

A Case for Latin: A Linguistic Note on LC II, 66

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- Perhaps nothing throughout The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has caused more theological controversy in the first decade of this new century than have the translation and interpretation of Luther's comments at *Large Catechism* II, 66. The controversy centers on whether or not Luther asserts, in his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, that "heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites" have any natural knowledge of God and, if so, of what sort and to what effect.

• Review of the History of the Controversy

- The debate has produced much discussion in the first decade of this century, beginning with posted articles and comments on the World Wide Web. The discussion became especially heated when the Rev. Donald Matzat, in a stated motivation for good evangelistic practices, argued the following: "The Confessions state that the Ten Commandments are inscribed on the hearts of all men and that Turks, Jews, heathen and false Christians all believe in and worship the one true God."¹ Matzat even suggested that confessional subscription requires one to believe, confess, and teach the above. The Rev. Dr. John Wohlrabe, an LCMS-endorsed chaplain in the U.S. Navy and currently Third Vice-President of the LCMS, in turn argued that the German verbs in the applicable passage are in the subjunctive mood and embedded in a conditional construction (hence, not stating a fact), that the key phrase ("whether nor not they believe in and pray to only one true God/god") probably refers only to "false Christians and hypocrites" rather than to the entire list of "heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites," and that Matzat "has erred greatly."²
- The debate has also produced a share of articles in academic journals. The Rev. Dr. John Nordling, whose doctoral dissertation at the University of Wisconsin Madison addressed the topic of indirect speech and rhetorical strategies in Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum* and *Bellum Civile*, has convincingly argued "that the verb *credant* in the Latin version of the Large Catechism sets off an indirect statement"³ and should not therefore be translated or interpreted "that pagans 'also' believe in, and worship, the one true God." Nordling therefore suggested the following in a footnote: "This borders on what grammarians call a contrary-to-fact statement: 'Even if it were the case [understand: but it is *not!*] that they believe in, and worship, only true God.,' etc."⁴
- Concordia Seminary faculty members Drs. Charles Arand and James Voelz responded to Nordling by emphasizing that "True faith and worship (and their counterpart, idolatry) are not defined by having the correct knowledge of God's identity, but by having true knowledge and confidence of God's attitude toward us as revealed in Jesus Christ."⁵ Subsequently, their colleague Dr. Thomas Manteufel suggested "a broader look at Luther's writings" which "yield the information that Luther sometimes speaks of non-Christians 'believing' and 'worshipping'

¹ See Matzat's articles, "The Knowledge of God" and "How Many Gods (or gods) Are There?" at http://www.stpeter-brooklyn.org/serious_problem.html#gods and "Confessional Subscription or Private Interpretation" at http://www.stpeter-brooklyn.org/subscription_interpretation.html (accessed December 6, 2008).

² John C. Wohlrabe, Jr., "What Is Clear!"

<http://consensuslutheran.org/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=310> (accessed May 7, 2007).

³ John Nordling, "Large Catechism III, 66, Latin Version," *Concordia Journal* 29.3 (2003): 237.

⁴ Nordling, 239.

⁵ Charles Arand & James Voelz, "Large Catechism, III, 66," *Concordia Journal* 29.3 (2003): 234.

God in some sense.”⁶ Manteufel insists, however, that “none of this non-Christian activity is saving faith or the worship of one reconciled to God.”⁷ Finally, in addressing the distinctions among the uses of *aut*, *vel*, and *sive* in Latin literature, Dr. E. Christian Kopff (a classicist) has also argued (in line with Wohlrabe) that the key phrase “even though they believe that there is only true God and pray to Him” applies only to “false Christians and hypocrites [i.e., within the community of believers]”⁸ and not to the entire list.

- The 2005 edition of *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions. A Reader's Edition* followed Nordling's suggested translation of LC II, 66 as a contrary to fact construction.⁹ In an online review of the volume, Dr. Matthew Becker criticized this handling of LC II, 66 with his contention that “Neither the German nor the Latin originals support this paraphrase.”¹⁰
- In March 2006, the administration of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod publicly released a decision of a review panel of the LCMS Commission on Doctrinal Review regarding doctrinal certification of *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions. A Reader's Edition*.¹¹ Part of the rationale for revoking doctrinal certification of the volume included the following with regard to LC II, 66 [The original challenge is in bold print; the decision of the reviewers follows.]:
 - The translation of **Large Catechism (hereafter LC), Creed, 66 (page 432)** (“Even if we concede that...”) is misleading or erroneous, and distorts Luther's meaning; introduces new teaching into the Large Catechism; conflicts with Romans 1 & 2 and with Acts 17. This change is “an unwarranted, incorrect, misguided, and misleading editorial comment.”
 - The rendering is a rather loose paraphrase of the German, and introduces an interpretive slant that reads Luther's concessive clause as a contrary-to-fact conditional. This is not the plain meaning of the German grammar here; such a construction would normally require a subjunctive rather than the indicative, which the original has here. But whatever the weaknesses of the translation of this passage, the McCain edition rendering does not do violence to the substance of the paragraph, which is that mere monotheism leaves a person under God's wrath and without the promise of his forgiveness. In other words, even if the translation is wrong, it does not involve false doctrine.
 - There is concern that this editorial change was prompted by recent controversial use of this particular passage, and not by any clear inadequacy or error in the underlying Bente/Dau text. The change from Bente/Dau at this point could be perceived by some as an attempt to “spin” a passage of the Confessions in order to settle a contemporary argument. This appearance of some kind of manipulation of the confessional text is both inadvisable and unnecessary. Since the new rendering of this text departs significantly from all previous English translations, it would probably be best to place it in brackets alongside the translation on which this new edition is based (Bente/Dau), and an explanatory note might be added.¹²
- The second edition of *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions. A Reader's Edition* made its appearance in early 2007 and contains the recommended change on this issue.¹³ However, the debate has not subsided, either in terms of translation or in terms of interpretation. Prof. Dr. Roland Ziegler, faculty member at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, IN, references LC II, 66 in a recent article (dated April 2005 but not released until late 2006) and argues both that “there is a difference in the German at Luther's time between ‘*glauben an*

⁶ Thomas Manteufel, “What Luther Meant,” *Concordia Journal* 29.4 (2003): 366.

⁷ Manteufel, 368.

⁸ E. Christian Kopff, “Who Believes In and Worships the One True God in Luther's Large Catechism?” *Logia* 13.3 (2004): 56.

⁹ *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions. A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord*, Paul T. McCain and others, eds. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 432.

¹⁰ Matthew G. Becker, “Book Review,” http://www.day-star.net/becker_review.htm (accessed December 6, 2008).

¹¹ See the March 16, 2006, Memorandum from the LCMS Office of the President at <http://www.lcms.org/pages/internal.asp?NavID=9679> (accessed December 6, 2008).

¹² “Concordia Decision,” <http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/Doctrinal%20Review/Concordia%20decision.pdf>, 4 (accessed December 6, 2008).

¹³ *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions. A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord*, Second Edition, Paul T. McCain, ed. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 406.

(believe in)' and 'glauben plus accusative object' (believe that)" and also that "Neither Luther nor the Confessions identify the gods of non-Christian religions with the true God."¹⁴

- In late 2006 Concordia Publishing House released Edward Engelbrecht's monograph, *One True God: Understanding Large Catechism II 66*.¹⁵ An editor at CPH and associate editor for *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions. A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord*, Engelbrecht presents an amazingly thorough analysis of the dialectical, rhetorical, and grammatical issues surrounding LC II, 66 in the German text. He convincingly demonstrates that Luther uses both the indicative and subjunctive moods in presenting *per impossibile* arguments, challenges the findings and conclusion of the LCMS Doctrinal Review Panel (on LC II, 66), agrees with Nordling's suggestion that LC II, 66 amounts to a contrary-to-fact construction in the Latin version, and asserts the following: "Luther's grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic all point to a contrary-to-fact interpretation of the concessive conditional clause in LC II 66. This is true whether the verbs are in the indicative mood or the subjunctive mood."¹⁶
- It does not seem that the issues surrounding the correct translation and interpretation of LC II, 66 will soon go away. Most recently, a lengthy thread on the Online Forum of the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau dealt with those issues when the Rev. Dr. David Benke announced, "I retract the statement, 'The Muslim God is also the True God,' because it is theologically imprecise."¹⁷ What the thread clearly reveals is that there is still much confusion about the precise translation of LC II, 66 and its implications for Luther's position on the topic of the natural knowledge of God.

- **The Subjunctive Mood in the Latin Text of LC II, 66**

- This linguistic note wishes to emphasize a fact that has not been highlighted in the discussion so far. This fact has perhaps been assumed, and perhaps lies behind the argumentation in previous articles, but never emphasized. The fact is this: In the Latin translation both of the crucial verbs, *credant* and *invocent*, are clearly in the subjunctive mood. Whereas the fluidity of the German language in the 16th century may permit an argument for either the indicative or the subjunctive mood for the forms *glauben* (or *gläuben*) and *anbeten*, there is no argument in the Latin. Both verbs are clearly subjunctive, with no contradictions in the critical editions of *The Lutheran Confessions*. In other words, this is a case for Latin. Just as versions other than Greek can sometimes be helpful in determining the original text and original meaning of certain New Testament passages, so in this case the Latin version should be seen as determinative for the meaning of the German text at LC II, 66.
- The reason that this is so lies in the difference between the indicative and subjunctive moods. The subjunctive mood has unfortunately fallen out of common use in contemporary English. And, even when translating the subjunctive mood, English language editors frequently make a subjunctive form in another language sound indicative in English. It ought not be so, for the difference between the two moods is substantial, and a carefully crafted translation can prevent a tremendous mistake (as has occurred in many English language translations of LC II, 66).
- The indicative mood presents statements of fact. The subjunctive mood does not. The subjunctive mood always indicates an 'unreality' by expressing an action or idea or abstraction that has yet to occur or that might not occur at all because of its being hypothetical or contrary to fact. Simply put, when clauses express a fact, the indicative mood is used (in nearly all Indo-

¹⁴ Roland Ziegler, "Natural Knowledge of God and the Trinity," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 69.2 (April 2005): 151.

¹⁵ Edward Engelbrecht, *One True God: Understanding Large Catechism II.66* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006).

¹⁶ Engelbrecht, 74.

¹⁷ See <http://www.alpb.org/forum/index.php?topic=1677.0> (accessed December 6, 2008).

European languages). When clauses express something that may or may not be true, the subjunctive mood is used.

- The critical Latin verbs at LC II, 66 are both in the subjunctive. This is clear from the connecting (or theme) vowel *a* in *credant* and the connecting (or theme) vowel *e* in *invocent*. In the present tense in Latin, the subjunctive forms differ only from the indicative forms in terms of a change of the connecting (or theme) vowel. There are various mnemonic devices that assist in remembering these vowel changes in the four conjugations. A favorite is “Let’s eat caviar,” in which the 1st Conjugation present indicative *a* changes to *e* in the present subjunctive; the 2nd Conjugation *e*, to *ea*; the 3rd Conjugation *e*, to *a*; and both the 3rd Conjugation *io* and the 4th Conjugation *i*, to *ia*. The verb *credo*, *-ere* is 3rd Conjugation; therefore, *credant* is a present subjunctive form. *Invoco*, *-are* is a 1st Conjugation verb; therefore, *invocent* is also a present subjunctive form. These two critical verbs in the Latin version of LC II, 66 are not indicative and therefore ought not be translated into English as if they were indicative. They do not convey a fact nor a reality but merely a possibility. To repeat, the subjunctive always expresses an element of doubt and ought to be translated into English so that such a meaning is accurately conveyed.
- At LC II, 66 these two verbs (*credant* and *invocent*) are embedded in a clause introduced by *quamquam* (“although”). In Classical Latin *quamquam* introduces adversative clauses. Bennett describes such clauses with the following: “Clauses introduced by **quamvis, quamquam, etsi, tametsi, cum**, *although*, while often classed as ‘Concessive,’ are yet essentially different from genuine Concessive clauses. As a rule, they do not *grant* or *concede* anything, but rather state that something is true *in spite of something else*. They accordingly emphasize the adversative idea, and are properly Subordinate Adversative Clauses. The different particles used to introduce these clauses have different meanings and take different constructions...”¹⁸
- Typically, *quamquam* introduces a statement of fact and is followed by the indicative mood, whereas *quamvis* does not introduce a statement of fact and is therefore followed by the subjunctive. However, Bennett acknowledges that “In post-Augustan writers *quamquam* is freely construed with the Subjunctive, while *quamvis* is often used to introduce statements of fact, and takes either the Indicative or the Subjunctive.”¹⁹ Bennett thereby suggests somewhat of an exchange in the uses of *quamquam* and *quamvis* in post-Augustan writers. However, the basic principle remains the same: use of the indicative mood for statements of fact and use of the subjunctive mood for something that is merely conceived (but not a statement of fact).

• Examples from Classical Latin

- It is a fact, however, that numerous instances of *quamquam* followed by the subjunctive mood (when unreality is intended) can be found even in pre-Augustan writers. Several examples, in chronological order, should suffice.
- Sallust, a 1st century B.C. Roman politician and historian, provides one such example in his *Bellum Iugurthinum* (3.20). The passage reads: *Nam vi quidem regere patriam aut parentes, quamquam et possis et delicta corrigas, tamen importunum est* [“For to rule the fatherland or the fathers by a certain force, although you may be able and may erase crimes, is nevertheless ill-advised.”—translation, mine]²⁰ The subjunctive forms are used in conjunction with *quamquam* because Sallust is speaking only of a possibility. Additionally, the second person forms of *possis* and *corrigas* refer to an indefinite rather than a specific person.

¹⁸ Charles E. Bennett, *New Latin Grammar* (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Inc., 1995), 204.

¹⁹ Bennett, 205.

²⁰ C. Sallustius Crispus, *Bellum Iugurthinum*, in *Catilina Iugurtha Fragmenta Ampliora*, A. Kurfess, ed. (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1957), 3.20.

- Cicero, also a 1st century B.C. Roman politician and an orator, has left us with well over 500 examples of the use of *quamquam* with either the indicative or subjunctive.²¹ In the *Tusculan Disputations* (5.30.85) we find the following: *Nec enim licet is, qui laudem cum dolore petendam esse dicant, negare eos esse beatos, qui illam adepti sunt. Quamquam enim sint in quibusdam malis, tamen hoc nomen beati longe et late patet.* [“For it is not permitted for those who may say that praise ought to be sought with pain, to deny that those are happy who have attained it. For although they may be (mixed up) in certain bad things, nevertheless this title of ‘happy’ extends far and wide.”—translation, mine]²² Cicero makes use of the subjunctive form *sint* in the clause introduced by *quamquam* because he has no evidence that those spoken of in general terms are actually involved (mixed up) in certain evils. He merely holds open the possibility that, even if they were, it does not diminish the force of his argument.
- Livy (59 B.C.—A.D. 17 or 64 B.C.—A.D. 12) was a Roman historian. In his history of Rome (*Ab Urbe Condita*) he recounts the details of the Macedonian War. Because Titus Quinctius was opposed to the utter destruction of cities that Rome had freed, he walked the walls of besieged Naupactus so that its Aetolian inhabitants could see him. Livy reports that the Aetolians rushed to the walls of the city, reaching out their hands and beseeching him to help them. Livy then reports: *Et tum quidem, quamquam moveretur his vocibus, manu tamen adnuit quicquam opis in se esse.* [“And then indeed, although he should be moved by these voices, nevertheless with (his) hand he indicated there was nothing of power in himself to help (them).”—translation, mine]²³ Livy made use of the subjunctive form *moveretur* (imperf. Pass. in this instance) because he had no certainty that Titus Quinctius was indeed moved by the Aetolian calls for help, only that he should have been.
- Pliny the Younger was a civilian Roman administrator and author in the second half of the 1st century A.D. and early 2nd century. His books of literary letters are well-known and important for early Church history. In Book 8 (24.5), in a letter to Maximus we find this interesting passage: *Vides a medicis, quamquam in adversa valetudine hinil servi ac liberi differant, mollius tamen liberos clementiusque tractari.* [“You see that, although slaves and freedmen in an adverse state of health may differ in no way, nevertheless freedmen are treated more gently and more mildly by physicians.”—translation, mine]²⁴ Pliny combines the subjunctive form *differant* in the *quamquam* clause because it is doubtful that slaves and freedmen differ in no way, even when it comes to ill health.
- The conclusion to be made is the following. Both in Classical Latin (as demonstrated above) and in Medieval Latin (as acknowledged by Bennett), when *quamquam* introduces a clause that contains a subjunctive verb form, the content of that clause is not real. It is doubtful at best; totally fictional, at worst; and always hypothetical (merely conceived). To repeat, *quamquam* with the subjunctive never reports a fact. That would require an indicative form of the verb.
- The Latin translation of LC II, 66 has two subjunctive verb forms, *credant* and *invocent*, in the clause introduced by *quamquam*. The Latin communicates a hypothetical, and certainly not a factual, argument on the part of Luther. Engelbrecht says the following about the Latin translation of the *Large Catechism*:
 - The Latin translation of the *Large Catechism* (1529) was provided by Vincent Obsopoeus, rector of the school at Ansbach. In most cases, Obsopoeus translated *ob . . . gleich* concessive clauses with subjunctive mood in Latin—even in cases

²¹ Appreciation is expressed to the Rev. Dr. John Nordling for accessing the database of the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, while still at Baylor University, and providing a list of Cicero’s use of *quamquam* in all the extant works of Cicero, with the exception of his letters.

²² M. Tullius Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, M. Pohlenz, ed. (Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner, 1965), 5.30.85.

²³ Titus Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, J. Briscoe, ed. (Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner, 1991), Book 36.34.6-7.

²⁴ C. Plinius Caecilius Secundus, *Epistularum Libri Novem Epistularum ad Traianum Liber Panegyricus*, M. Schuster, ed. (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1943), 8.24.5.

where the German is clearly indicative (see Appendix D). This may be because Latin naturally prefers the subjunctive for such constructions, as also happens with French. Concessive clauses beginning with *quamquam* use the subjunctive commonly in imperial, medieval, and humanist Latin.²⁵

- Unfortunately, Engelbrecht does not emphasize that at LC II, 66 Obsopoeus does indeed incorporate the subjunctive forms of the verbs. Whether or not all of Engelbrecht's data concerning Luther's use of *per impossibile* arguments stand up to careful scrutiny, here is one case in which it surely will. Here is a case for Latin! The Latin translation of LC II, 66 confirms that Luther was presenting a hypothetical situation, for the sake of argument, and not intending his comments to be taken as facts.

- **Implications of the Latin Text of LC II, 66 for the German**

- Even though the German text of the *Large Catechism* is the primary, authoritative text, the Latin translation must also be taken quite seriously. Kopff summarizes the reasons well:
 - There are several reasons to take the interpretation of *Obsopoeus* seriously. Latin was the lingua franca of educated Europe in the Sixteenth Century. Latin versions of Luther's writings allowed his ideas to be read and understood by educated people all over Europe. It was not just the printing press, but the printing of Latin that gave Luther's ideas European influence. Luther read and wrote Latin fluently. He would not have minded "slavish" loyalty, but he (and Melancthon) would have objected to Latin that substantially misrepresented his views on the important topic of the belief of pagans, Turks and Jews in the one true God. The critical edition of the *Die Bekenntnisschriften* presents the careful reader with many examples of printers' errors, misprints and textual variants. Here, however, we are dealing with a very careful use of Classical Latin. In addition, it is common to use the German and Latin of the Book of Concord to interpret one another. Where one is unclear, the interpreter rests his case on the other. It is a good method to follow the same practice here. For Confessional Lutherans, the Latin of the Large Catechism is just as much a part of the Book of Concord as the German is.²⁶
 - Because Latin was the language of the universities in Europe in the 16th century, it makes sense that the Latin translation of the Large Catechism would have been primarily studied and used by scholars and students alike. It therefore also makes sense that Luther would have made certain that the Latin translation accurately reflected what he intended to communicate (or he would have corrected it before its dissemination throughout Europe).

- **Conclusion**

- LC II, 66 is a case for Latin. The Latin subjunctive forms of *credant* and *invocent* in the *quamquam* clause clarify what Luther meant to communicate. He was not presenting a statement of fact; he was merely being hypothetical, at best, for the sake of argument. Even though the neutral translations of "believe in" and "worship" in both the Tappert and Kolb-Wengert editions of the Lutheran Confessions may be understood as subjunctive, they can also mistakenly be understood as indicative. Clearly Luther did not intend an indicative (factual) understanding. Any future English language translations of LC II, 66 should therefore at least emphasize these subjunctive forms ("may/perhaps believe that" and "may/perhaps call on") in

²⁵ Engelbrecht, 73.

²⁶ Kopff, 56-57.

order to prevent any future misuses of this passage. This should be done even if editors do not accept the contrary-to-fact translation suggested by Nordling and Engelbrecht. An English language translation should, and must, accurately convey the fact that Luther did not mean to make a statement of fact on this particular issue in the *Large Catechism*. Regardless of what one may claim with regard to Luther's opinion on the natural knowledge of God in his other writings, one cannot claim that Luther is making a statement of fact at LC II, 66.

- In reality, LC II, 66 also makes the case for Latin. Had the Latin translation (instead of English language translations) of LC II, 66 been consulted and carefully studied and taken seriously, many false conclusions and faulty decisions could have been avoided and may yet be avoided. The Latin translation clarifies and supports what Luther meant in the German text of LC II, 66. One shudders to ponder the future of a church body in which Latin texts are no longer consulted or in which Latin ceases its usefulness as one of the theological languages.