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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

"Bach's Theocentric World View"

written by

Jarrell M. Lyles

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requirements for completion of the
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meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned.

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Bach's Theocentric World View

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Matt Lyles

Bach's Theocentric World View

by Jarrell M. Lyles

Introduction

Bach's life spanned the gulf between the old-world age of faith and the new-world age of reason. seventeenth-century Germany, especially those portions with a strong Lutheran influence, remained strangely isolated and insulated against the rising storm of skepticism and inquiry, raging elsewhere in Europe. The full force of the Enlightenment broke suddenly over Bach during his latter years in Leipzig, where the younger generation was growing less sympathetic to the ideals of art Bach and others of his generation cherished.

Those who wish to understand Johann Sebastian Bach must first understand his world view, the lens which colored his perception of reality. The object of this paper is to answer the question, "What was Bach's world view?" and to do so by examining his family background and the influences of education and religion.

Family History

During his early childhood at Eisenach, Bach learned to associate theology with music, the proclamation of Scripture with the response of congregational and choral music. His father, Johann Ambrosius, and relative, Johann Christoph, both took active roles in the music of St. George's Church at Eisenach, Johann

Ambrosius as a violinist and Johann Christoph as organist. Bach, later noted for his fine treble voice, may well have sung in the choir.¹ Lutheran services could last five hours, involving readings from the epistles, gospels, and psalms, in addition to the sermon, the anthem, and the congregational chorales.²

The Bachs were devout Lutherans. In a family history compiled around 1735, Bach describes how his great, great grandfather, Veit Bach, suffered persecution for his Lutheran faith from hostile Catholics in Hungary. The Bachs eventually settled in Central Germany where the Lutheran faith was strong.³ The Lämmerhirts, Bach's maternal family, left their traditional home in Silesia, where Catholics were a hostile majority, to make a new home in Thuringia. There they came under the influence of an anabaptist mystic named Esaias Stieffel. In loyalty to this controversial figure, the staunchly independent Lämmerhirts again risked their reputation by supporting Stieffel, even after his arrest for spreading such peculiar doctrines as believer's baptism.⁴ Geiringer attributes Bach's piety and strong sense of principles to his Bach and Lämmerhirt ancestors.⁵

Education in Lutheran Germany

The education offered at Eisenach, as in other centers of Lutheranism, was intended to foster moral development by instilling in students the knowledge of, and reverence for, God. In keeping with the tradition Martin Luther established, the curriculum

emphasized theological instruction. First-year students read Luther's catechism, the psalms, the gospels, the epistles and Bible history, all in Latin as well as in German.⁶ The Eisenach curriculum also included selections from the classics, readings which would harmonize with Christian doctrine and assist in the moral formation of young students.⁷

The schools in Lutheran Germany at the end of the seventeenth century resembled the schools of the fifteenth century. While other Europeans eagerly embraced the discoveries of the natural sciences, Lutheran Germans mistrusted the consequences of naturalistic and humanistic studies. As a result, Bach pursued and completed his education without learning of Newton's nor even Galileo's discoveries in physics.⁸

On the verge of the Enlightenment, Lutheran educators held fast to a medieval conception of the universe with the earth as its center and man, God's highest creation, as nature's greatest glory. Accordingly, the curricula featured theology first and foremost with music often following next in importance. For instance, students at Ohrdruf, where Bach studied five years, spent roughly a fifth of their time learning theology and an equal amount in singing lessons. The remaining time was divided among arithmetic, geography, history, and physics.⁹

Luther, as father of the Reformation, left his mark on education as well as religion. He abhorred the intellectual emphasis of the scholastic theologians, protesting that logic and reason cannot redeem sinners, but faith alone. Acting on this

conviction, he enlisted the help of his friend and fellow theologian, the brilliant Philip Melanchthon, to create a new system of education which would foster the pious devotion of young Germans rather than filling their minds with formal proofs for God's existence, drawn from the ancient Greeks and Romans.

Luther's aversion to naturalistic philosophy flowed from his conviction that the Gospels are supernaturalistic, containing all truth and necessary knowledge. Significantly, the natural sciences remained the least developed area of study nearly two hundred years later. But on the matter of the Ancients, Luther did give ground. He and Melanchthon reluctantly allowed some restricted study of the classics for their linguistic and disciplinary value in the more exalted study of theology.

Melanchthon clearly agreed with Luther that theology should receive pride of place for education: "If Theology is not the beginning, the middle, and the end of life, we cease being men; we return to the animal state."¹⁰

Fortunately for posterity, Luther did not begrudge the arts but welcomed them as expressions of devotion and reflections of God's glory. Indeed, he looked on non-musical persons as "wicked souls to be mistrusted."¹¹ Accordingly he awarded music a place nearly equal to that of theology and encouraged music of all sorts, all for the glory of God, to be taught in the schools.

After the death of his parents, Bach lived with his brother, Johann Christoph, in Ohrdruf. For five years, he studied with Elias Herda, who came to be cantor in Ohrdruf from the university

of Jena, where he was a divinity student. Previously, Herda studied music at the famous St. Michael's School in Lüneburg. The timing was ideal for Bach, who found Herda a kind and able teacher. Herda's influence is significant, for he exemplified the union of theology and music which is so evident in Bach's mature compositions. The teenaged Bach responded with all the enthusiasm of a youth inspired. He made rapid progress in all his studies, completing the six years of theology in only four.¹² Remarkably, theology and music comprised fully two-fifths of the students' time, with all other subjects given secondary emphasis.

According to Chiapusso, the religious instruction for students at Ohrdruf involved vast amounts of memorization, mainly the catechism and related commentaries by orthodox Lutheran clergy. These included such systematic theologies as Leonhard Hutter's *The Guide to the Theological Passages from the Sacred Scriptures* and *The Compendium to the Articles of Faith of the Lutheran Church*.¹³

Bach completed his formal education in Lüneburg, studying at the prestigious St. Michael's School¹⁴ like Elias Herda before him. Less is known of his exact course of study, but certainly it would have included more theology and music. The cantor at St. Michael's shared a similar background with Herda and directed the musical and theological instruction.¹⁵ The significance of the Lüneburg period lies in the excellent opportunities available to Bach: all the advantages of an old, respected school in a town with a thriving music culture.¹⁶

By 1703 Bach had completed his formal education. The world view transmitted to him, and which he apparently endorsed, may be summarized thus: the goal of learning is to understand, at least partially, God's nature and Creation. The ultimate goal of life is eternity. One prepares for eternity by learning about oneself, ruling oneself, and directing oneself to God. Bach himself knew from his childhood that the aim of a church musician is to praise and magnify God through music.

The age of faith was giving way all over Europe to the age of reason, and soon the revolutionary professor of philosophy Christian Wolff would take the chair of philosophy at the University of Halle in 1706 and from there shake the very foundations of Lutheran orthodoxy throughout Europe.¹⁷ But Bach had no idea of such things. No deist wind blew his way, nor would he encounter the new philosophy for years to come. Not until his cantorship in Leipzig would he see the yawning chasm separating his generation of faith from the new generation of reason.

Orthodoxy and Pietism in the Churches

Bach's work kept him in or near Lutheran churches all his life. Even at Cöthen he chose to attend the Lutheran church rather than join his patron at the Calvinist/Reformed church.¹⁸ At Mühlhausen, he found himself in a most disagreeable position, serving a pietist minister completely incompatible with his own artistic taste. Pastor J.A. Frohne of St. Blasius's looked on his

brilliant organist with suspicion and even resentment, for the ever-independent Bach made no apology concerning his friendship with the pastor of St. Mary's Church, Georg Christian Eilmar, an orthodox minister at war with Frohne.¹⁹ The religious instruction offered in the schools Bach attended was all orthodox Lutheranism, but now he was learning, and in a most unpleasant way, the views of Lutheran Pietists, who mistrusted elaborate church music in general and the sophisticated figural music Bach favored in particular.²⁰

The Lutheran Pietists were followers of the seventeenth-century pastor, Philipp Jakob Spener, who was dismayed by the worldliness of the clergy at Frankfurt am Main, where he was senior minister. The cold rationalism of contemporary religion divorced faith and action, causing the clergy and laity alike to tolerate sins of all sorts. This indifference toward holy living led Spener to preach and teach renewal. His *Pie Desideria* of 1675 explained his concept with such power that many Lutherans responded enthusiastically.²¹

Ironically, much of Spener's message and goals are like echoes of Luther's own ideas for reform: renewed emphasis on the Bible as the Word of God, the priesthood of all believers, etc. Other ideas he perhaps drew from Melanchthon, such as the need for holy living in addition to doctrinal affirmations.²² But why this need for reform only one hundred thirty years after Luther's death?

The scholarly Melanchthon, though a staunch supporter of Luther's reforms, set about producing a system of doctrines and dogmas, just as the scholasticists had done. The result was a

return to doctrinal formalism with more attention to logical arguments in support of doctrines than appeals to the hearts of people.²³ The clergy of the seventeenth century claimed doctrinal purity in strict conformance to the letter of the law. The spiritual apathy which resulted stemmed, Spener believed, from a lack of inner piety. But with Spener's death and the rise of August Hermann Franck came a shift toward legalism, as the pietists settled into their own sort of formalism, though one dependent on behavior, not reason.²⁴ As with Luther's reform of a previous generation, this one also failed to survive the leader's absence but degenerated and narrowed.

By the early years of the eighteenth century, much of the warm-hearted, kindly spirit of Spener's pietism had faded. A war ensued between the Orthodox and the Pietists, whose extreme reaction to the easy-going orthodox clergy led them to reject secular entertainments such as theater and other worldly influences.²⁵ Incidentally, they disliked the artistic music and trained choirs favored by the orthodox.

Bach had the great misfortune of serving a church with pietist tastes and sensibilities. He, like the enthusiastic artist he was, naturally longed for like-minded, appreciative company. He found such a friend in Pastor Eihlmar, his own pastor's nemesis. Bach added insult to injury by asking Eihlmar to stand Godfather of his first two children.²⁶ Inevitably, there was a break, and Bach prepared to leave Mühlhausen.

Whether the matter of musical aesthetics actually drove Bach away is difficult to determine. Manfred Bukofzer observes that the sort of devotional songs favored by the Pietists were often derived from shallow operatic airs which betrayed the same secular influence the Pietists attacked so vehemently.²⁷ At any rate Bach could not and would not lower his standards to oblige his employers. His letter of resignation, dated 25 June 1708, offers the following insightful comments intended for the consistory at Mühlhausen:

it has been my constant aim to accord with your desire, that church music should be performed as to exalt God's glory, and as far as my humble ability has allowed, I have assisted that purpose, also in the villages, where the taste for music is growing and in whose churches its performance not infrequently excels our own.²⁸

Bach next served Duke Wilhelm Ernst as court organist at Weimar. There his life was closely regulated by the Duke's exacting standards. All court officials were expected to attend the daily services in which Bach participated. And woe unto him who allowed his mind to wander from the chaplain's sermon. The Duke was sure to question such offenders closely as to the message and theological concepts discussed. Even the order at which his servants took communion absorbed the Duke's attention.²⁹

Perhaps the Duke's own piety, less threatening and obnoxious to Bach, began to stir within him that inner piety preached by Spener. Bukofzer and others remark an intensely subjective quality in many of Bach's works from this period.³⁰ And indeed, he shows a marked preference for the poetry of Salomo Franck, the court poet

at Weimar who incorporated pietistic phraseology in freely-composed responses to Scripture texts.³¹

Having recently experienced the pietist perspective Bach took advantage of the religious nature of his surroundings to consider his faith in a new light. Chiapusso notes the inclusion of works by Spener and Arndt, two of the pietist giants, in Bach's personal library. These books were printed in 1709 and 1714 and may have been purchased during his Weimar years.³² This seems quite possible when taken together with the other indications of heightened religious awareness during this period.

Bach next served as court conductor to Prince Leopold at the tiny court of Cöthen. This period marks a departure from Bach's usual pattern; for the first time, his output of church music slowed to a trickle in contrast with the explosion of instrumental music.³³ For the first time he chose a position in which he would have no outlet for religious expression. Perhaps the years at Mühlhausen and Weimar made him eager for something new and exciting. The handsome salary promised by Prince Leopold, together with the opportunity of composing instrumental music, persuaded him.

And yet, the Bachs did not enter entirely the life of the court. They worshipped at the Lutheran church rather than join their patron at the Calvinist services he attended.³⁴ In a real sense, Bach was isolated, just as his ancestors had been generations before him. The Cöthen court and province were aligned with the reformed Calvinist church, and the Lutherans, including

the Bachs, were a tiny though unmolested minority. Still, the sense of exile must have disturbed Bach, especially after the death of his first wife, Maria Barbara, in 1720.³⁵

Bach valued his Lutheran faith enough to separate himself from his Calvinist patron and neighbors. This indicates the depth of his commitment to Luther's (and even Spener's, ideal of a faith-based religion. Bach like Luther mistrusted the Calvinists' emphasis on reason and the preeminence of the human intellect at the expense of faith.³⁶

By 1723, Bach was ready for another church position. He accepted the cantorship at the St. Thomas's School in Leipzig, where he would also serve as director of town music. The new situation, though a prestigious one, could not equal his former position at Cöthen, either socially or financially. Numerous considerations compelled him to accept the cantorship, grudgingly granted to him when Telemann and Graupner refused it. But Bach knew that his sons would need more in the way of education than provincial Cöthen could offer, and Leipzig's university would answer handsomely. Also Bach looked forward to the stimulation of a university town where so many talented people gather.³⁷ Most of all he longed to restore the balance upset by his move to Cöthen, the balance of his art and his faith which had been restricted five years.

Bach began his Leipzig years with a frenzy of activity, producing several of his lifetime masterpieces in the first ten years. Once more, his life passions of music and theology gave

vent to brilliant compositions, expressing all the devotion and profundity of Christian faith. The *St. John Passion* was performed at Good Friday vespers that year, and a cantata cycle with new compositions each week was begun the week after Trinity Sunday. By Christmas the *Magnificat in E-flat* was finished and performed on Christmas Day. Had Bach continued at that rate his output would certainly equal Telemann's twelve cantata cycles. By 1729 Bach had completed his *St. Matthew Passion* and three more cantata cycles. A fifth one appears to have been spread out through the 1730's and 1740's.³⁸

With five cantata cycles completed, he turned his attention to other, more interesting projects including the gargantuan *Mass in B minor*.³⁹ However, his dissatisfaction with his position in Leipzig grew, once he realized the school and church officials did not share his vision and standards for music. In 1730, Bach wrote to Georg Eerdman, his school friend from Ohrdruf, then in the diplomatic service at Danzig, to inquire about possible positions there.⁴⁰ Bach afterward evinced growing dissatisfaction with his situation at Leipzig, especially his duties as cantor of St. Thomas's School. And yet, he continued his work on the mass and other church compositions through the next two decades. His dissatisfaction, then, stemmed from the tense relations with Ernesti, the director of the school, and not from any boredom with the church or its music.

Bach's perseverance, despite unpleasant surroundings, reflects his Lutheran outlook on life. Martin Luther taught his followers

to accept tribulation and hardship patiently as the natural result of sin in the world and to give thanks for the times of blessing and joy as evidence of God's grace.⁴¹⁻⁴² And Bach could be thankful for a large and talented family and for a supportive and loving wife with whom he apparently shared a deep and intimate love, despite the differences in their ages.

New Philosophies in the Enlightenment

During his Leipzig years, Bach became intensely aware of the new philosophies which were sweeping through the German universities. With the rise of reason as the exclusive and superior faculty, human emotions were repressed. Such emotional avenues as music had no legitimate place among rational and enlightened men. Chiapusso sums up the ultra-rational stance of Christian Wolff and his followers, among them J.G. Gottsched of the philosophy faculty at Leipzig: "Clarity of understanding, the true object of man's life, required one to distrust emotion as well as all reason that could not be conclusively proven."⁴³ Johann August Ernesti who succeeded Gesner as rector of St. Thomas's School, considered music an "anti-intellectual indulgence" which obscured and confused clear thinking.⁴⁴ His open attacks on Bach's musical establishment destroyed the peace that had prevailed under Gesner who, though sharing many of Ernesti's radical ideas, still valued music as having the power to "link souls to the heavenly choir" and

so understood and appreciated the work Bach carried out among the school boys.⁴⁵

The question arises whether Bach adapted to the new skepticism and abandoned his medieval view of religion and life. Significantly, Bach owned no books by Enlightenment thinkers. And indeed, nothing in their new philosophy would have appealed to his artistic temperament. The indifference of such rationalists as the younger Ernesti must have filled Bach with alarm and poisoned his mind against the movement altogether.

Conclusion

Bach, born of devout Lutheran parents and into an equally religious family, educated with intensive courses of orthodox Lutheran thought, and shaped by his interactions with essentially Lutheran church and court officials, embodied the optimism and faith of his age, the Reformation Age. Instead of embracing the age of reason, Bach obstinately continued in his antiquated, faith-dominated world view. He remained a staunch Lutheran, though an independent one, as the contents of his library bear witness. Works by orthodox and pietist writers reveal the depth and scope of his theological interests.⁴⁶ Just as his music was a creative synthesis of French, Italian, and German styles, so his world view was a blend of the several schools of Lutheran theology.

Remarkably, Bach's personal Bible survives and is in the possession of the Concordia Library in St. Louis, Missouri. This

Bible, published in the late seventeenth century, combines Luther's German translation with the commentary of Abraham Calov, a Wittenberg theologian. In 1934, a German immigrant to America discovered this priceless artifact among his father's books and recognized its historic value. Although Howard Cox published an edition in 1986, the material, consisting of Bach's notes and markings, awaits serious analysis and commentary.⁴⁷

In an age when integrity seems more and more difficult to find, in a time when economic considerations appear to drive all creative art, in a day when religious devotion is dismissed as childish--then a Johann Sebastian Bach is most inspiring. Though no saint, he models the steadfast faith and heart-felt devotion of his spiritual mentor, Martin Luther. The universal dimension of his music defies rational explanation. That peculiar quality is the result of Bach's own worship, his response to the nature and creation of God. Had it been possible to know Bach and assess his sincerity by hearing him speak and observing him go about life, this study would be irrelevant. Had he left letters or meditations describing his views, a great deal of the uncertainty would be removed from Bach studies. This, too, may be seen as evidence of a modest nature and so is to his credit but is decidedly tragic for those who would like to know the man behind the music, the mind behind the art.

Notes

1. Christoph Wolff, Walter Emery, et al. *The New Grove Bach Family*. New York: Norton, 1983, p. 46-47.
This excellent reference work combines all the articles from the *New Grove Encyclopedia of Music and Musicians* which pertain to Bach or the several members of his family.
2. Alfred Dürr. *Die Kantaten von Johann Sebastian Bach*. Kassel: Barenreiter, 1985, p. 17-18.
This also includes helpful insights into Lutheran worship and practice.
3. Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, eds. *The Bach Reader: a Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*. New York: Norton, 1972, p. 204.
David and Mendel here present the extant writings of Bach, together with anecdotes and accounts by his contemporaries. A prime source for original material--unfortunately, little of the material directly bears on my topic.
4. Karl Geiringer. *Johann Sebastian Bach, the Culmination of an Era*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 5.
This is the standard biography dating from the sixties. Some points need updating. My notes are taken from the braille edition.
5. *ibid*, p. 5
6. Jan Chiapusso. *Bach's World*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1968, p. 11.
This has been the most valuable source for informing me of the world Bach knew. My questions on education, especially, would have remained unanswered but for Chiapusso's studies. He also helped set the philosophical scene by drawing my attention to the changing intellectual trends in mid-Eighteenth-century Europe.
7. *ibid*, p. 2.
8. *ibid*, p. 2.
9. *ibid*, p. 17.
10. *ibid*, p. 13.
11. *ibid*, p. 246.
12. Emery, p. 47.
13. *The Book of Concord: the Lutheran Confessions of 1529-1580*.
<http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/wittenberg-boc.html>.

14. Emery, p. 49.
15. Chiapusso, p. 14.
16. Emery, p. 49.
17. Chiapusso, p. 246.
18. Alec Robertson. *The Church Cantatas of J.S. Bach*. New York: Praeger, 1972, p. 23.
19. Emery, p. 58.
20. Dürr, p. 19-20.
21. "Philipp Jakob Spener." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*.
www.eb.com.
22. *ibid*
23. Philipp Melancthon. *The Augsburg Confession, etc.* IN *The Book of Concord: the Lutheran Confessions of 1529-1580*. [online]
<http://www.iclnet/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/wittenberg-boc.html>.
24. Chiapusso, p. 106.
25. Dürr, p. 14.
26. Emery, p. 58.
27. Manfred Bukofzer. *Music in the Baroque Period, from Monteverdi to Bach*. New York: Norton, 1947, p. 272.
28. David and Mendel, p. 60.
29. Geiringer, p. 53-54.
30. Bukofzer, p. 279.
31. Wolff, p. 126.
32. Chiapusso, p. 104.
33. Emery, p. 72.
34. Robertson, p. 23.
35. Emery, p. 73.
36. Chiapusso, p. 3.

37. Wolff, p. 81-2.
38. Wolff, p. 129-130.
39. Wolff, p. 139.
40. David and Mendel, p. 125.
41. Chiapusso, p. 20.
42. Eric Chase. *Tonal Allegory in the Vocal Music of J.S. Bach*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1991, p. 15. Chase provides some other useful notes on Luther's theology.
43. Chiapusso, p. 249.
44. Chiapusso, p. 245.
45. ibid
46. David and Mendel, p. 193.
47. Howard H. Cox, ed. *The Calov Bible of J.S. Bach*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1985.

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