for asking if a technology contributes to the common good. Just because some find a technology useful does not mean that everyone is benefiting. It is even reasonable to ask if a technology could cause more harm than good. However, for anyone who is aware of how dominant agrarianism and libertarianism have become in the US, it should not be a surprise that many Christians no longer recognize the common good as a Christian ideal.

[20] Aquinas was one of the first Christians to develop the concept of the common good as social order.^[18] More contemporary elements of the common good might include human rights, social equity, knowledge, and justice, since these are elements that a society holds in common and that benefit all members of a society. In a more concrete sense, social equity, knowledge, rights, and justice can be thought of as collectively facilitating common goods, such as public health, food provisioning, public education, and ecological wellbeing.

[21] Agrarianism and Christianity are not irreconcilable, especially for Lutherans. An oversimplified, though common, understanding of Luther's teaching on vocation is that any occupation becomes a calling through which a person serves God once that person becomes a Christian. Based on this perspective, claims that farming is a calling to steward Earth's resources and to feed the hungry is consistent with Christianity. However, it becomes inconsistent with Christianity when that belief leads people to think that they are no longer capable of sinning. Kolden asserts that "If we read Luther with a naive literalness when he speaks of the Christian's calling to family, work, and citizenship, then we might justify our modern irresponsible conformity. [However], [t]he need of the neighbor - and the neighbor as the one with the greatest need - was Luther's criterion for making the calling a response to the God Who is doing new things, not a means of protection for oneself and one's own group."^[19] Therefore, claiming that Christian farmers need not consider how their actions affect the common good is not consistent with Lutheran teaching.

[22] Furthermore, the uncritical acceptance of agrarianism is problematic. Agrarianism in the US has become an empty celebration of farming, even as farming has become more consistent with supplying raw materials for agricultural commodity processors than with producing food.^[20] It has also become a political tool to exempt harmful agricultural practices from social, economic, and environmental regulations.^[21]

[23] Although agrarianism and Christianity can be compatible, the same is not true for libertarianism. "Christianity is incompatible with libertarianism — an ideology rooted in social atomism that pits all against all in a war of wills."^[22] Some point to Luther as the founder of Christian libertarianism. When such statements are made, however, it is clear that they focus on the first half of one of Luther's famous statements and ignore the second. That statement is "A

Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”[23] Furthermore, the typical appeals to liberty tend to ignore the fact that any talk of rights is premised on a public-legal community that establishes and defends those rights.[24] In other words, even the best defense for libertarianism assumes a common good, which libertarianism subsequently denies.

[24] In a recent, provocative *New York Times* article, David Bentley Hart asks if Christians should be communists. He points to biblical verses to highlight the opposition to wealth and private property. More to the point, he directs attention to the Book of Acts, which describes how “the first converts to the proclamation of the risen Christ affirmed their new faith by living in a single dwelling, selling their fixed holdings, redistributing their wealth ‘as each needed’ and owning all possessions communally.”[25] He acknowledges that such a commitment is unlikely today, when private property is fundamental to our national economy. However, he argues that accepting our economic reality does not mean that those of us who take Christianity seriously should not be asking ourselves if we are living up to our Christian ideals.

[25] Given how seamlessly agrarianism, libertarianism, and Christianity have merged in recent years, the Church needs more aggressive outreach on the role of the Christian ethics in the lives of the faithful. Furthermore, the Church needs to clearly articulate distinctions between Christian beliefs and other beliefs, especially political-economic ideologies. The Church needs to make it clear when agrarianism and libertarianism, as well as other belief systems, are corrupting Christian faith.

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[1] The statement is available

here: <http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/GeneticsSS.pdf>.

[2] Lon Tonneson, "Farming and Faith Collide: Our Say," *Dakota Farmer* (June 2010) 8 available here:: <http://magissues.farmprogress.com/DFM/DK06Jun10/dfm008.pdf>. (Accessed 21 October 2017).

[3] Orion Samuelson, "This Week in Agribusiness," radio broadcast on WGN-AM radio(Chicago, 5 March 2011).

[4] Frederick Engels,.. *The Peasant War in Germany*, translated by Moissay J. Olgin (New York, NY: International Publishers 1926 [1850]) 4. Available here:<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/peasant-war-germany/index.htm> (Accessed 21 October 2017)

[5] Nancy MacLean,.. *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America*(New York, NY: Viking, 2017).

[6] Michael J. Sandel, . *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 75.

[7] Leland Glenna,. "Liberal Economics and the Institutionalization of Sin: Christian and Stoic Vestiges in Economic Rationality," in *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* 6 (2002) 31-57.

[8] Andrew Sandlin,.. “The Christian Libertarian Idea” (November 2015), available here: <http://www.forerunner.com/blog/the-christian-libertarian-idea>” (Accessed 15 November 2017).).

[9] Bill Broadway,.. “You May Swear on the Bible, But It’s Not in the Bible,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 11 (September 2000), p. 2,.available here: <http://articles.latimes.com/2000/sep/11/news/cl-18991> (Accessed 21 October 2017)).

[10] Thomas C. Hilde and Paul B. Thompson, “Introduction: Agrarianism and Pragmatism,” in Paul B. Thompson and Thomas C. Hilde, eds.) (*The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism* Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press. 2000) 1-24, p. 1.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Accessed 15 November 2017: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7UBj4Rbq3ZI>.

[13] Accessed 15 November 2017: <http://farmeronamission.blogspot.com/2010/05/when-faith-and-farming-collide-part-2.html>.

[14] Janet Jacobson.. “ELCA Right about GMO Warning,” *Dakota Farmer* (2010) 11, available here:: <http://magissues.farmprogress.com/DFM/DK10Oct10/dfm011.pdf>. (Accessed 21 October 2017

[15]<http://farmeronamission.blogspot.com/2010/08/when-faith-and-farming-collide-part-3.html>. (Accessed 15 November 2017).

[16] <http://wgnradio.com/shows/orionmax/wgnam-saturdaymorningshow-110305,0,6682719.mp3file>

[17] We drew information about the synod assemblies from summaries in the July and August 2011 editions of *The Lutheran Magazine*: “Assemblies Discuss Bullying and Other Issues,” *The*

Lutheran, (August 2011)34-37 and 47, available here: <http://content.yudu.com/A1sysd/August2011/resources/index.htm?referrerUrl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.thelutheran.org%2Farticle%2Fpastdigital.cfm>), and “Assemblies Discuss Bullying and Other Issues,” *The Lutheran* (July 2011) 34-37 <http://content.yudu.com/A1sl1m/July2011/resources/index.htm?referrerUrl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.thelutheran.org%2Farticle%2Fpastdigital.cfm>). (Accessed 21 October 2017). We also had access to several of the actual resolutions.

[18] Jane Mansbridge,. “On the Contested Nature of the Public Good.” Pp. 3-19 in Walter W. Powell and Elisabeth S. Clemens, eds.) (*Private Action and the Public Good*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

[19] Marc Kolden,. “Luther on Vocation.” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* (1983), available here: <https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/1015#ENDNOTES> (Accessed 15 November 2017).).

[20] Leland Glenna, “Farm Crisis or Agricultural System Crisis: Defining National Problems in a Global Economy” *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food* 11, 1 (2003) 15-30.

[21] J.B. Ruhl, . “Farms, Their Environmental Harms, and Environmental Law.” *Ecology Law Quarterly* 27, 2 (2000): 263-349; Leigh E. Colihan, “Child’s Play: The Case Against the Department of Labor for Its Failure to Protect Children Working on America ’s Tobacco Farms,” *American University Law Review* 64, 3 (2015) 645-686.

[22] Smith, James K.A.. “Christian Principles Hold Steady as the System Worsens.” *New York Times* (June 2014) 25, available here: <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/06/25/has-capitalism-become-incompatible-with-christianity/christian-principles-hold-steady-as-the-system-worsens>) (Accessed 16 November 2017).

[23] George Forell,.. “Luther and Christian Liberty,” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* (January 2002), available here:: <https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/990>. (Accessed 15 November 2017).

[24] James W. Skillen, . “The Common Good as Political Norm,” in Dennis P. McCann and Patrick D. Miller, eds.), *In Search of the Common Good* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2005) 256-279.

[25] David Bentley Hart,.. “Are Christians Supposed to Be Communists?” (*New York Times*, 4 Nov 2017), available here:https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/04/opinion/sunday/christianity-communism.html?_r=0) (Accessed 15 November 2017).

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