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# Different Accents in the Story: An Autobiographical Exploration

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by Susan VanZanten

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Susan Emily VanZanten is Dean of Christ College, the Honors College of Valparaiso University, and Professor of Humanities and Literature. She has taught at Covenant College, Baylor University, Calvin College, and Seattle Pacific University. Her recent books include a memoir, *Reading a Different Story: A Christian Scholar's Journey from America to Africa* (2013), *Joining the Mission: A Guide for (Mainly) New College Faculty* (2011), and *Mending a Tattered Faith: Devotions with Dickinson* (2011). VanZanten became the Dean of Christ College in July 2018, the first female dean in the college's 50+ year history. She previously served at Seattle Pacific University, where she founded the Center for Scholarship and Faculty Development, directed the University Scholars (Honors) Program, and was a Professor of English. VanZanten is a frequent speaker on Christian higher education across the country and has published extensively in areas such as vocation, faculty development, American Literature, and African Literature. She is the author or editor of seven books.

My talk today will consider the value of incorporating the gifts of other Christian traditions into one's own life and work. It is a personal account in support of what has been called "receptive ecumenism," which emphasizes learning from a different Christian tradition rather than arguing for the superiority of one's own tradition or attempting to work out compromise positions (the opposite approach from the rhetorical situation of the Canons of Dort). Receptive ecumenism considers how we can include new practices and ways of thought into our Christian life without abandoning our own theological identities or distinctives. For example, we are increasingly finding some liturgical practices, such as Taize worship or a Maundy Thursday service, occurring in a wide variety of ecclesial bodies. I've sung the Taize song "Ubi Caritas" at Christian Reformed, Presbyterian, Methodist, Southern Baptist, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran worship services. But I've also experienced ecumenical gift reception through a number of friendships and encounters.

I myself am deeply rooted in the Reformed tradition.<sup>1</sup> Growing up in the small Dutch farming community of Lynden, Washington, in the 1960s, I was baptized in the Christian Reformed Church as an infant. I went to a CSI (Christian Schools International) school for twelve years, took Ref Doc (Reformed Doctrine) in high school, and spent years studying the Heidelberg Catechism in weekly classes. I was married and made profession of faith in a CRC church, and I even taught and received tenure at Calvin College, what many in my sub-

culture regard as the Dutch-American Jerusalem. My son was baptized as an infant in a CRC church and attended a CSI school for eight years. However, these life experiences provided little contact with faithful Christians from different traditions. With the exception of four years at Westmont College, where I met many evangelical Christians, and four years at Emory University, where I found only a few friends who were thoughtful and practicing Christians, I essentially lived within a theologically Reformed bubble for a long time.

However, after teaching at Calvin for seven years, I moved to Seattle Pacific University (SPU), where I spent twenty-five years working in an institution whose mission includes a commitment to being “distinctively Wesleyan...by standing within the Wesleyan holiness branch of historic and evangelical Christianity.” But SPU also defines itself as “genuinely ecumenical,” affirming, “as heirs of John Wesley’s catholic-spirited Christianity, we seek to gather persons from many theological and ecclesial traditions who have experienced the transforming power of Jesus Christ. We believe that theological diversity, when grounded in historic orthodoxy and a common and vital faith in Christ, enriches learning and bears witness to our Lord’s call for unity within the church” (Mission Statement). I have come to agree wholeheartedly with that statement. At SPU I had my first deep encounters with Wesleyan thinkers as I participated in book discussion groups and faculty workshops, attended lectures on the Wesleyan tradition, and frequently interacted with faculty from the SPU School of Theology, many of whom were life-long Methodists. One of my fondest memories involves an informal weekly Friday afternoon faculty gathering at which we drank beer and discussed theology (and campus politics).

During my time at SPU, I also served as a mentor for the Lilly Graduate Fellows Program, working with two cohorts of graduate students enrolled in Ph.D. programs in the humanities at major research institutions across the US. The Graduate Fellows Program, as most of you probably know, is deliberately ecumenical, just as the Lilly Fellows Program (LFP) is—representing a diversity of denominational traditions and institutional types both Protestant and Catholic, evangelical and

mainline. The LFP’s efforts to strengthen the religious nature of church-related institutions is deliberately an ecumenical one. Within the Graduate Fellows Program this is manifested by having two mentors for each cohort—one Roman Catholic and one Protestant—as well as by attempting to achieve a rough balance of theological traditions within the cohort itself. I say a “rough” balance, as the relative strengths of each year’s applicant pool play a significant role in this process. During the three years of the program, in addition to one-on-one personal mentoring conversations, we participated in an on-line colloquium, with a different topic each semester. One semester’s topic, following the lead of an earlier cohort, was “Protestants and Catholics in Conversation.” This topic arose from a conversation in June 2008 that took place among the mentors for all the cohorts. “I really didn’t know much about Protestants until I became part of the LFP Network a number of years ago,” one Catholic mentor commented, sparking similar memories and confessions from Protestants and Catholics alike. The group soon arrived at the consensus that getting to know colleagues and campuses from across the spectrum of Christian traditions is one of the best aspects of participating in the Lilly Network events, like the conference we are currently attending. Consequently, we decided to make such deliberately ecumenical conversations a central part of our colloquium. The experience of working closely with a Catholic colleague, Professor Patrick Byrne of Boston College; participating in the “Protestants and Catholics in Conversation” colloquium; and becoming part of an ecumenical community of intellectual thought, spiritual and emotional support, and shared worship opened my eyes to the many strengths and gifts of the Catholic tradition.

Thus, my years at SPU and working as an LFP mentor have taught me much about two traditions very different from my own. In a recent issue of *The Christian Century*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes about the “holy envy” that she occasionally experiences when studying other religious faiths, and that phrase, which she traces back to biblical scholar Krister Stendahl, nicely captures my own frame of mind, as my religious horizons grew broader. However, the older I grow, the more I also recognize the myriad ways in which my thought

patterns are deeply Reformed, even though I no longer currently worship in a Christian Reformed or even Presbyterian church. If asked, I still define myself theologically as Reformed, although I might quickly add, “with a deep regard for liturgical worship and spiritual formation.” In retrospect, I can see that I only discovered the depth of my Reformed formation and commitments when I had serious encounters with other forms of Christianity. My ecclesial friendships have thus clarified and strengthened my own theological commitments. Such friendships extend beyond the Wesleyan and Roman Catholic traditions, but these are the two in which I have spent the most time in conversation and that have had the greatest impact on me. (I should note I’ve encountered a variety of forms, practices, and charismas within each of these traditions, for neither one is monolithic.) From the Wesleyan tradition, I have learned much about genuine piety and the importance of spiritual formation; from my Roman Catholic friends, I have learned much about the value of tradition and an appreciation for sacramentalism.

In what follows, I’m going to put some complex issues fairly simply for the sake of succinct communication. (You all know how hard it is for an academic to do this.) For me, embracing a Reformed theology means that my starting position or initial thoughts about any issue are grounded in God’s sovereignty. God’s wholly-encompassing being produces creation and redemption, love and anger, grace and law, mercy and judgement. God’s creation of everything, and assessment of its goodness, means we live in a world brimming with possibility; nothing, conceptually, is off-limits. Yet God’s sovereignty stands in vivid juxtaposition with humanity’s weaknesses, exposing the reality and extent of human sin. God’s good creation has been sullied, and the undeniable evidence of human depravity surrounds us every day. As creatures made in the image of God and charged with a stewardship role, we must strive to clean creation’s house, one inch

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at a time. So, sovereignty, sin, and stewardship are key strands of my understanding and practice of the Christian life. And the neo-Calvinist tradition, with its affirmation of the life of the mind as one of those aspects of our creaturely existence formed by God and its call to transform and reform a fallen world, taught me the responsibilities generated by my own intellectual gifts and inclinations.

The Wesleyan tradition, I initially assumed ignorantly, advocated for a mindless and rule-bound piety in which heart trumped head. In such educational institutions, chapel attendance was more important than disciplined academic thought. Mark Noll’s account of “the scandal of the evangelical mind” clearly identified the Wesleyan holiness’s “stress on the dangers of the world” and “the comfort of separated piety” as contributing to the dearth of Christian scholarship. And the identity of many evangelical colleges appeared to be determined primarily by expressions of overt piety, such as strict lifestyle requirements, mandatory chapel attendance, and required opening prayer for class sessions or committee meetings. However, my time at SPU taught me much about the positive role of spiritual development in Christian education, about the need to involve both heart and mind in one’s vocational pursuits, and about the value of the spiritual disciplines. Despite the sometimes strong pietistic and legalistic elements of American Methodism, Wesley himself was a well-read eighteenth-century scholar who advocated “plundering the Egyptians” for intellectual gold. He stressed lay education, compiled a fifty-volume *Christian Library* that included Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, German Pietists, and Reformed authors, and designed extensive reading programs in literature and science for his followers. What became known as his Aldersgate experience—feeling his heart touched, strangely warmed by God one evening at a service, years after his head endorsed Christian faith—caused Wesley to resolve, “[Let us] unite the pair so long disjoined, Knowledge

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and vital Piety.”<sup>2</sup> In one sermon he warned, “We know that wrong opinions in religion usually lead to wrong tempers, or wrong practices; and that it is our bonded duty to pray that we might have a right judgment in all things. But still a man [or woman] may judge as accurately as the devil, and yet be as wicked as he.”<sup>3</sup> Right knowing, while crucial, did not necessarily carry over into right living or loving.

Salvation, Wesley held, involved more than simply forgiveness of sins. His favorite metaphor for God was “Doctor,” one who worked through the Spirit to heal our warped lives spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Although as a Calvinist I remain skeptical of Wesley’s belief that complete sanctification on earth is possible, Wesley’s unwavering affirmation of God’s enormous power to heal reminded me of a crucial truth. Combining the Reformed responsibility to think carefully and work toward shalom in this world with the Wesleyan idea of spiritual growth and devout practice brought head and heart together in new ways for me. While the Reformed tradition stressed the importance of identifying presuppositions and foundational beliefs in an intellectual worldview, Wesley was concerned with the ways in which a Christian worldview could be methodically developed through practices as well as ideas.

I had previously struggled with some of the apparent contradictions in some Reformed accounts of *worldview*, which is associated with propositional truths, theological foundations, and philosophical categories, but is also defined as a pre-theoretical basic human tendency found across cultures and throughout history. However, if worldviews are unreflective expressions of basic beliefs, why would we try to teach someone a Christian worldview? And how could we explain the human ability to hold inconsistent beliefs, or a professed Christian’s ability to operate with assumptions at odds with Christian faith? Charts outlining categorical differences between a Christian worldview and, say, theism or naturalism implied that a Christian worldview could be instilled if one had the right philosophy, that if one just *looked* in the right way, one would *act* in the right way.

As Jonathan Edwards insists, however, the formation of the will plays a crucial role in Christian identity. Like Edwards, Wesley believed that

Christian character—both thought and practice—was the product not only of the head but also of the heart. Believers’ temperaments and practices, as well as their ways of thought, are formed by nurturing and shaping. Liturgies, hymnody, poetry, spiritual biographies, devotional practices, and spiritual exercises all work in our embodied, social, affective lives to help us grow in faith and practice. My *holy envy* of the Wesleyan affirmation of God’s healing power exercised through the means of grace alerted me to something that I had previously neglected. SPU’s mission statement affirms, “We share [the theological] conviction [of John and Charles Wesley] that God’s saving purpose is the renewal of human hearts and lives in true holiness through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. We are shaped by their emphasis on the importance of the human response to the Spirit’s renewing work, including the vital role of the spiritual disciplines and practices—such as prayer, meditation, worship, Scripture study, charitable giving, public witness to Christ’s saving love, and service to those in need—all of which serve as means of God’s grace.” Few Reformed Christians would quarrel with this affirmation (although they might add something to it), but it nonetheless powerfully expresses an emphasis, an accent if you will, on a part of Christian life that can be overlooked, slighted, or even ignored in an all-consuming attempt to think correctly and confess impeccable doctrinal statements. The tendency of my Reformed tradition as I had experienced it was to emphasize doctrine over holiness, even as the Wesleyan tradition’s tendency is to emphasize holiness over doctrine.

Attentive members of the audience will no doubt see the similarity of my point of view to that of Jamie Smith, whose recent work asks us “to re-vision Christian education as a formative rather than just an informative project” by attending to the education instilled through cultural liturgies and practices.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Smith calls Christian educational institutions to give a central role to Christian worship. He argues, “Our ultimate love/desire is shaped by practices, not ideas that are merely communicated to us.”<sup>5</sup> Yes, but... Our love and desire can also be shaped by ideas. We need both holiness and doctrine; heart and head; liturgies and lectures.

Let me also say a few words about some of the

gifts I've received from the Catholic tradition, something about which I was completely ignorant for many years. I knew no Catholic believers personally and had what I suspect is a fairly common Reformed prejudice against what is essentially all Christians' mother church. Lynden, Washington was a predominantly Protestant town, and my family, friends, and teachers all appeared to believe that Catholics were not really Christians. Many CCCU institutions do not hire Catholic faculty, as Aquinas scholar Joshua Hochschild found when he converted to Catholicism and was forced to leave Wheaton College in 2009. Both Covenant College, where I held my first teaching position, and then Calvin College required that tenure-track faculty hold Reformed theology. At SPU I had my first sustained contact and conversation with Catholic colleagues, for the University's Mission Statement, as I noted earlier, affirmed hiring people "from many theological and ecclesial traditions," and some of the Catholic faculty were the most ardent defenders of the University's mission. But my extensive work with the Lilly Fellows Graduate Program effected a sea change in my views. Becoming close friends with the extraordinary Patrick Byrne, among many others, mentoring Catholic graduate students who came from very different parts of the Catholic tradition, wrestling with primary texts from sixteenth-century religious discourse, and learning the ways in which the Christian family tree has expanded in the subsequent five centuries has provided numerous gifts.

Reading sixteenth-century texts may appear problematic, since this was a period of division and debate, violence and oppression, rancor and acrimony. From today's perspective, we may wonder about the value of all the controversies over the Eucharist/Lord's Supper, baptism, election and free will, church organization, and liturgy. (Brad Gregory, among others, almost suggests the Reformation was all a catastrophic mistake.) But without seeking to downplay the sharpness of these theological disputes, our goal in the "Protestants

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and Catholics in Conversation" colloquium was to focus on the charisms that each tradition brings to our understanding of Christ's church. I think it is important that we undertook this task only in our third year together as a cohort, for genuine friendships and deep trust needed to be established first before we could have such conversations with charity. As Paul Murray, one of the founders of receptive ecumenism, states, "receptive ecumenical awakening is properly a matter of the heart before it is a matter of the head; a matter of falling in love with the experienced presence of God in the people, practices, even structures of another tradition and being impelled thereby to search for ways in which all impediments to closer relationships will be overcome."<sup>6</sup>

One way to view the changed landscape of post-Reformation Christianity is to appreciate the particular emphases of each tradition, not only in order to better understand that tradition—dispelling ignorance and prejudice—but also in order to think through how we might incorporate its gifts into our own lives. Our stance in such conversations is crucial; we must enter expecting to find in "the other" tradition, whatever that might be, a place of grace. Here are some places of grace that I have discovered:

1. My intellectual and personal encounters with Roman Catholic believers have given me a new appreciation of the importance of tradition, of the rich resources from the past that speak powerfully into the troubles of today. Certainly in my own tradition, we revere the contributions of Calvin, which have become semi-authoritative in some respects. But now I encountered the deep faith, spiritual struggles, and rich wisdom of the early church mothers and fathers, from Paula to Metroma, from Macarius the Great to Anthony of Egypt. And my reading of and conversations about authors such as St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Theresa of Avila, and Ignatius of Loyola, have given me a deeper knowledge of and respect for a



wide range of Christian resources.

2. I have also learned about the Catholic Church's own reformation, now known as the Counter-Reformation, a reformation that had stirrings and roots well before Luther, something that I never learned in my Protestant-biased church history classes (or didn't stick with me).
3. A third gift has been the blessed discovery that on one of the most fundamental issues of Christian faith, the Roman Catholic Church, and many Protestant traditions now profess agreement. The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999), produced by the Catholic Church's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation, states that the churches now share "a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ." This statement resolves the 500-year-old conflict over the nature of justification, which was at the root of the Protestant Reformation. Since 1999, both the World Methodist Council (2006) and The World Communion of Reformed Churches (2017) have also adopted the Declaration.
4. I now enjoy the pleasure of having many Catholic friends, who are inspiring models of spiritual discipline, persistent prayer, faithful church attendance, a hunger for the Eucharist, and a commitment to social justice. In the LFP cohorts, we have studied four different books of the Bible together, but we have also conducted Ignatian reflections and—one Lent—jointly committed to praying the liturgy of the hours as compiled in Phyllis Tickle's *The Divine Hours*. Many traditional Catholic devotional practices have proven meaningful and spiritually enriching for me.
5. Finally, the sacramental worldview of post-Tridentine Catholicism and its incarnational approach to body-spirit relationships have provided me with a new perspective from which to view the value of the physical world of nature, the embodied nature of hu-

manity, and the power of visual and textual art.

These are a few of the gifts I have been given through ecumenical friendships, conversations, and conferences, for which I am utterly grateful. While I don't think I will become either a Wesleyan or a Catholic (not the time to explain why), I have received many treasures from these traditions, and I rejoice when I can worship with my sisters and brothers from other branches of the Christian family tree.

I have come to believe that different theological traditions tell the Christian story with slightly different emphases, just as the synoptic Gospels do—and this is a good thing. The heart of the story remains the same, but the details and the accents differ. One group shouts triumphantly about sovereignty, while another sounds the constant note of sacramentalism. All orthodox Christian traditions affirm a triune God, but some spend more time talking about the Holy Spirit than others, while others seem to concentrate almost exclusively on Jesus. My own tradition puts the accent on God the Father or Creator, and other forms of worship, liturgy, and practice provide necessary reminders of the truth of the Trinity. As an academic I have been trained to be critical, to question, to doubt, but I've come to believe that in matters of Christian practice, it is better to be receptive, optimistic, and appreciative, whenever possible.

The theologian David Ford says that theology is essentially about God's extraordinarily bountiful generosity, and that we, too, should practice such generosity. The diversity of our theological perspectives and practices may well be a product of that generosity. St. Catherine of Siena explains, "[Eternal Truth says:] I have distributed [the virtues] in such a way that no one has all of them. Thus have I given you reason—necessity, in fact—to practice mutual charity. For I could well have supplied each of you with all your needs, both spiritual and material. But I wanted to make you dependent on one another so that each of you would be my minister, dispensing the graces and gifts you have received from me. So whether you will it or not, you cannot escape the exercise of charity!"<sup>7</sup> John Calvin says something similar in reflecting on God's providence: different people have differ-

ent gifts, and in exercising the gifts that we have to help others, we embody God's providential care. We are God's arms and legs, hands and feet, head and heart. Perhaps the same can be said of the gifts of ecumenical diversity.

#### Endnotes

1. Some parts of this talk are adapted from Susan VanZanten, *Reading a Different Story: A Christian Scholar's Journey from America to Africa* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013).
2. Charles Wesley, "Hymn 461, for Children," in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 7, *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, ed. Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).
3. *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler and Richard Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 563.
4. James A.K. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Cultural Liturgies) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 27.
5. Smith, 27.
6. Paul D. Murray, *Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*. Edited by Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 15.
7. *The Dialogue*, 7. See [http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit\\_20010126\\_caterina\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20010126_caterina_en.html).