

A. D. Mattson and Social Justice<sup>1</sup>  
Karl J. Mattson

Who was A. D. Mattson?

He was a big man and maybe a little peculiar looking. He had a great sheaf of hair standing straight up from a high forehead and a slow smile. My wife always described him as gentle. When I was a kid, he always showed up at the house for coffee after lunch, not saying much, and he continued such visits with my wife and me after his wife and my father died. In his loneliness, perhaps, he needed to touch base with family. A. D. took pleasure in arguing with high church students about their priestly tendencies and with fundamentalists about textual inconsistencies. Often his classes were just plain dull as he plodded through one of his books. When I got to know him well, in the 40's and 50's, much of the prophetic fire was gone and I had to use my imagination to reconstruct what he must have been like in the 30's. As he grew older he became a health nut. Some say his addiction to Vermont medicine, vinegar and honey concoctions, was a contributing factor to his death in 1970.

There is a story that epitomizes my experience of A. D. Mattson.

On occasion when I was in high school, I used to travel with A. D. when he was organizing for Farmer's Labor, and we would go from one small white frame church to another, filled with whole families of farmers, men in bib overalls and the women in simple dresses, all together trying to devise a strategy to resist the agribusinesses and other economic forces that were driving them off the family farm.

The first job my wife and I had, after we were married in 1957, was for the National Lutheran Council under Conrad Hoyer, working in Aurora, Minnesota, with this same class of farmers, some recently dispossessed and now migrants, who lived in small metal trailers in a bull dozed, mosquito infested, clearing in the forest, sometimes a dozen people to a trailer, some kids sleeping in crates, some 5000 people building the Taconite industry for Bethlehem Steel. There were no social services whatsoever except those provided by the National Lutheran Council.

Woe to you, A. D. would say, quoting Isaiah 5:8 who join house to house and field to field until there is no more room in the midst of the land. "How can Jacob stand, he is so small?" asked the prophet Amos.

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In these simple stories are the situations and the actions, the institutions and the ideals, the traditions and the metaphors, that A. D. embodied and manipulated in his life and ministry.

Cornell West says that all that we basically have are traditions, each dynamic, malleable and revisable. What we want to do is show what A. D. did with the traditions that he inherited.<sup>2</sup> A tradition is a stream of energy that passes through the generations, a stage which legitimizes and supports a reconstructive performance. We want to try to analyze A. D.'s performance within the context of certain traditions and to do so in a way that connects his performance with our situation.

We have identified five traditions, each inter-related to the others.

1. A. D. was the product of the Swedish Lutheran immigrant tradition as it was experienced in an itinerant pastor's home, a tradition beginning with peasants fleeing little agricultural villages like Lekvattnet because of the collapsing European system and enabled by agricultural opportunities in the American West.
2. The milieu and the teaching tradition of Yale University were instrumental in A. D.'s development, its impact far beyond that of the six courses that he took while he was pastor in Ansonia and West Haven, Connecticut.
3. A. D. was a practitioner of the theology of the Kingdom of God. "To the advancement of the ends and interests of the Kingdom I dedicate my efforts as professor in Augustana Theological Seminary," he said, in his inaugural lecture.
4. A. D. was part of the Social Gospel Movement, which evolved from a certain understanding of the Kingdom of God in America.
5. A. D.'s essential strategy and source of energy for his Christian life was boundary crossing, breaking through established patterns in response to perceived need, as per his favorite parable about a Good Samaritan crossing over to the other side.

Let's start with A.D.'s immigrant experience.

Everything that A. D. was, and became, was conditioned by the immigrant experience, particularly the immigrant experience as perceived from a parsonage organized around a semi-itinerant father. Oscar Handlin has written that the immigrant was a person diverted by unexpected pressures from established channels, thereby discovering the invigorating

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<sup>2</sup> Cornell West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 230.

"The Kingdom of God," *Lutheran Companion* 42 (1934), p. 1478

effects of new demands on imagination. Itinerancy requires starting over again and again.<sup>3</sup>

A. D.'s father was from Värmland, a place called Lekvattnet, a district of pietistic revival, conceived in a family of poor farmers (I have been there several times: they are still poor). They arrived in 1869 through Quebec to Cokato, Minnesota where the family built a log cabin with a dirt floor and hand-made furniture.<sup>4</sup>

At 21 A. D.'s father P.A. Mattson decided he wanted to go to college. The family would not speak to him when he left because they said he was abandoning them in their poverty. In 1892 he was ordained.

A. D.'s mother came in third class stalls from Linköping at the age of 8 in 1880, up the Hudson to Albany, then through the Erie Canal to Ophiem, Illinois, where the family had to stay in a haystack until deloused. The family settled in a shack by the cemetery. In 1882 they moved to Rock Island, living in a house down the hill from the College where her father worked leveling the hill on which Augustana College was built and then for Dimock and Gould.

A year later they moved to Moline where her mother took in washing and she delivered it, washing clothes free for Augustana students, as was the custom. Her father died six years after coming to Moline.

Somewhat against her will (she really wanted to work for Augustana Book Concern when she was 17 but did not get the job) A. D.'s mother became a teacher and collector for First Lutheran in Moline (at \$35 per month - \$25 for teaching and \$10 for collecting) and also took up subscriptions for Augustana College and became an occasional Swedish cookbook traveling salesperson in northern Illinois

She met P.A. Mattson while taking subscriptions to paint First Lutheran: "Who is that man with the beard down to his waist?," she asked the Assistant Pastor Olson. "That's a student from Gustavus Adolphus down from Winnepeg where he has been working for a year." They were married in 1894.

Their first parish was Bloomington, Illinois, where Grandpa Mattson tried to enforce the Augustana code with a vengeance. We used to have in our house a lead headed cane that Grandpa carried and once or twice used to defend himself against free thinkers who hated his temperance position

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<sup>3</sup> Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951), pp. 305 – 306.

<sup>4</sup> This and what follows are citations from a family biography dictated by A. D.'s mother to Earl Mattson, A. D.'s youngest brother.

Once Grandpa heard in a prayer at Sunday School teachers meeting that a former organist was at that moment dancing in a dive (prayer meetings are a wonderful way to get gossip and news) and Grandpa rushed off to see, Grandma trying to hold him back by his coattails at the door. (The organist was in there dancing alright, grandma said, but eventually repented and became a fine church member again.)

Once Grandpa attacked a local union for unfair practice and someone put a bullet in the wall over his head while he was preaching.

A. D. was born in Bloomington in 1895 and his mother, still bed-ridden, did not know his name until she heard it at his baptism (perhaps some indication as to how the family was structured).

After that it was out to the prairies: In 1899 they moved to Black River, Minnesota, a mile to potable water and neighbors. Sometimes, as in Warren, Minnesota, there were as many as seven churches in the parish, the family supplementing their income with small land dealings, stock keeping, trapping and hunting. A. D.'s father was good with a gun both in season and out. When I was a student pastor in Kennedy, Minnesota, a lady told me how grandpa once conducted a service smelling of skunk, from one that he had trapped.

Eventually there were six children: besides A. D., Paul, Karl, Earl, Lydia and Ruby. Family life was raucous and the humor was often gross.

A. D. was a fiercely independent big brother. When someone tried to rob the parsonage in Fort Dodge, Iowa, while he was baby-sitting Karl, he chased the robber away with his father's gun, and when the folks came home, they found A. D. pointing the gun at the door saying "If you come in, I will shoot you too." When he broke his leg in a bicycle accident, he did not tell anyone and tried to heal it with liniment. Later on he wrote much correspondence trying to talk his brother Earl out of his doctrinal heresies and back into some sort of relation with the Augustana Synod, "I preached on Easter," Earl wrote, "and didn't mention the empty tomb. Nobody missed it."

At age 8, A. D. had to care for the family's stock in Warren on the other side of the Snake River. When the family doctor saw him out at 5:00 a.m., on the way to the barn, thinking A. D. was sleepwalking, he told him to go home. A. D. told him to mind his own business and leave him alone.

In Manson, Iowa, where the family lived from 1910 until 1917 (It was A. D. who walked the family cow the forty miles from Fort Dodge to Manson) the family owned three

horses, Babe, Lady and Pet. Pet became so old she had to be put down: Papa couldn't. A. D. did.

A. D. met his wife Frida in Manson and courted her there despite the efforts of the other boys to embarrass him by their behavior.

In 1913 A. D. left for Augustana College which surprised everybody because all along A. D. had said he was going to Kansas City to become a horse doctor.

As influential as A. D.'s immigrant ties were on his predispositions, his instruction and experience and acquaintances at Yale (which, as I said, extended far beyond the six courses he took there) provide a key to his understanding of the world.<sup>5</sup>

In 1919 A. D. was ordained on a call to Avoca, Minnesota. His second call, in 1921, was St. James, Minnesota, where his neighboring pastor was Lars Herman Beck, first president of Upsala who urged A. D. to burn his bridges and go to Yale to come to terms with emerging patterns of American thought. Beck had gotten his Ph.D. from Yale in 1892 studying European psychology and had once taught a course for George Trumbull Ladd (with Wm James, a founder of American Psychology) and was offered a position teaching Scottish theology at Yale. He refused the position and decided instead to go to Brooklyn and establish Upsala College in the old Bethlehem Lutheran Church.

Several professors at Yale had significant influence on A. D. One of the most important was Luther Weigle, head of Yale Divinity School for 21 years, a former General Synod Pastor who had done his dissertation under George Trumbull Ladd and later chaired the commission on the Revised Standard Version of the Bible and headed, for a time, the Federal Council of Churches, which gave institutional form to the social gospel. Weigle often sang the praises of the much maligned S. S. Schmucker of Gettysburg for his ecumenical efforts (Schmucker eventually was dismissed and derided for his essentially Puritan theology, imbibed partially at Princeton, the same Puritan theology that A. D. apparently appropriated at Yale).

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<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to reflect about how our family history is intertwined with a triangle of institutions, Yale, Upsala, and Augustana College and Seminary. I was born while my father was teaching at Upsala (AD taught there in 1928 and 29). My grandfather confirmed C. G. Erickson, later president of Upsala, by whom I was baptized. Lars Herman Beck, the first president of Upsala, was instrumental in AD's decision to go to Yale and was a Yale teacher and Ph.D. Upsala was founded in and around Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Brooklyn where I was pastor for a time. Earl, the doctrinally rebellious brother, opted out of Augustana Seminary for Yale. My father was the Lutheran chaplain at Yale where I later did graduate work. My mother was director of women's residences at Upsala in the years that Upsala had hopes of becoming a black college, before the ELCA reorganization undercut Upsala's existence. And everybody ends up at Augustana College and Seminary for whom my grandfather on my mother's side and my grandmother on my father's side had been solicitors and of which institution my uncle on my mother's side was college president and my father president of the seminary

A. D. was also deeply influenced by D. C. MacIntosh, a champion of empirical theology, a vigorous realist who insisted on the reasonableness of Christianity and demanded an objective basis for a religious faith. As always, with A. D., just as important as a person's theology was his or her story and MacIntosh was a Canadian pacifist who refused to bear arms to defend the constitution. He lost his case before the Supreme Court and never became a US citizen. MacIntosh was also the mentor for Richard Niebuhr.

As a kid I lived just a few houses from D. C. MacIntosh on Woodlawn Avenue in Hamden, Connecticut, but by the time I saw him, he had had a stroke and each day hobbled up and down the street supported by a cane. (I had an inexplicable veneration for the old man and I figured that he was an important personage but no knowledge of his connection with my uncle A. D.)

Prior to going to Yale, A. D. was introduced to these emerging patterns in American thought by C. J. Sodergren who taught at the seminary and the college. Sodergren liked to heckle Augustana's traditionalism, insisting that the religious spirit of the young could never exist in the old Augustana forms. He hated the theory of verbal inspiration, defended evolution as being consistent with the Bible, derided priests, and advocated prophets.

Through Sodergren A. D. was introduced to the work of George Trumbull Ladd, became acquainted with recent studies of biblical critics, and was provoked by the works of Walter Rauschenbusch, who according to Sydney Ahlstrom and Winthrop Hudson was the foremost molder of American Christian thought in his generation.

A. D. wrote: "The most dynamic influence which Dr. Sodergren brought to me was the introduction to the works of Walter Rauschenbusch, a new dimension of Christianity which I had never seen before. Christianity became socially relevant. Later I found this same emphasis in Archbishop Söderblom."<sup>6</sup>

Since George Trumbull Ladd played such a large role in the thinking of Beck and Sodergren and Weigle, a few words about him may be instructive.

Both his story and his teaching attracted A. D. Ladd was a direct descendant of the elder William Brewster who came over on the Mayflower and was a graduate of Andover Seminary and eventually pastor of the Free Congregational Church in Milwaukee, whose members, as the name implies, were active in abolitionist and temperance causes.

He was famous for his attacks on the corrupt town council, the malfeasance of the local press, and for provoking the clean-up of the Milwaukee sewage system.

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<sup>6</sup> A. D. Mattson, *Theological Currents in Augustana History*. Source and date unknown. From correspondence files.

Ladd believed that the greatest obstruction to proper ethics was the nerveless ethical condition of Christianity. To experience God is to experience a passion for ethical behavior, he insisted.

Eventually he became captivated by the new psychology in Europe, which was beginning to appear in American universities and, together with William James of Harvard, and a few others, he founded the American Association of Psychologists and wrote the first textbook in the field.

Ladd, with James, was interested in the paranormal which may or may not explain A. D.'s later interest in paranormal experience.<sup>7</sup>

Because of this and other such influences A. D.'s early interest centered in philosophy of religion, religion and science and the nature of the Bible.<sup>8/9</sup>

In 1928 A. D. received a call to Upsala College as professor of Christianity and preacher in the church serving the College and then went to Augustana College in 1929.

The years of college teaching were significant because the courses that he taught in the prophets brought together many insights that had never quite been worked together into a consistent whole.<sup>10</sup>

By the time A. D. went to Augustana Seminary in 1931, Amos is front and center. And the vision of justice rolling down like waters was firmly fixed.

A digression

There was a certain intrigue around the appointment of A. D. to the Seminary.

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<sup>7</sup> Eugene Mills, *George Trumbull Ladd: Pioneer American Psychologist* (Cleveland: Case Western University, 1969).

<sup>8</sup> Karl E. Mattson, "The Theological Pilgrimage," *The Augustana Seminary Review* (date unknown), from correspondence files.

<sup>9</sup> There is something special about the liberal evangelical social gospel tradition at Yale and its effect on students. As Dean Liston Pope put it: "An insistence on studying society as it is, in relation to what it ought to be." Of all the religious periodicals I receive only Yale consistently tackles the tough issues: Recent issues of *Reflections*, for example, deal with: Money and Morals after the Crash, Who is my Neighbor Facing Immigration, Sex and the Church, and The Future of the Prophetic Voice.

<sup>10</sup> K. E. Mattson above.

Mark Granquist has reported an active correspondence between certain scholarly outsiders, George Stephenson and Vergelius Ferm, plotting strategy to mold Augustana College into a forward thinking institution.<sup>11</sup>

Stephenson, with a Ph.D. from Harvard, taught briefly at Maywood and then received a permanent appointment in history at the University of Minnesota. He had somehow gotten on the Augustana Board of Directors and quietly helped engineer A. D.'s appointment.

After the appointment, he wrote to A. D. saying: "My contribution to the happy outcome was to remain severely silent....If I had spoken on your behalf, you would have been under a cloud of suspicion."<sup>12</sup>

The most ecstatic letter came from C. J. Sodergren, now at LBI:

I am rejoicing because it is the dawn of a new day, an answer to many a prayer. At times I have been paralyzed mentally and spiritually, partly because I have had to breathe air vitiated by the poison gas of fundamentalism and before that 8 years at Augustana Seminary in the form of mummified scholasticism and dogmatism.<sup>13</sup>

A similarly ecstatic communication came from C. A. Wendell, Lutheran Pastor at the University of Minnesota:

I don't believe it ---Or rather, I wouldn't if I knew how to doubt it. But I have it right smack from the inside, so I suppose it must be true. --If Brother Ripley found out about it he certainly would report it under his famous "Believe it or Not."

What does it MEAN? Have you backwatered and admitted that the earth does not move; or have you fooled the fossils into believing that you too are dead; or have you just been wise with the wisdom of the Christian serpent (Mt. 10.16)

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Granquist, "Two Lives: Vergilius Ferm and George Stephenson: Scholarly Outsiders who contributed to the Augustana Synod," *Augustana Heritage Newsletter*, Volume 6, Number 3 (Fall 2009), p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Letter dated February 28, 1931.

<sup>13</sup> Letter dated March 2, 1931.



.....Does it mean the dawn of a new day? ---And if it does mean that – if the dawn is trying to arrive - will you be able to hold out and help it come? ---it will not come without struggle and much unpleasantness. <sup>14</sup>

Conrad Bergendoff was Dean at the Seminary and the relationship between the two was always problematic even though they had been influenced by similar movements. A. D. thought Conrad timid on social justice issues and resented what he took to be his autocratic ways. (Once they got in vigorous argument about dancing, A. D. in this case being on the conservative side, insisting that the colleges were under church authority and only the Synod could decide to allow or disallow dancing. Conrad said his son had joined the United Lutheran Church because of Augustana's position on dancing. What a profound reason for changing churches, said A. D. and then went on to say that if college administrators could not abide by the rules of the church they should resign and the sooner the better.) And of course there was always the issue of the separation of the College and the Seminary.<sup>15</sup>

And yet it was Conrad who buried A. D.'s young sister Ruby who died of a ruptured appendix while working as a nurse at Moline Lutheran and it was Conrad who conducted the funeral for A. D.'s father and gave the eulogy at A. D.'s funeral and at least privately was every bit as radical about the depredations of capitalism, despite his conservative clientele, railing with Eisenhower about the military industrial complex. The point is, that despite decades of difference, they never broke with each other.

The main theological postulate that energized A. D. was his belief in the Kingdom of God. Typical of A. D.'s pronouncements are these: Without an emphasis on the Kingdom, the distinctive ethical attitude of Jesus is lost. It expresses the very essence of his life's purpose. Without the kingdom emphasis, the church becomes reactionary and tends to breed priests rather than prophets. The Kingdom of God is the energy of God pressing in on human affairs, the eternal in the midst of time. The Kingdom is God's rule on earth as it is in heaven. It is present, it is coming, and is in the future. The Christian must not withdraw behind the fortress of individual salvation and let the world perish.<sup>16</sup>

“To the advancement of the ends and interests of the Kingdom, I dedicate my efforts as professor in Augustana Theological Seminary.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Letter dated March 6, 1931.

<sup>15</sup> Argument details taken from a letter to P. O. Bersell dated April 15, 1951.

<sup>16</sup> A.D. Mattson, *The Social Responsibility of Christians* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), pp 46-56, A.D. Mattson, *Christian Social Consciousness* (Rock Island: Augustana Book Concern, 1953), pp 96-110; A.D. Mattson, *Christian Ethics* (Rock Island: Augustana Book Concern, 1938 and 1947), pp 175 – 188.

<sup>17</sup> A.D. Mattson, “*The Kingdom of God*,” *Lutheran Companion* 42 (1934), p. 1478.

His dedication of the Knobel Miller Lectures was to his grandchildren:

With the hope that the Kingdom of God  
may increasingly become a reality in their consciousness.

Frequently A. D. quoted Bishop Temple: “Every generation finds in the gospel something peculiar for its time...and the great discovery which our generation has made is the tremendous importance which the gospels place on the kingdom of God.”

Where did this come from? From the Synoptic Gospels, of course, but it was also woven into the theology that attracted him, partly from Yale.

As Richard Niebuhr advocates in *The Kingdom of God in America*, published in 1937,<sup>18</sup> written as a kind of corrective to his *Social Sources of Denominationalism*, the Kingdom of God is the essential religious story in America and explains the unity beneath the diversity in American Christianity.

Christianity, maintains Niebuhr, is a movement and not a series of institutions. It is gospel, not law. It is not an organization but the invisible organic movement of those who have been called out. It is the reformation and not the protestant churches. It is the great revivals and not the multifarious denominations spawned. And, we might add, it is the glory of the coming of the Lord in the movement of Dr. King.<sup>19</sup>

The Kingdom of God in America is a symphony with three movements: Movement number 1: The Puritan insistence that only God is King Movement #2: The Great Awakening to the spirit of Christ that swept like wild fire through America, and the expulsive power of that new affection which led the converts to believe that they could “live godly lives here in time;” Movement #3: Jesus prayer for the reconstruction of the earth, Christianity as a social gospel.

Initially and chiefly A. D. encountered the Kingdom of God in America in the life and writings of Walter Rauschenbush. Rauschenbush was something of an enigma in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, given the prevailing spirit of liberalism and optimism and the secularization of the Puritan tradition. This liberalism proclaimed, in Niebuhr’s famous phrase: “a God without wrath who brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”<sup>20</sup> But not Rauschenbush, said Niebuhr, at least not entirely. “Rauschenbush stayed relatively close to evangelical

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<sup>18</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Willet, Clark and Co, 1937).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, preface xii.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid,, p. 193.

notions of the sovereignty of God, the reign of Christ, and the coming kingdom on earth.... The revolutionary element remained pronounced requiring conversion and the coming of the kingdom was crisis, judgment, as well as promise.”<sup>21</sup>

Rauschenbusch learned his trade in the Hell’s Kitchen section of Manhattan where he experienced a Kingdom of Evil and subsequently began to proclaim the possibility of the Kingdom of God on earth, an ideal of common life so radically different from the present that it involves a revolutionary displacement of existing relations. Right moral conduct is the sole test and fruit of religion. The prophets proclaimed not the private morality of detached souls but the social morality of a nation.<sup>22</sup>

A. D.’s pantheon of saints all fit a similar mold.

A. D. frequently emphasized Archbishop Nathan Söderblom and his ecumenical interest in the history of religions and his belief in the kingdom of God on earth. Particularly important for A. D. was his organizational work on the Stockholm Conference of 1925, which proved to be a progenitor of the World Council of Churches in which kingdom theology was a major theme. After 1925 it was no longer possible to ignore the fact of common Christian responsibility for humanity living together in peace, freedom and justice.<sup>23</sup>

A. D. sometimes commended Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple who combined incarnational theology and an acute social conscience and whose legislative work foreshadowed much of the legislation that formed the welfare state, a term which he popularized.

Another of A. D.’s pantheon was Toyohiko Kagawa, participant in the kingdom movement in Japan and like A. D. a lover of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Christianity in action is the truth of Christian doctrines, he insisted. (“In the beginning is the deed,” said Goethe.) Kagawa was a slum dweller, a worker for full suffrage for men and women, organizer of the Japanese Federation of Labor and the National Anti-war League. In 1925 he was arrested for apologizing to China for Japan’s atrocious behavior during the occupation.

But it is Albert Schweitzer that A. D. quotes more than anybody else. The one important thing, said Schweitzer, is that we shall be thoroughly dominated by the idea of the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 194

<sup>22</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch from *Christianity and Social Crisis*, as quoted in Vergelius Ferm, *Classics of Protestantism* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959).

<sup>23</sup> *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: W.C. C. Publications, 1991) p., 939.

Kingdom, as Jesus required his followers to be.<sup>24</sup> The ethical is the essence of religion and the essence of Christianity is an affirmation of the world that has passed through the rejection of the world. Jesus requires that we should actively prove ourselves people who had been compelled by him to rise from being as the world to be other than the world, and thereby partakers of his peace.<sup>25</sup>

And, of course, the quotation that so many love and that is so often heard:

As one unknown and nameless he comes to us, just as on the shore of the lake he approached those men who knew not who he was. His words are the same: "Follow thou Me!" and he puts us to the task which he has to carry out in our age. And to those who obey, be they wise or simple, He will reveal Himself through all they are privileged to experience in His fellowship of peace and activity, as an inexpressible secret, Who He is.<sup>26</sup>

But now the question as to how to enter this kingdom, or rather, how A. D. sought to enter the kingdom. As Crossan has written, if Jesus only discussed the Kingdom of God, Lower Galilee would have greeted him with a great big yawn.<sup>27</sup> Echoing Schweitzer Crossan writes: Christianity must, generation after generation make its best historical judgment about who Jesus was and then decide what that reconstruction means in our time.<sup>28</sup>

Here A. D. quotes Richard Niebuhr:

Each believer must reach his own conclusion in a resolution that involves a leap into the middle of the present conflict. No amount of speculative insight can relieve the Christian individual or the Christian community from the burden, the necessity, the guilt and the glory, at arriving at such decisions and present obedience.<sup>29</sup>

So how did A. D. leap? What was the nature of his obedience?

Each of us, at best, acts on some amalgam of grand traditions.

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<sup>24</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought* (New York: New American Library, 1953), p 47.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 48.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p.48.

<sup>27</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), p 76.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 200.

<sup>29</sup> A.D. Mattson, quoting by permission H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture in Christian Social Consciousness* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1951), p. 56.

What kind of record did he leave? What did he do?

To quote Jerry Christianson,<sup>30</sup> A. D. was a vital part of making Augustana Seminary into a modern seminary together with Conrad Bergendoff, Eric Wahlstrom and Carl Anderson, all of whom embraced the fundamental principles of modernism, ecumenism, social justice and the historical-critical method.

During the 34 years that A. D. taught ethics at the Seminary more than 1100 Augustana pastors were taught his system of ethics and listened to Amos call for social justice.

He embodied in his teaching the Social Gospel Movement, a form of millennial thought, a sub-movement of liberalism, chiefly energized, according to Sydney Ahlstrom, by the urban dislocations occasioned by America's unregulated economic expansion. The Social Gospel movement developed naturally out of Puritanism and abolitionism was a decisive prelude.<sup>31</sup> The movement itself originated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but was revitalized by the social catastrophe of the depression. Coincident with the start of A. D.'s tenure at Seminary, the depression became the backdrop for many of A. D.'s commitments.

The Social Gospel Movement eventually found institutionalization in the Federal Council of Churches, founded in 1908, and throughout his career, until the very end, A. D. regarded their definition of Christian social responsibility as definitive. He quoted it in its entirety on the final pages of the Knobel-Miller lectures. Among other things, it contained the following principles:

Subordination of speculation and the profit motive....control of credit and monetary systems....a wider and fairer distribution of wealth....social insurance....repudiation of war, drastic reduction of armaments....free speech, free assembly, and a free press.... and equal rights for all.<sup>32</sup>

This was a kingdom platform upon which A. D. consistently stood.

A. D. had no use for the traditional Lutheran two-kingdom doctrine, believing with H. Richard Niebuhr that this doctrine substituted two parallel moralities for Luther's closely

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<sup>30</sup> Jerry Christianson, "The Making of a Modern Seminary: Augustana Seminary in the 1930's," unpublished paper.

<sup>31</sup> Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, Second Edition (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), p 921.

<sup>32</sup> A. D. Mattson, *The Social Responsibility of Christians* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), pp. 107-09.

related ethics.<sup>33</sup> Again citing Niebuhr from *Christ and Culture*, A. D. insists that “Luther affirmed the life in culture as the sphere in which Christ....ought to be followed.”<sup>34</sup> Subsequently, along with Jesus and the prophets, notably Amos, A. D. worked, to use Crossan’s phrase, at the dangerous interface between politics and religion.

Precipitated by the tradition and people of Yale, A. D. kept contact with the American religious left and gave those who would listen to him some sense of that tradition. He joined the Religion and Labor Foundation, founded in 1932 by Jerome Davis and Willard Uphaus, whose mission was to translate the creed of the church and synagogue into the economic life of the nation. Davis had been hired by Yale to provoke Yale students to think contemporaneously and inspire them to preach social gospel.<sup>35</sup> He was a sociologist and vigorous community and labor organizer who taught that if democracy is to survive capitalism must go, something that A. D. essentially believed. Eventually A. D. served on the executive committee of the Religion and Labor Foundation with Douglas Macintosh and Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr. A. D. accompanied Davis to Russia before the disillusionment with the Soviet experiment and again in 1957. He was also an occasional companion of Willard Uphaus visiting with him Black sharecroppers in the South and investigating labor conditions in the West, long before James Agee was writing about white sharecroppers in “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.” Uphaus became a teacher at Vanderbilt Divinity School and was a mentor of Dan West who founded the Highlander Center so important in the Civil Rights Movement. A. D. visited the interracial experiment called Koinonia Farms near Plains Georgia which provided the inspiration for Millard and Linda Fuller and Habitat for Humanity. It is said that he knew Martin Luther King, but I can’t vouch for that. He paid bail for freedom riders. (When I came to Gettysburg College as chaplain one such freedom rider contacted me and repaid the bail money as a contribution to Gettysburg College.)

As a kid I loved the story of how in 1938, A. D., angry that Rock Island institutions (including the college, I believe) would not allow Spanish anti-fascists to speak, went to Concordia Lutheran Church in Chicago to denounce the Silver Shirts, founded by William Dudley Palley in 1933 (The Silver Shirts were pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic<sup>36</sup>), and they threatened to shoot A. D. out of the pulpit (just like his father in Bloomington before him).

As I have already mentioned, A. D. worked as an occasional labor organizer, even helping to organize the Augustana Book Concern. As chaplain of the local Quad City

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<sup>33</sup> *Christian Social Consciousness*, p. 159.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Gregory Jackson, *The Impact of Alvin Daniel Mattson Upon the Social Consciousness of the Augustana Synod* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1982), p. 51.

<sup>36</sup> S. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, p 927.

Federation of Labor he often mediated labor disputes, taking great satisfaction in being feted by Senator Paul Douglas upon his retirement.

He bemoaned the classicism of the Lutheran Church: Middle class Lutherans have no sense at all of the working man, he said over and over again,

Using the model of John Frederick Oberlin, A. D. spent a great amount of time working for and teaching about the rural church, convinced, and trying to convince others, that if such churches were to survive, they must involve themselves in a revision of the economic system.

His endorsements of Franklin Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy and Henry Wallace (he introduced Wallace at Wharton Field House in Moline) provoked tremendous controversy and strong rebuke. His public chastening by the President of the Augustana Lutheran Church, Malvin Lundeen, and his refusal to recant his Kennedy endorsement are well known. A. D., apparently enjoying the conflict, kept a box full of letters from irate Augustana laypeople, pastors, and church councils.

His role on the Augustana Commission on Moral and Social problems in the founding of which A. D. was instrumental and of which he was the only chairman was significant but difficult to assess. There is no question that its pronouncements were significantly more progressive than its clientele and of other Lutheran Churches. For example, its documents affirming the right to collective bargaining, calling for equal rights for minorities six years before *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, supporting non-violent resistance in the civil rights struggle, calling for an end to private manufacture of armaments, insisting on the transcendence of the Kingdom of God over any form of nationalism, supporting exemption of CO's from military service, calling for pastors to share political insights in preaching and teaching, opposing capital punishment, etc.

As a pastor in the Augustana tradition, the exciting thing about these statements was not that such things would ever become the main agenda of an Augustana Church, but rather that they gave permission to those who wanted it to act boldly in the name of Christ in any of those areas. That, to me, was good news, empowering news.

It may be that the most important part of the heritage of A. D. is his witness that Kingdom action requires boundary crossing. Moses crossing over from the prosperity of his father-in-laws farm in response to the cries of his enslaved country people, Amos crossing over to Israel to embody the pleas of the poor for justice, and always the Good Samaritan crossing over to the person on the other side – this was the action that attracted A. D.

Crossan and the Jesus School say the same thing about Jesus: Everyone was welcome at his table. There the boundaries that divided classes and races and sexes, the sick and the well, these were all erased, and, in the vulnerability of each to all, not unlike that of an

immigrant on a new shore, new possibilities and relationships were imagined and ventured, and the energies released became the experience of the kingdom on earth and the engine of the church a possibility that was immediately open to everyone.

Kingdom action requires boundary crossing.

That's what A. D.'s life was about! He tried to ignore the middle class boundaries of the Augustana Church so that he and others could cross over to realities generally ignored. As Louie Almén reports he put seminary students on the union picket line and brought them to hear Walter Reuther knowing that most of them did not understand the working man that he had come to know working as a section hand on the railroad.<sup>37</sup> He found energy and inspiration in crossing over to realities and populations on the other side with small ventures to sharecroppers, and migrants, and in interracial experiments and larger ventures into the union world of the working man. Class is the institutionalization of economic oppression, and A. D. struggled with others on the American religious left to break out of that confinement.

“God,” said A. D. over and over again, “does not appear at the end of a logical syllogism.” “Indifference to the social realm is the denial of the Christian faith.” “God is with the weak and the oppressed, and that is the pilgrimage required to enter the kingdom.”

How do you explain the energies that flow when boundaries are crossed? A friend of mine, a psychologist, says it has to do with health. When the whole body is working together we say that the body is healthy. Pollution, racism, discrimination, closed boundaries, class division, these are not natural. They are the scars that serve to show how the severed parts once fit together. And so the energy and the unity that we experience upon crossing over to the other side, like Rosa Parks to the front of the bus, or St Francis to the lepers, is simply the rush and flush of healthy circulation restored, arteries unclogged for the unobstructed flow of life giving blood, like the ecstasy experienced when the Berlin Wall came tumbling down, a present experience of the Kingdom coming.

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<sup>37</sup> Louis T. Almén, “The Augustan Heritage Vis-à-vis the Role of the Church in Society,” *The Augustana Heritage: Recollections, Perspectives, and Prospects*, ed. Arland J. Hultgren and Vance L. Eckstrom (Chicago: Augustana Heritage Association, 1999), p. 140.