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“Lest we become beasts who devour each other:” A Lutheran Calling to Higher Education in Multi-Religious Settings

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After teaching religion at Lutheran colleges for two decades I traveled with St. Olaf College students for five months in eight countries. Along the way we encountered and studied varieties of Christianity and other religious traditions. Following a visit to an Indian primary school, one astonished student reported that a child had forthrightly asked her: “Who is your god?” Once the Ole sputtered her way to claiming Jesus, the child happily pointed to a friend announcing, “So is his.” In our traveling-classroom, our discussions about Jesus in the context of cultural and religious diversity were more troubled. The range of religious commitments—or non-commitments—in the group was narrower than among Indians or the American populace, but the differences of belief and intensity among Oles became evident. When responses to assigned readings, to Coptic monasticism or Ramadan practices, to a Hindu puja or an Indian Rite Catholic mass, to a Chinese holy mountain or Korean Pentecostalism diverged, and they always did, there was no hiding it. We were a long way from home and together a lot so there was no retreat into familiar community and habitual practices. A sharp comment or hard question tossed into class discussion rippled beyond the hour. Tragic news from home evoked genuine compassion between students who disagreed. Christmas in Shanghai was made memorable by an improvised pageant costumed out of suitcases. This may have been the most difficult teaching I have ever done. I’m not sure how to evaluate its success, but I know that students were deeply engaged and insightful when they wrote final essays on this question: How can people of differing religions live well together? For them this issue is as pressing as any questions about the Trinity or the efficacy of the sacraments or the validity of non-episcopal ordinations. My experiences during those months prompt me to reconsider how Lutheran colleges and universities prepare our students to live well, even faithfully, in a nation and world where religions are many.

I propose that a Lutheran perspective on the growing religious diversity in the United States and awareness of religious diversity world-wide call us to revise the practice of education in Lutheran colleges and universities in order to better serve our students who are neighbors to the world and in the hope of a transformation of church and theology.¹ I state my proposal boldly, without qualifications or concessions to limiting, local realities necessary for implementation. American Lutheran colleges and universities should require all their students to study more than one religious tradition, increase the presence and participation on campus of persons from traditions other than Christianity, support the practice of these traditions, and provide opportunities for collaborative service projects and joint celebrations. This is not a call to

¹ I restrict my claim to the United States and then to one college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as this is the nation, church, and college I know best. The Christian church generally and Lutherans in particular are involved in higher education around the world. However, the history and current conditions of that involvement and the realities of religious variety in other nations are significantly different from those in the United States as well as from each other. While I anticipate that those involved in higher education in these settings can learn from one another about religious diversity and the global variety of Christianity, here I make a step toward that exchange by exploring our common Lutheran resources and its implications for my own setting.

conformity with the world, to syncretism within the church, or to secularism as a rejection of religion. Rather it is a call to respond to the realities of this age confident of God's generous love for the whole world and all its people, aware that there is much we humans do not know of God, and humble about our participation in God's unfolding reign. Minimally these changes will address Luther's gruesome image in this paper's title; that is, higher education's response to religious diversity should aim at least to restrain the all-too-human impulse to turn on one another as beasts who devour one another.² I have no illusion that these revisions will bring in God's final reign on earth. Perhaps training able young men and women "to benefit and serve the world" can contribute to people of differing religions living together in peace. If so, these efforts will counter the forces of evil—AKA the devil who, Luther observed, "very much prefers coarse blockheads and ne'er-do-wells lest men get along too well on earth."³ And, beyond these temporal goods, perhaps engagement in such educational ministries will yield to the church some small increase in wisdom, a deepened understanding of the truths by which we live and of the wideness of God's love for the world.

American Lutheran colleges and universities are suited to this task by their theological heritage, by their educational experience, and by their place within the ecology of their churches. That straightforward sentence summarizes rich discussions and relies upon conclusions that might be debated but here are asserted in an ideal fashion.⁴ Lutheran theology supports Christians' active involvement in care for "this world": for the welfare of the city, for provision of daily bread and all that entails, for compassionate response to one another's ordinary and extraordinary needs. In this shared work Lutherans accept the good gifts that come from all sorts of people, not only from their own members or from other Christians; indeed, it is their vocation not only to offer gifts, but also to receive gifts of skills, wisdom, and material resources as from God. Lutherans understand the distinction between the *uselessness* of reason to know things that are above and the great, if limited, use of reason in work proper to human beings. They know that a robust account of faith is not satisfied with mere reason and knowledge; it must also acknowledge truth and trust. In nearly two centuries of higher educational practice in the United States, they have come to distinguish these aspects of faith without dividing them. In their classrooms both students and teacher are "before humans" to be evaluated by the "law" rather than "before God," evaluated by Christ's righteousness according to grace. American Lutheran colleges and universities are not neutral about religion as public institutions are legally required to be. They have not given up their connection to their churches; neither do they restrict their mission to those churches. Unlike congregational focus on fostering members' personal faith, and unlike seminaries' emphasis on preparing persons for the church's public ministry, the

2 "Now if you have a son who is able to learn, and you are in a position to keep him at it, but not do so . . . you will be the one who is responsible when—as much as it is up to you—no man will have any security for his person, his wife, child, house, home, and property. You blithely hack them all to pieces, causing men to become like beasts who devour one another in the end." Martin Luther, "Sermon on Keeping Children in School," LW 46: 242.

3 "Only one thing is lacking, the earnest desire to train the young and to benefit and serve the world with able men and women. The devil very much prefers coarse blockheads and ne'er-do-wells lest men get along too well on earth." Martin Luther, "To the Councilmen of Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools," LW 45: 370-71.

4 The relevant literature about such topics as the relationship between Lutheran teaching and cultural dispositions, about the "two kingdoms," and about education is far too vast to cite here. Of particular interest is Mark U. Edwards, Jr. "Characteristically Lutheran Leanings?" dialog 41, no. 1 (2002): 50-62.

colleges' mission is equipping students for vocations of leadership and service to the world. Unlike social service agencies whose work is to bind up wounds, the colleges' work is more like the conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman who met at Jacob's well.⁵ Because local history, current circumstances, and church affiliations vary, some schools will be more able to take up this call than others. As one or more respond, changes should be consistent with the educational purposes Luther articulated, adapted to the political and cultural realities of twenty-first century America, and informed by historical and contemporary examples of Lutheran educational and inter-faith endeavors.⁶

Martin Luther's views about education and the reforms he and Philip Melancthon proposed for German schools and universities are well known.⁷ Luther's theological grounding for education provides useful guidance for higher education in the multi-religious context of the United States today. On the other hand, his notoriously polemical remarks about Jews, Turks, and Christians with whom he disagreed do not; at the very least they require critical interpretation rather than simple appropriation.⁸ Luther identified three sorts of purposes for education: 1) personal; 2) ecclesial; and 3) worldly. Unlike his contemporaries who regarded

5 The goal of higher education, as I present it here, is NOT conversion, but rather exchange between the two who converse. Prasuna Neloal treats this story in a compatible fashion noting that "both Jesus and the woman are transformed" by their encounter. "Dialogue for New Life: Dalit Women and the Samaritan Woman," in *Identity, Survival, Witness: Reconfiguring Theological Agendas*. Ed. Karen L. Bloomquist. (Geneva: LWF, 2008), p. 81.

6 There is much to learn from such exchanges, but even brief descriptions are beyond the scope of this paper. Among the examples to be considered: the religious and civic purposes of education in early modern Denmark, the combination of educational and charitable work carried out by Pietist, Lutheran H. A. Francke and colleagues at Halle with the support of a Calvinist ruler, the role of education in Lutheran missions from Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg's 1709 arrival in India forward, the work of Lutheran higher education around the world today, and such inter-faith work as that carried out by Karl L. Reichelt at the Christian Mission to Buddhists at Tao Fong Shan and recently begun at Quo Vadis by the Arcot Lutheran Church in Tamil Nadu. As for how to evaluate the faithfulness of any project to Luther's purposes, I have suggested elsewhere three criteria: 1) the education offered must be of good quality; 2) it must attend to more than "men's bellies;" and 3) it must take account of the personal consequences. L. DeAne Lagerquist, "Secularization--a Bad Thing?: A View from St. Olaf College," in *American Academy of Religion* (Washington, DC: 2006).

7 Martin Luther, "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools," LW 45 and "Sermon on Keeping Children in School," LW 46 are his most sustained discussions of these topics. He also comment in letters, lectures and other treatises including "On the Freedom of a Christian," LW 31. Notable interpretive works include: Gustav Marius Bruce, *Luther as an Educator*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1928); Harold J. Grimm, "Luther and Education." In *Luther and Culture*, ed. Gerhard L. Belgum, (Decorah, IA: Luther College, 1960).; Marilyn J. Harran, *Martin Luther: Learning for Life*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997); Richard Solberg, "What Can the Lutheran Tradition Contribute to Christian Higher Education," in Richard Hughes, ed., *Models for Christian Higher Education: Strategies for Survival and Success in the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 71-81. Also of interest is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Social Teaching Statement, "Our Calling in Education," adopted at its 2007 Assembly. <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/Education.aspx> (Accessed 1/28/09).

8 This crucial task might be included in the curriculum of Lutheran colleges. See for example: Miller, Gregory J. "Luther on the Turks and Islam." In *Harvesting Martin Luther's Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert, 185-203. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004; Johannes Ehmann, "Martin Luther and Islam," in *Deepening Faith, Hope and Love in Relations with Neighbors of Other Faiths*, ed. Simone Sinn (Geneva: LWF, 2008). and Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531-1546* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

learning as unnecessary for faith since faith is a gift of the spirit, Luther contended that education offers benefits to personal piety. Most basically, being able to read allows the believer to study the scriptures and the catechism.⁹ Further, he recognized the church's need for well educated clergy able to preach the gospel, to interpret the scriptures, to foster the faith of their parishioners, and to lead. At the same time, he asserted that in the worldly arena there was an equal, if not greater, need for educated persons to serve as judges, teachers, and the like. This education cultivates peace ("the greatest of earthly goods"), justice, and life through its contribution to the "glorious ordinance and splendid gift of God" which is worldly government.¹⁰ Such work is temporal and secular, directed to needs of a specific time and place, therefore transient and always requiring attention and effort. When it equips Christians to respond to their various callings including participation in civil society, this third purpose for education can also be categorized as vocational

Detailed attention to the particulars of Reformation curriculum and pedagogy is not necessary here, but the nature of faith and its intersection with educational purposes is relevant to what follows. Education for personal piety addresses all three aspects of faith: knowledge, affirmation, and trust.¹¹ It teaches accurate knowledge of doctrine, encourages assent to the truth of what is taught, and fosters trusting reliance upon that truth. Luther expected this to happen in the household, in the schools, and in congregations with the Bible and the catechism as primary texts. Similarly, education preparing students for church service in the "spiritual office" addresses all aspects of faith and it expands the scope of knowledge, in the sixteenth century with study of languages, histories, and chronicles and in ours with additional disciplines. When education serves a worldly purpose, it can prepare a Christian student to answer a call to serve the neighbor in a profession and as a citizen, an obedience that is a way of trusting God's promises. Like the Hebrew wisdom tradition, worldly education can foster faith, but its resources are not limited to revealed truths or one cultural tradition. Luther suggests the same when he commends the example of Roman education and when he comments that if a Turk has a good idea, he should be heard.¹² Wisdom and worldly education draw upon the reason and resources

9 In this way education contributes to the knowledge aspect of faith and allows a better informed affirmation of the truths of Christianity. It is possible, of course, to trust in God and divine promises without being able to read or without formal knowledge of theology and doctrine.

10 "A Sermon on Keeping Children in School," LW 46. "Therefore, to tell the truth, peace, the greatest of earthly goods, in which all other temporal goods are comprised, is really a fruit of true preaching." p. 226. "Nevertheless, worldly government is a glorious ordinance and splendid gift of God, who has instituted and established it and will have it maintained as something men cannot do without. If there is no worldly government, one man could not stand before another; each would necessarily devour the other, as irrational beasts devour one another." p. 237.

11 Jaroslav Pelikan explains these aspects of faith in his discussion of Reformation Confessions. *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp.46-7. Peter C. Phan's discussion of the nature of faith as relevant to religious identity treats only assent and trust. "Religious Identity and Belonging Amidst Diversity and Pluralism: Challenges and Opportunities for Church and Theology." In *Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, ed. James L. Heft, 162-184. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 168-70.

12 "So it was done in ancient Rome. . . . Their system produced intelligent, wise, and competent men. . . as a result their country prospered; they had capable and trained men for every position. So at all times through out the world simple necessity forced men, even among the heathen, to maintain pedagogues and schoolmasters if their

of many cultures to serve the needs of its own time and place. Having rejected the medieval model of education provided by the church to the few and in view of the overlap between temporal and spiritual goods promoted by education in his context of relative religious homogeneity, Luther urged civil authorities, councilmen and princes alike, to sponsor schools that addressed all three sorts of purposes: for personal faith, for the public office of ministry, and for the benefit of neighbors and the world.

Today only a minority of Lutherans live in nations whose government has responsibility to provide religious education of any kind to their citizens, and most Lutherans live in societies that encompass multiple religious communities. Although the government has been prohibited from support of religion in the United States since its founding, and religious diversity is not entirely new here, Americans are increasingly aware of the many-ness of religion. Varieties of Christians—including English dissenters, Quakers, Roman Catholics, Baptists, and Lutherans—inhabited the colonies along with small number of Jews and the native peoples. Federal and state dis-establishment placed all religious groups in the same legal position while ensuring religious liberty to individuals. James Madison argued for this arrangement as encouraging the debate among various parties that he believed would advance pursuit of truth, strengthen Christianity, and render benefits to the nation.¹³ Thus, as sociologist R. Stephen Warner has observed, from the outset religious groups in America have competed.¹⁴ They do so now in a culture still saturated by religion, far more so than in Europe. Despite the so-called second, cultural dis-establishment of Protestantism, Christianity remains the ambient tradition whose Christmas holy day is a school holiday and whose sacred stories echo in political rhetoric and public rituals. The specter of competition becoming disruptive conflict produced a pragmatic toleration.¹⁵ In the nineteenth century the limits of tolerance were tested, and sometimes found wanting, by new American groups such as Mormons and an increasing number of Roman Catholics. Lutherans came to public notice infrequently, most often for their ethnic identity, sometimes for their liturgical similarities to Roman Catholics, but seldom for the theology that distinguished them from the majority of Reformed Protestants.

Personal religious liberty and voluntarism contributed to the typically American notions that religion is an individual matter about which everyone may have an opinion and that inquiry

nation was to be brought to a high standard.” Luther, “To the Councilmen,” 45:356. “And if I were a very Turk or a heathen, and my plan were nevertheless seen to benefit not myself but the Christians, they ought not in fairness to spurn my offer.” p. 378. In “A Sermon on Keeping Children in School,” 46:238-9, where he notes of the limits of force, Luther turns to Solomon, quoting Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Here Luther’s comments suggest that he regards God as the source of all wisdom as in his advocacy of reading the history of non-Christian peoples he asserts that in doing so one learns of God’s glorious acts.

13 See James Madison. Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments 1785. Accessed 1/28/09. Available from http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/madison_m&r_1785.html.

14 R. Stephen Warner, "Work in Progress toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States," *The American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 5 (1993): 1050-51.

15 In “Journeys of Faith: Meeting the Challenges of Twenty-first Century America,” in James L. Heft, ed. *Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (New York: Fordham, 2006), pp. 37-51, Nancy Ammerman attributes the term “pragmatic pluralism” to Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America*. (New York, Harper & Row, 1963), p. 106. For an engaging account of the developing American responses to the variety of religion see William R. Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

into this private matter is rude.¹⁶ Since the mid-twentieth century the many-ness of American religion has expanded to encompass an increasing number of adherents to more traditions—both recent immigrants from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa and new converts—as well as an array of spiritual seekers and skeptics.¹⁷ At one extreme this provokes intolerance, withdrawal into sectarian communities, or reassertion of Christianity as the foundation for American society. At the other extreme, it moves pragmatic toleration toward romantic pluralism and improvisational spirituality that are uninterested in the particularity of each tradition and underestimate the differences between them. All too often both responses rest on a foundation of indifference toward and ignorance about religion. Nonetheless, there are calls for a middle way that takes religion seriously, granting a public role to communities as well as protecting personal conviction and practices.¹⁸ Lutheran colleges and universities can contribute to such a middle way by welcoming persons of many religions on their campuses, by providing programs that encourage public, informed attention to the beliefs and practices of various groups, and by cultivating compassionate relationships between persons of different religions.

In a reversal of the situation Luther encouraged in sixteenth century Germany, from the colonial period until today American churches have depended upon their own initiative to educate their children and provide leaders for their religious communities; in addition their schools have contributed to the welfare of their towns and nation. The first colleges, including Harvard, set a model of education directed to developing students' moral character and fitting them for service in church and civil society. Some colleges of this type were supported by a denomination. Others, like Oberlin, were associated with the religious enthusiasm and social reform movements stimulated by the Second Great Awakening. Students from these schools were pioneers in Protestant foreign missions. By the early twentieth century state supported and private universities, following the lead of German research institutions, shifted their focus to production of new knowledge and its practical application rather than transfer of information and

16 Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

17 Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001). Rather than focus upon the content of belief and affiliation with religious communities, Robert J. Nash and DeMethra LaSha Bradley describe their students' spiritualities under five types: committed, orthodox believers who are confident in their beliefs and for whom doctrine is primary, mainline believers who balance loyalty to their traditions and freedom, spiritual seekers, spiritual humanists, and spiritual skeptics. "The Different Spiritualities of the Students We Teach," in Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda H. Jacobsen, eds., *The American University in a Post-Secular Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 138-47. Sociologist Nancy Ammerman notes that the "psychological presence" of adherents of non-Christian traditions among young people is greater than their actual number. Among the students I traveled with, about 20% declared themselves "not Christian;" only the Hmong student claimed another tradition. Ammerman counts 3% of young people as members of other traditions; we had 1/28 or about 4%. Our proportion of active Christians, likely roughly equivalent to what Nash and Bradley describe as orthodox and mainline believers, was probably higher than the 37% Ammerman gives. Ammerman, "Journeys of Faith," pp. 37-51.

18 Gustav Niebuhr, *Beyond Tolerance: Searching for Interfaith Understanding in America* (Viking, 2008). Ebo Patel, *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007). Peter C. Phan calls for a "positive regard for and willingness to learn from the belief and practice of other religions." "Religious Identity and Belonging," p. 171. Nancy Ammerman borrows from biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann an ideal of bilingualism that she then applies it to the situation of religious diversity, suggesting the possibility of persons who are "culturally bilingual—who speak a native parochial language and a language shared with people they do not know." "Journeys of Faith," p. 45.

development of student character. Following World War II, higher education expanded and democratized. New schools and new programs welcomed a growing percentage of the population whose studies lead to a range of degrees from the two-year A.A. in nursing or law enforcement to the Ph.D. in theoretical physics or cultural studies. In keeping with American laws and cultural norms, on new campuses and old ones, religion in general and Christianity in particular was frequently relegated to the margins and at colleges founded by churches the relationship appeared to be eroding. Alarmed response described this trend as the “secularization of American higher education” and provoked vigorous discussion about how to recover a vital role for Christianity in the academy.¹⁹

If a bit behind the curve, nonetheless, American Lutheran colleges and universities seem to follow this trend toward greater worldly engagement.²⁰ Having left state responsibility for education and church behind in Europe, Lutherans adapted to American reality with the potentially sectarian strategy of separating their students from the general populace in churchly institutions. Most church bodies established and supported at least one college that was a focus of community identity as well as educating the church’s youth.²¹ However, even when the school’s stated purposes included inculcation of pure Lutheran teaching, non-Lutherans were not prohibited from enrolling and some did.²² Generally Lutherans followed the “old” college model, blending liberal arts and occupational training with attention to fostering students’ religious and ethnic identity.²³ Colleges devoted to preparing students for seminary usually enrolled only men

19 Notable, influential accounts are: George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light : The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998).

20 Four studies take up Lutheran examples. Hughes, ed., *Models for Christian Higher Education*, pp. 71-124 examines St. Olaf College and California University; Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light*,” pp.459-556 includes Gettysburg College, St. Olaf College, and Concordia University (River Forest); Robert Benne, *Quality with Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001) examines St. Olaf College and Valparaiso University; Conrad Cherry, Betty A. DeBerg, and Amanda Porterfield, *Religion on Campus* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2001), pp. ## investigates “North College” which is St. Olaf College.

21 This demonstrated in the case of the Augustana Synod and its schools by Maria Erling and Mark Granquist, *The Augustana Story: Shaping Lutheran Identity in North America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008).

23 This is recounted in Richard Solberg, *Lutheran Higher Education in North America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985) and numerous institutional histories. Other works explore these schools’ Lutheran identity and their future. Tom Christianson, *The Gift and Task of Lutheran Higher Education* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2004). L. DeAne Lagerquist, "What Does This Mean? Lutheran Higher Education," *Lutheran Higher Education* 135, no. 4 (2000), L. DeAne Lagerquist, "the Vocation of a Lutheran College in the Midst of American Higher Education," *Intersections* (2001), Steven Schroeder, "Nothing Lutheran Is Our Subject Matter: The Lutheran University in the Twenty-First Century," *The Cresset*, no. Advent/Christmas (2007). Mark Schwehn, "Lutheran Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century," in *The Future of Religious Colleges*, ed. Paul Dove (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002). Ernest Simmons, *Lutheran Higher Education: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1998). In addition see presentations from the annual Vocation of a Lutheran College conference published in *Intersections*. <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Education/Colleges-and-Universities/Resources/Intersections.aspx> (January 28, 2009)

while those offering a more general program were coeducational.²⁴ Despite early twentieth century discussions among several church bodies, American Lutherans never founded a research university. Closures gradually reduced the number of schools. The series of church mergers that culminated in the ELCA weakened old loyalties to its 28 schools. Other changes followed from many Lutherans' movement into the American middle-class and social mainstream, from colleges' efforts to improve academic quality, from financial considerations, and from principled commitment to cultural diversity. Only a small percentage of Lutheran students ever attended these schools; now the proportion of Lutherans on campus declined even as the size of the student body grew. Similarly, the number of non-Lutheran faculty and staff increased. Direct financial support from the church shrank. Lutherans participating in discussions of secularization share some of the anxieties articulated by Evangelical, Reformed, and Catholic colleagues, but not all were as alarmed or as willing to equate the quantifiable changes with faithlessness to their mission.

It must be admitted that in their evaluation of this trend Lutherans do not entirely agree with each other.²⁵ Nonetheless, Lutheran response is rooted in a theological understanding of how God works in this temporal world and the significance attributed to the notion of the secular. Certainly one meaning of secular is as a synonym for the profane that, like the devil, opposes God's purposes. Sociologists have described secularization as the processes by which religious authorities lost control of institutions and resources and in which "worldly goals and purposes displaced . . . action directed toward otherworldly, or supernatural, ends."²⁶ Another, older use of secular refers "merely to ordinary life in this world (as opposed to heaven). *Secular* has meant the actual world with all its complexities and ambiguities, the place where most people act out their lives, whatever their aspirations for heaven."²⁷ In this usage the secular is not the loss of something so much as it is a location. It is, as Lutheran historian Martin E. Marty succinctly notes, "the present age. It need not be a sphere of militant anti-religion or anti-

24 Lutherans did sponsor some schools for women. All of these were closed by the 1960s. L. DeAne Lagerquist, "Learning to See, Learning to Answer: Women and Lutheran Higher Education," Essays and Reports: Lutheran Historical Conference 20 (2002).

25 Robert Benne, for example, is more anxious than some others. See his "A Flagging Flagship?" in Pamela Schwandt, ed., *Called to Serve: St. Olaf and the Vocation of a Church College* (Northfield, Minnesota: St. Olaf College, 1999), pp. 231-39. However, the typology he presents in *Quality with Soul*, pp. 48-65 allows that there is more than one way for a college to relate to its church. What I propose here falls in the type he calls "intentionally pluralist."

26 Bryan R. Wilson, "Secularization," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd edition, p. 8214. I discussed differing notions of the secular at more length in "Secularization: A Bad Thing? A Lutheran View from St. Olaf College," *American Academy of Religion*, November 2006. Douglas Farrow's distinction between supercessionist, liberal, and eschatological views clarified my thinking. "Three Meanings of Secular," *First Things*, no. 133 (2003).

27 Amanda Porterfield, "Religious Pluralism, the Study of Religion, and 'Post-secular' Culture," in Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, eds. *The American University in a Post-Secular Age* (Oxford, 2008), p. 198. I sympathize with Porterfield's defense of fair-mindedness in the study of religion, her caution against an "idealized view of [religious] compatibility, her reminder that religion is "essentially a collective phenomenon," and her observation that religion can be either a positive or negative force in the world. I am more hopeful, however, that combining suspension of belief in the classroom with other inter-faith activity outside it need not result in "romantic pluralism."

Christianity.”²⁸ Moreover, Lutheran theology recognizes that even as most people act out their lives in this world, so too God is constantly active in this world. In this age God’s reign has begun, but is not complete, and its purposes are served by the crucial yet flawed work of Christians and others in enterprises such as worldly governance and education. Thus Lutherans risk answering God’s call into places, times, and tasks marked by complexity and unresolved ambiguity always confident that despite their own mixed motives and imperfections God’s love never fails. This theology may be shared by Lutherans around the world; however acting upon it entails attentiveness to the particularities of chronological, national, and cultural context. My proposal for revising American Lutheran higher educational practice involves faithful risk taking. Without asking Lutherans to give up control of their schools, it calls them to this-worldly purposes. Rejecting the potentially sectarian character of earlier practice, it affirms broad, public purposes and urges a posture of hospitality that welcomes many into a shared mission.

Because local resources and limitations shape implementation I offer St. Olaf College, the school I know best, as an illustrative case for putting this plan to work.²⁹ In our setting theology is transformed as students cultivate “theological literacy” and prepare for citizenship and occupations.³⁰ To do this students must encounter the full scope of religious life—not only ideas, but also the people who have them, the communities in which they live, and the ways they live. Providing this depends upon our recruiting many more students from a variety of religious traditions and cultivating cooperative, trusting relationships with their communities. Our resources include are the developmental stage of our student body who are 18-22 years old, our residential campus, the four-year duration of the program, our scheme of general education, representatives of multiple religious traditions among our religion faculty, our strong international study program, and the vitality of religious practice.³¹ We would need to expand

28 “The Church and Higher Education in the New Millennium, in Douglas V. Henry and Bob R. Agee, eds. *Faithful Learning and the Christian Scholarly Vocation* (Eerdmans, 2003), p. 57.

29 Mark D. Tranvik of Augsburg College (Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA) offers a compatible discussion of American Lutheran higher education in his “Sinning Boldly on Campus: Rethinking the Role of the Church Faith in the Colleges and Universities of the Church,” *The Cresset* (Lent 2009): 27-32. Tranvik’s discussion of resources for the college’s work today to be found in the legacy of long-time Augsburg College president Bernhard M. Christensen also serves as a salutary reminder that the “big tradition” of Lutheranism is appropriated on each campus through its own “little,” local traditions.

30 The phrase theological literacy comes from St. Olaf’s Mission Statement which sets out the distinctive features of the college’s education as commitment to the liberal arts, rootage in the Christian Gospel, and incorporation of a global perspective. “In the spirit of free inquiry and free expression, it offers a distinctive environment that integrates teaching, scholarship, creative activity, and opportunities for encounter with the Christian Gospel and God’s call to faith. The college intends that its graduates combine academic excellence and theological literacy with a commitment to lifelong learning.” <http://www.stolaf.edu/about/mission.html> (January 28, 2009). This commitment governs general education requirements for the study of religion. For further discussion of the mission particularly as it relates to the study and practice of religion see Farrell, *St. Olaf 2000* cited above.

31 James Farrell, *St. Olaf 2000: Identity and Mission for the Twenty-First Century* (St. Olaf College, 1999, accessed January 28 2009); available from <http://www.stolaf.edu/church/identity/>. L. DeAne Lagerquist, “Faithfulness to Mission: The Observations of the Observed,” *Faith in the Academy*, Messiah College, September, 2004. Schwandt, ed. *Called to Serve*. Joseph M. Shaw, *History of St. Olaf College, 1874-1974* (Northfield: St. Olaf College, 1974).

our requirements beyond study of Christianity to include a second tradition.³² In the classroom careful, critical, and constructive inquiry contribute to students' accurate knowledge and depth of understanding including awareness of differences and disagreements. Students also develop a sense of how to approach additional traditions. There are consequences for students' personal faith, but this is not the goal of academic study. Pursued in close proximity to each other the practice and study of religion inform and interpret one another. Students meet one another outside of class in the residence hall, practice room, and cafeteria. Voluntary activities such as Ole Spring Relief or Project Friendship provide opportunities to share in service to others. Invitations to participate in festivals deepen understanding of one another's traditions. As my opening indicated, study abroad enhances learning, both by what is learned while away and by the questions brought home. Over four-years there is time to learn and to develop authentic, personal relationships that transcend merely pragmatic toleration or romantic pluralism.

At its best such education, not only restrains beastly behavior, it also equips students to cooperate for the welfare of the earthly city as wise, humane citizens who feed one another. There will be other good outcomes as well. Christian students may make more a genuine affirmation of the truth their own tradition teaches and develop active trust; perhaps students in other traditions will gain a similar benefit. These students will be members of congregations and leaders for their churches, even in the spiritual office. They and some of their teachers will contribute to deepening Christian theology in ways we are only beginning to glimpse.³³ This will supply the sort of faculty and administrators needed in the next generation if the work of American Lutheran colleges and universities is to continue. Nothing human is always at its best, of course. There will be perversions and failures. Hostility and hatred and ignorance will continue. Hospitality always entails risk to host and guest alike. Meeting as strangers, they hope to be transformed into neighbors who exchange what they have rather than to become enemies.

Recalling that Christmas pageant in Shanghai I have noticed what a generous, hospitable story it tells. The scandalous baby's birth drew many visitors. Our skeptical Mary's adoptive family has fostered dozens of infants. Half of our donkey was the daughter of theologically conservative Lutheran pastor. Like Luke's shepherds, ours heard the news from angels, though ours had wings fashioned from pillowcases. Our magi were a rock-climbing, economics major named Larson, a politically liberal, devout religion major, and a Hmong immigrant whose mother is a shaman. Like Matthew's, our magi followed a star, a hiking headlamp mounted on a Frisbee, and they consulted Herod, a Korean-American, alpine skier outfitted like pharaoh. The

32 Currently St. Olaf College requires all students to take two courses in Biblical and Theological Studies, both include primarily if not only Christianity. Religion majors are required to study two traditions. When two traditions are required, Christianity should be one of them because 1) it is the school's tradition; 2) it is the dominant tradition in the United States; and 3) even Christian students know little about it.

33 My colleague Gregory A. Walter has written about the resources for inter-faith matters to be gained by retrieving a Lutheran appreciation for the hiddenness of God and God's alien work. I am informed by his development of the motif of Abraham and Sarah's hospitality to strangers. "The Hidden God and the Trinity in Christian Theology of Religions" <http://moodle.fishersnet.net/mod/resource/view.php?id=1315> (January 22, 2009). Among recent Lutheran examples: Ronald Thiemann, "Beyond Exclusivism and Absolutism: a Trinitarian Theology of the Cross" in *God's life in Trinity*, eds. Miroslav Wolf and Michael Welker (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006); Simone Sinn, ed., *Deepening Faith, Hope and Love in Relations with Neighbors of Other Faiths* (Geneva: LWF, 2008). Sinn's introduction sets out criteria for "good interfaith relations" that are appropriate to a college campus where common work and study of doctrine inform one another.

generosity of the story is not exhausted by the scope of infant's hospitality, however. I also notice that each one who came brought a gift. If we are to live well together, people of different faiths must learn to accept one another's gifts and to recognize that "we are all strangers on this earth, seeking a better eternal home."³⁴ Revisions in our practice will enable Lutheran higher education to cultivate that ability and thus contribute to transformations in theology and church.



singing Christmas songs

enacting the story

34 Hazel O. Ayanga, "Hospitality in the Context of Interfaith Relations," ed. Simone Sinn (2008). Note resonance with Luther's legendary final declaration that we are all "beggars telling one another where to find bread."