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INTEGRITY AND FRAGMENTATION: CAN THE LUTHERAN CENTER HOLD?

Robert Benne

The question posed for this conference is a very important one, but which makes the optimistic assumption that a Lutheran center is currently holding in many of our colleges. The question then suggests that the center may be endangered.

My view, on the contrary, is more pessimistic, and, I think, more accurate and realistic. My short answer to the question is: No. The Lutheran center cannot hold in many, if not most of our colleges, because it was never there in an articulated form in the first place. To paraphrase the words of James Burtchaell, "How can those colleges miss what they never had?" How can they hold now what they never held in the first place. But such a hard and stark answer needs some nuances, which I will give in a few moments.

A few of our colleges have been able to articulate and hold a Lutheran center that has shaped and organized their lives as colleges. Though that center may be under constant discussion, it still provides the identity and mission of the college as a whole. Whether it can remain the organizing paradigm for the college of the future is an open question. But the fact that it is under intense public discussion is a good sign.

Mere discussion is not enough though. Discussion can lead to chaos or paralysis. (The whole faculty of Calvin Seminary was once dismissed by its Board because they had argued themselves to an impasse. The good Calvinist pastors on the Board held the quaint thought that the seminary should have a clear position on important matters of faith.) Ongoing discussion can also lead to notions of a center that in fact will marginalize or subvert any persisting Lutheran identity. That nuance, too, will have to be unpacked.

In the following I wish to: 1. give a brief account of those colleges that had no articulated center.
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by another brief account of those who had. 2. Then I want to make a stab at articulating what I think the Lutheran center is. 3. Finally, I will close with suggestions for those colleges who have a center that roughly corresponds with my definition and then some suggestions for those that don't have a Lutheran center at all.

But before I move on to those tasks, it is important to define at least provisionally and formally what I mean by "center." I would argue that the center for Lutheran liberal arts colleges ought to be religiously defined. That is, a religious vision of Christian higher education should be at their center. This religious vision, which like the Christian faith is comprehensive, would have within it an interpretation of the role and nature of human learning. (This provision of course eliminates a lot of our colleges who would currently find it quite embarrassing to admit that their mission was religiously defined.)

The religious vision comes from a living religious tradition. Alasdair MacIntyre has famously argued that a living tradition is "an historically extended, socially embodied argument about the goods which constitute that tradition." Traditions extend through many generations. Lutheranism is such a tradition--or better, such a constellation of traditions--and it has sponsored the colleges and universities from which we come.

In giving a rationale for its involvement in higher education, Lutheranism has never exhibited unanimity. But its religious commitments led it to establish colleges that had an educational purpose consonant with its perceived mission. Something in these Lutheran bodies impelled them to establish colleges.

I.

Now, the problem for many of our colleges is that they were not conceptually clear about what they were doing. The impulse was there but the sharp

rationale--particularly a theological rationale--was not. These colleges were "Christ of culture" colleges.

What do I mean by that? H. Richard Niebuhr, in his renowned book, *Christ and Culture*, identified five classic ways that Christian traditions have related Christ (the Christian vision) to culture. One of those, the Christ of Culture tradition, identifies Christianity with the best of high culture. For example, during the Enlightenment many of the elite identified Christ as a sublime teacher of morality. He was a hero of culture along the lines of a Socrates. The way I am using the Christ of culture category is a bit different. I mean that for many Lutheran groups that established colleges, the Christian vision was deeply and unconsciously entwined with their particular ethno-religious culture. They were fairly homogenous groups that wanted their young to be educated within the ethno-religious culture that they prized. They wanted their laity-to-be to be immersed in the "atmosphere" of their culture. Moreover, they wanted that culture to encourage candidates for the ordained ministry who would then go on to seminaries of that tradition.

The Midland Lutheran College of my college days was such a college. We were children of the German and Scandinavian Lutheran immigrations to the Midwest. Most of us had parents who hadn't gone to college but were encouraged by them and our local parishes to go to "our" school. We were taught by faculty generally of that same ethno-religious culture. Ninety-some percent of us were from those backgrounds. How could such education not be Lutheran? Almost every one at the college was Lutheran. Similar statements could be made about a Gettysburg and a Muhlenberg a generation or so earlier. Many of our colleges exhibited these characteristics.

But was there anything more specifically Lutheran about that Midland of yore? Not a whole lot. Religion was a pretty inward, non-intellectual matter. We had pietist behavioral standards that prohibited premarital sex and alcohol. We had Bible courses offered at a low level of sophistication. We had required chapel of a distinctly non-liturgical sort. We had faculty who had committed their lives

to the college and who now and then would connect their Christian perspective with their teaching. By and large the faculty and administration encouraged us as young Christians.

But there was no articulated center that sharply delineated the mission of the college. The theological acuity to do that was simply absent, or was felt not to be needed. Lutheran theology and ethics were not taught. Lutheran history was nowhere to be found. The Lutheran idea of the calling was not explicitly taught to young people who had had it bred into them in their parishes. There was no concerted intellectual effort to interrelate the Christian vision with other fields of learning. We were simply Lutheran by ethos. We were immersed in a Christ of culture educational enterprise.

When the colleges expanded their student bodies and faculties in the late 50s and 60s, students and faculties were recruited who were no longer part of that ethos. Indeed, the ethos itself was melting into the general American culture. Since the colleges had no articulated center, the colleges lost whatever integrity and unity they had. Soon faculty appeared who were not only apathetic about the tradition that originally sponsored them, but actually hostile. Raising any question about a religious center disturbed and offended them. The culture that was friendly to Christ became one that either ignored or rejected him...and the college went with that culture.

Now the loss of such a religious, Christ-of-culture, orientation did not mean death for the colleges. Some of them found new ways to define themselves. Some, like Gettysburg, went for high quality and high selectivity pre-professional education. They have a certain kind of integrity and unity, but it is not religiously defined. At most, religion is a grace note, a flavor in the mix, a social ornament. But certainly not the organizing center. It remains to be seen whether such an identity is satisfying enough to either college or church to maintain it.

Other Lutheran colleges, which Burtchaell calls the "confessional colleges," did have a more articulated

center. That is, the religious vision that sprang from their religious tradition was more specific, often theologically stated. They didn't mind being viewed as "sectarian," an appellation from which the Christ of culture colleges fled. This theological distillation of the religious vision served as the paradigm around which was organized the whole life of the college--its academic, social, organizational and extracurricular facets.

These colleges exemplified a Lutheran version of Christian humanism. Their theology departments taught Lutheran theology and ethics as well as bible and church history. Their faculty made a point of inter-relating the Christian vision and other fields of secular learning. Often this was strongest in the fields of literature and the arts. The notion of the calling was explicitly taught as a way to shape one's life before God. The moral ethos of the campus was guided by explicitly Christian principles. Lutheran worship was provided in an impressive chapel at a set-apart time.

All this was led by people who had a clear rationale for what they were doing. And it sprang from their religious tradition and was theologically articulated. It was supported by a board that explicitly supported and prized that tradition. Above all, the college had the courage to select faculty who supported such a notion of Lutheran humanism.

Such Lutheran colleges still exist, I believe, but have an uphill battle to maintain themselves. Some had a clear rationale but are losing it. A number of reasons for that are obvious. Some colleges fight for survival and are willing to adopt to market conditions even if it means giving up their religious center. Others are seduced to give up their religious center by a glorious worldly success that goes far beyond mere survival. Some have increasing numbers of administrators and faculty who simply do not see the point in trying to operate from a religious center. They do not believe that the Christian vision is any longer an adequate vision for organizing the life of a college. For many of those administrators and faculty, religion is a private, interior matter that should not be publicly relevant to the educational enterprise. Some colleges can no longer agree on the center and fall into a kind of

chaotic pluralism. Then they cannot summon either the clarity and courage to hire faculty that support Lutheran humanism in higher education.

A number of our colleges fall between these two depictions. They are a bit more intentional than the Christ of culture types but less defined than the Lutheran humanist types. I do not wish to set up exclusive categories. But it does us no good to go on congratulating ourselves about our fidelity to a Lutheran center when so many of us have little or no semblance of one.

II.

Well, that brings us to the question: What is an adequate Lutheran "center?" Let me say that a Lutheran center is first of all a Christian center. We share with other major Christian traditions a common Christian narrative--the Bible and the long history of the church. From those narratives emerged early on what we could call the apostolic or trinitarian faith, defined in the classic ecumenical creeds. In the long history of the church much theological reflection took place; a Christian intellectual tradition was shaped. This intellectual tradition conveyed a Christian view of the origin and destiny of the world, of nature and history, of human nature and its predicament, of human salvation and of a Christian way of life. This larger Christian tradition also bore Christian practices such as worship, marriage, hospitality, charity, etc.

The Lutheran Reformation and its ensuing history arose from and expressed a Lutheran construal of this general Christian tradition. Many of the facets of that construal are enshrined in the Lutheran Confessions. Some of the more particular elements of that Lutheran construal will be discussed a bit later as I further delineate the Lutheran center for Christian higher education.

This Lutheran Christian vision of reality, particularly in its intellectual form, constitutes the center. But how will it work out in the life of a college? How will it provide the organizing paradigm for the identity and mission of a college? How will it make a difference? What difference will it make?

Mark Schwehn, in a recent address at the University of Chicago (*First Things*, May, 1999, p. 25-31.) gives us a wonderful starting point. In it he attempts to define the characteristics of a Christian university, one that, as I put it, employs the Christian vision as the organizing paradigm for its life and mission. Schwehn talks generically about "Christian" institutions but I will transpose his language for specifically Lutheran colleges. Also, I will abbreviate the rich elaboration of each of his characteristics.

First, Schwehn lists what he calls "constitutional requirements." A Lutheran college must have a board of trustees composed of a substantial majority of Lutheran persons, clergy and lay, whose primary task is to ensure the continuity of its Lutheran Christian character. This will mean appointing a majority of Lutheran leaders who are committed to the idea of a Lutheran Christian college.

These leaders will in turn see to it that all of the following things are present within the life of the institution. First, a department of theology that offers courses required of all students in both biblical studies and the Christian intellectual tradition; second, an active chapel ministry that offers worship services in the tradition of the faith community that supports the school (Lutheran) but also makes provision for worship by those of other faiths; third, a critical mass of faculty members who, in addition to being excellent teacher-scholars, carry in and among themselves the DNA of the school, care for the perpetuation of its mission as a Christian community of inquiry, and understand their own callings as importantly bound up with the well-being of the immediate community; and fourth, a curriculum that includes a large number of courses, required of all students, that are compellingly construed as parts of a larger whole and that taken together constitute a liberal education (26-27).

Second, Schwehn develops three qualities that ought to be present in a Lutheran Christian college that flow directly from its theological commitments. The first is *unity*. By that he means the conviction that since God is One and Creator, all reality and all truth finally cohere in him. Thus, the Christian

college quests for the unity that follows from this theological principle. The second quality is *universality*, that all humans are beloved of the God who has created and redeemed them. All humans must be treated with dignity and respect. The third is *integrity*, which involves the belief "that there is an integral connection among the intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions of human life, and that these therefore ought where possible to be addressed concurrently within a single institution rather than parceled out into separate and often conflicting realms." (28) While these qualities may be grounded in other views of life, they are thoroughly grounded for a Christian college in trinitarian theological principles.

His fourth principle deserves more attention because it gets at, at least for this essay, the particularly Lutheran qualities of a Christian college. Schwehn argues that a "Christian university privileges and seeks to transmit, through its theology department, its official rhetoric, the corporate worship it sponsors, and in myriad other ways, a particular tradition of thought, feeling, and practice." (29)

While one could spend a good deal of time on a Lutheran college's "feeling"--its aesthetic tone--and "practices"--its worship, its arts, its sense of corporate and institutional calling, I would rather focus on its tradition of thought, its approach to higher learning. This is shaped by the particular way that Lutherans relate Christ and culture, Gospel and Law, the Right-hand Kingdom and the Left. And since the Lutheran approach is complex and dialectical, it is highly vulnerable to distortion.

The first thing to say is that Lutheran colleges respect the independence, creativity and contributions of the many "worldly" ways of knowing. The disciplines are prized in their full splendor. Luther roared: "How dare you not know what you can know!" He also argued that Christians have to be competent in their secular callings; a Christian cobbler makes good shoes, not poor shoes with little crosses on them. Lutheran teacher-scholars teach and write well; their piety will not excuse incompetence.

However, the disciplines are not given idolatrous autonomy, for they, too, are under the dominion of finitude and sin, and they often claim too much for themselves. Rather, the disciplines are to be engaged from the point of the view of the Gospel, and here "Gospel" is meant to refer to the whole trinitarian perspective on the world, not just the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins. That is, a Lutheran college aims at an ongoing dialogue between the Christian intellectual tradition--Lutheranly construed--and the secular disciplines. This is what is meant by a lively tension and interaction between Christ and culture, the Gospel and the Law, and the two ways that God reigns in the world.

A genuinely Lutheran college will aim at such an engagement, rejoicing in the areas of overlap and agreement that may take place, continuing a mutual critique where there are divergences and disagreements, anticipating that in the eschaton these differing views will come together in God's own truth, but in the meantime being willing to live with many questions unresolved. Thus, in some areas of inquiry, a Lutheran college will recognize paradox, ambiguity and irresolvability. But this recognition takes place at the end of a creative process of engagement, not at the beginning, where some of the proponents of "paradox" would like to put it. Those proponents then simply avoid real engagement by declaring "paradox" at the very beginning, essentially allowing everyone to go their own way and do their own thing.

Let me enter a caveat here. This sort of engagement does not go on all the time and by everyone in every classroom. A good deal of the time of a Lutheran college is given over to transmitting the "normal knowledge" of the field or the freight of the liberal arts core. But in probing the depths of every discipline, in addressing perennial and contemporary issues, in shaping a curriculum, in the kind of teaching and scholarship it prizes, and, above all, in the kind of faculty it hires, it nurtures this ongoing engagement between the Christian intellectual tradition and other ways of knowing.

Contrary to the Reformed approach, it does not give an automatic privilege to the Christian world view

which in the end can "trump" the other ways of knowing. Contrary to the Catholic approach, which sees all knowledge rising to a synthesis organized by Catholic wisdom, it lives with more messiness. But it respects those models of Christian humanism and finds itself closer to them than to the modern secular tendency to marginalize and then sequester into irrelevancy the Christian view of life and reality.

This genuine Lutheran approach also guards against its own Lutheran distortions, the prime one being the separation of Christ and culture, Gospel and Law and of the two ways that God reigns. This separation takes place in this way. The Gospel is narrowly defined as the doctrine of justification. This Gospel is preached in the chapel and taught by the theology department. But it is not the full-blown, comprehensive vision of life explicit in the trinitarian faith. It does not have the intellectual content of the full Christian vision.

In this flawed view, the Law (culture or the left hand of God) embraces everything else. All disciplines are under the Law and reason is the instrument for understanding them. Indeed, Luther's understanding of reason is often appealed to. His understanding sounds like an affirmation of autonomous reason set free from Christian assumptions. If that is the case, then a Lutheran college simply allows all inquiries shaped by reason to proceed freely. The results of these inquiries are respected and left pretty much unchallenged. The best available faculty can be hired for this exercise of autonomous reason without regard to their religious convictions or their interest in the theological dialog I outlined above. A Lutheran college, in this view, is simply one that encourages the exercise of autonomous reason. Or, in Postmodern terms, it respects the various perspectives that people bring to learning from their social locations.

There are enormous problems with this approach. For one thing, it assumes that Luther meant the same thing by reason that we do. On the contrary, the reason that Luther respected was thoroughly ensconced in a Christian worldview. It was a reason that could affirm the Good, the True and the

Beautiful in a way that was consistent with Christian presuppositions. But such a view of reason is long gone. Reason has been removed from the religious traditions within which it worked and now operates from very different assumptions, usually characterized by a pervasive philosophical naturalism (the modern) or by an arbitrary epistemological tribalism (the postmodern).

Allowing such an exercise of reason to go unchallenged in a Lutheran school is irresponsible. It leads to bifurcations of the minds of students and faculty alike. Christian faculty who worship God on Sunday teach a view of the world that shuts out God and human freedom on Monday. Students live their faith and intellectual lives in two separate compartments. To combat this unhappy situation, the disciplines must be engaged by the Gospel, i.e. the Christian vision with its comprehensive claims to truth. However, the Christian vision is not immune to challenge itself. The disciplines engage the Christian vision. In any genuine conversation there is the chance that both conversation partners' views may be changed. What's more, Christian claims are often of high generality; the claims of discipline more detailed and concrete. One often needs the other. Engagement is not always conflictual; it is often complementary.

The distorted Lutheran approach I have depicted above splits Christ (the Christian vision) and culture (the academic enterprise), the Gospel (in its full elaboration) from the Law (the exercise of reason). This separation of the Christian intellectual tradition from secular learning is as dangerous to Lutheran colleges as the separation of the Gospel and politics was to the Germany of Nazi times. Certainly the stakes are quite different, but such a separation will lead to a realm of secular education unchallenged by the Christian vision, just like it led in Germany to a political movement unchecked by that same Christian vision.

Such an approach, which often is used as a rationalization to disguise the prior lapse into secularization, can then well appeal to paradox, ambiguity and uncertainty since it will have nothing but a cacophony of voices each claiming their little corner of the college. Such a condition, which is not

too far from the one prevailing at many of our colleges, led one of our graduate students who attended this summer conference a few years back to say: "Gee, from what I gathered there, a Lutheran college is a wonderful place because everyone can think and do whatever they wish. It's a free-for-all."

In summary, a Lutheran college fosters a genuine engagement of Christ and culture. It encourages a creative dialectic between Gospel and Law by giving the Gospel in its fullest sense intellectual standing. Such a college stands at the lively junction between the two ways that God reigns. All of this flows from the Lutheran Christian center that guides the college. Such a college is willing to make the hard institutional decisions that ensure that such a vision lives on. It will hire an administration and faculty who not only tolerate such a vision, but support and participate in it. Indeed, they will feel called to it. Such a college will recruit students who are open to such an enterprise. And if it executes such an enterprise well, it will have something special to offer the church and world. It will become more than just a pretty good generic liberal arts college.

III.

Those colleges that approximate such a view of Lutheran higher education--Lutheran humanism, if you will--will have a good idea of what to aim at. The practical aspects of that task will be difficult and challenging, but the principles are pretty clear. In actual fact, a few of our colleges have a fighting chance to move closer to the ideal. I wish them well and godspeed.

But what of the many colleges who have long lost a Lutheran center, a religious vision that shapes the life of the college? What of the many of you here that find my ideal Lutheran vision simply impossible. You say: We can't put Humpty-Dumpty together again. We can't unscramble the eggs in our omelette. We simply have little chance of regaining such a robust center. Some of you might be saying silently: We shouldn't do that even if we could.

To you--and I include myself in this group--I say that we should aim at an *intentional, robust*

pluralism, a pluralism in which the college guarantees that the perspectives of Lutheran Christianity are represented in all the departments and divisions of the college. The Lutheran vision may no longer be the paradigm that organizes the college's life, if it ever was, but it can be intentionally represented among the many voices representing other perspectives.

Could we not insure that Christian public intellectuals--those who in their teaching and scholarship embody the dialogical model I elaborated above--are intentionally sprinkled among the departments? Could we not insure that the Christian perspective on our life together be represented in student affairs along with the more secular ones? Could our leaders not articulate a Christian rationale for our involvement in service as well as the more generic ones?

It seems only honest to press for such an intentional pluralism--affirmative action for Christians

generally and Lutherans specifically--in a college that still claims a relationship to the Lutheran tradition. If we would make provision for such a pluralism, our appeal to Lutheran donors and Lutheran students would have more plausibility. We would avoid the kind of hypocrisy which takes AAL money for projects that lead to further secularization of the college. We could at least guarantee to our Lutheran constituencies that we have made provision for the Lutheran voice to be heard, even if it is part of a small minority.

Certainly boards of trustees, presidents, deans, department heads and faculty could be persuaded to see the cogency of such a proposal. If being related to a religious tradition means anything significant, it must mean that tradition can speak within its "own" institution. If we can't muster at least that commitment, why in heavens name should we continue the relationship?