Vietnam, Luther, and the Doctrine of Vocation

An Interview with Uwe Siemon-Netto
Editor’s Note

In getting to know Uwe Siemon-Netto, I learned that one of his most admirable qualities is his willingness to speak his mind and stand clearly for truth amid a drifting and compromising culture. I’m sure he’d think nothing of my complimentary view of his character given all he has seen and accomplished. His life reminds me of the popular song “I’ve Been Everywhere,” first made popular in America by the country singer Hank Snow. Siemon-Netto has been all over the world as a journalist covering many of the biggest and most chaotic events of the 20th Century.

As readers will see in this issue’s interview, Siemon-Netto’s life in journalism gives him added insight as a theologian. As a journalist and theologian, he sees deeply into many of the problems that plague the media today. As somebody who enjoys studying military history, I appreciate Siemon-Netto’s willingness to discuss what has become a narrow and flawed history of America’s war in Vietnam. He covered the war as a reporter for five years and has written an excellent memoir titled, Triumph of the Absurd: A Reporter’s Love for the People of Vietnam. As a leading Lutheran theologian, his insight and study of Luther’s doctrine of vocation is, I would argue, essential for today’s culture.

After reading an excellent piece on John Milton and liberty in the Journal of Markets & Morality, I asked the author, David Urban, to offer us a version for Religion & Liberty. Urban is a professor of English at Calvin College and delves into Milton’s elevation of virtue as a chief requirement for liberty.

Mark S. Latkovic reviews Charles Murray’s The Curmudgeon’s Guide to Getting Ahead and Matthea Brandenburg reviews The Idealist: Jeffrey Sachs and the Quest to End Poverty by Nina Munk. The book by Munk is a thorough examination of the problems with aid and high-minded theories for ending poverty in Africa. Writing in Barron’s, William Easterly titled his review “The Arrogance of Good Intentions.”


Many of you have had the chance to visit our new and impressive headquarters. Acton’s Kris Mauren provides an update on the capital fundraising campaign that made our move possible. He also touches on some new investments that will expand Acton’s outreach thanks to our many generous supporters.

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Uwe Siemon-Netto is the founder and executive director emeritus of the Center for Lutheran Theology and Public Life in Capistrano Beach, California. He is also a regular contributor to English- and German-language publications. Siemon-Netto, a native of Leipzig, Germany, has been an international journalist for over 50 years. His assignments have included the U.S. Civil Rights movement, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the Vietnam War (over a period of five years), the Arab-Israeli Six Day War, and China’s Cultural Revolution.

In mid-career, he turned to theology, earning his M.A. from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and his Ph.D. degree in theology and sociology of religion from Boston University. His published works include The Acquittal of God, Duc: A Reporter’s Love for the Wounded People of Vietnam, The Fabricated Luther, and One Incarnate Truth, The Christian Answer to Postmodern Confusion, as well as his latest, a memoir, Triumph of the Absurd: A Reporter’s Love for the Abandoned People of Vietnam. He recently spoke with managing editor Ray Nothstine.

R&L: You’ve covered so many notable events related to the rise of totalitarianism in the 20th century. Are we in danger of forgetting the lessons from many of these events?

Uwe Siemon-Netto: Unfortunately, yes. Next April we are going to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Fall of Saigon. Let’s start there. The North Vietnamese defense minister Vo Nguyen Giap said, “The enemy do not possess the psychological and political means to fight a long-drawn-out war.” (Giap was talking about Western democracies) He proved that right in Vietnam, which America needlessly abandoned causing millions of South Vietnamese to be executed, tortured to death in reeducation camps, driven to drown as they fled their country as Boat People, deprived of their liberty, health, and well-being. Giap has had attentive students: Iran, North Korea, Al Qaida, the Taliban, and now, Putin. In Vietnam, the U.S. has shown that when it gets tired or bored with a conflict, it will get out, using any oblique means to do so. Look at Afghanistan: The U.S. and NATO are behaving like a house owner leaving a note on his front door saying, “We are on vacation and won’t be back until Oct. 10. The code for our alarm system is 021133, and we are taking the dog with us.” This is demented. No thought is given to what will happen to Afghan women after our soldiers are gone.

Vietnam was covered in a completely different way than previous conflicts and wars where America was a participant. After the Tet Offensive, Walter Cronkite essentially opined, “The war is lost.” How did that event change the media in America?

You are touching on the essence of my Vietnam memoir, Triumph of the Absurd. Let’s step back: I covered Têt in 1968, first in Saigon, and then in Hué, where I was in the thick of the battle as a war correspondent. I saw a mass grave with the bodies of hundreds of women, children, and old men and witnessed an American camera team refusing to film this scene saying, “We are not here to spread anti-Communist propaganda.” Like other real combat correspondents, I had just witnessed how the South Vietnamese, Americans, and their other allies defeated the Communists at Têt.

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The Allies took heavy losses, yes, but they smashed the North Vietnamese and Vietcong, killing more than 40,000. Hanoi would never have recovered from this massive military defeat had not Cronkite irresponsibly declared this war unwinnable before 20 million viewers. This prompted President Lyndon B. Johnson to say, “I have lost Cronkite, I have lost Middle America.” It is shocking that Cronkite is still venerated as the model journalist. He committed an arrogant act of journalistic malpractice, and so have other media personalities, though certainly not all. Most American and European combat reporters did a brave and honorable job covering this conflict where it was actually fought: not in Saigon’s bars and New York newsrooms but in the jungles, rice paddies, and streets of South Vietnam.

How did your experiences in Vietnam and elsewhere shape your decision to study theology?

The stench of death remained in my nostrils for years after I left Vietnam. In my nightmares I saw the bodies of those beautiful women in mass graves, and these images are coming back now that I have reached old age. This, compounded with my ghastly experiences as a managing editor having to deal with a sizable minority of extreme leftists on my staff, made me, formerly a hedonistic fellow, reflect about my vocation as a journalist. Being a cradle Lutheran, this automatically drove me to Luther’s doctrine of vocation. According to Luther, Christians have a divine assignment to serve their neighbor out of love in their many everyday endeavors as reporters, editors, photographers, but also as parents, citizens, or wherever they are placed.

What is the role of a journalist in a free society and how should one view the vocation of journalism?

In the free society, you have an interlocking chain of vocations. Let’s start with the voters. They are the sovereigns of a democratic nation. Their vocation is to elect public officials who then have their own vocations. But the voters must exercise their vocation not only as an act of self-interest but also with a loving concern for their fellow-citizens, their neighbors. The voters must base their decisions on information, which they can only get from responsible reporting, not the gobbledygook of self-important pundits, to use a great term coined by Rupert Murdoch, but from men and women who honestly research facts. When I started my career with the Associated Press in Frankfurt more than half a century ago, one of my superiors once slapped a manuscript around my chops, shouting, “Keep your irrelevant opinion to yourself! It’s not your vocation to opine! Tell the readers what they need to know, not what you want them to think!” Oh, do I wish editors of this type still manned the slots of the Western media today! They don’t, and that’s catastrophic. This is why I have grave premonitions for the chance for survival of democracy as we know it.

How has Luther shaped your view of work and what do people who are not as familiar with Luther need to know about him?

He has taught me how to lead a Christian life as a participating resident in this fallen world. Luther does not suggest that I do this as a holy roller but by my willingness to serve my neighbor quite simply in my regular work. According to Luther, I thus render the highest possible service to God, and am a member of the universal priesthood of all believers in the secular realm, which Lutherans call the left-hand kingdom. What people need to know about Luther is that his message is hugely practical and uncomplicated: By grace through your faith in Jesus’ work on the cross, a Christian is already a redeemed citizen in Christ’s realm. This frees the Christian to roll up his sleeves to get to work in the secular realm, where God is hidden and acting through His masks. We are these masks, including us journalists. In God’s secular kingdom, we have to do nothing particular other than to serve our neighbor in vocatione (in our vocations), not per vocationem (through our vocations), as long as we do this out of a loving concern for our neighbors. That’s what God has created for: to be His cooperators, His partners, in the ongoing process of creation. This is so wonderfully practical, so down-to-earth. It makes a huge amount of sense, except to narcissists.
How can a Lutheran view of vocation promote and benefit views that support a free market and free society?

Let me answer this question the Jewish way – with a counter-question: How can a free and free-market society survive without this sense of vocation? It would return to the state of chaos that existed prior to Creation. Is it not better business for the entrepreneur to love those who constitute his market rather than to view them with belligerence and cynicism? If our world, including the business and political world, seems in disarray and sometimes in a state of disintegration, this surely is a consequence of warped attitudes vis-à-vis our fellow human beings. The Lutheran view on vocation is neither socialist, nor collectivist, nor utopian. It only redirects the minds of entrepreneurs, workers, managers, business people, shopkeepers, and others away from themselves and toward their fellow human beings. From a free-market perspective, this sounds like a promising program.

You are working on an update to The Fabricated Luther. What is the most prominent myth or false belief when it comes to Luther?

Since World War II there have been two charges against Luther: First that he was Hitler’s spiritual ancestor because of his alleged anti-Semitic views. This is nonsense because anti-Semitism is a racist category that didn’t exist in the 16th century. Racism emerged with the Enlightenment. As a young man, Luther wrote wonderful tracts about the Jews.

Sadly, he wrote horrible things about them late in life. But this was a theologically motivated anti-Judaism, refuted by many of his horrified followers in his lifetime. It was even suppressed by the Lutheran church in Germany for nearly three centuries and dug up by people who were not even predominantly Lutheran. Let’s not forget that Hitler, Himmler, and many other Nazi leaders were lapsed Catholics; please note the word lapsed here. If Luther was the spiritual ancestor of the Holocaust, how come it occurred in Germany and not in the much more uniformly Lutheran lands such a Denmark, Sweden, Finland, or Norway?

Secondly, and more importantly, William L. Shirer, Thomas Mann, and more recent scribes have accused Luther of having turned the Germans into a nation of quitters, yes-men, and cowards by urging them to remain loyal subjects to their rulers, in keeping with Romans 13.

This is the main focus of my study where I show that Luther had developed a very sophisticated theology of resistance to tyranny, and that leading lights of the resistance against Hitler acted in keeping with Luther’s teachings. My best witnesses are Carl Goerdeler, the former mayor of my hometown, Leipzig, and civilian head of the German resistance who was hanged by the Nazis, and Eivind Berggrav, the former Lutheran bishop of Oslo and prime mate of the Church of Norway.

You’ve argued that Luther’s view on vocation is the best remedy for what you call the “Narcissist epidemic.” How is that so?

Remember last year’s Time cover story titled, The Me, Me, Me Culture? Narcissism is not just an epidemic but, on my reading, a dangerous false religion whose adherents attempt the impossible: to sit on their own altars and at the same time kneel in front of them worshipping themselves. This is a lethal and destructive faith, that is seen in the abortion genocide that leads to moral chaos and threatens to undo the order of creation. They focus exclusively on the Me, and this will end in what is called in Hebrew, tohu wa-bohu — the destruction of created order. In chaos, no freedom or free-markets are possible.

You can’t even be an effective entrepreneur with narcissism. You’re too self-serving; there’s no purpose to your entrepreneurship. How can you possibly look towards the other? Once the spirit of enterprise is crushed by the spirit of me, then the entire concept of freedom, the entire concept of ordered liberty is destroyed. Human life itself would end its meaning and ultimately perish. Luther’s view on vocation turns our head in the opposite different