

2014

Journey Toward Pluralism: Reimagining Lutheran Identity in a Changing World

Jacqueline Bussie

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Bussie, Jacqueline (2014) "Journey Toward Pluralism: Reimagining Lutheran Identity in a Changing World," *Intersections*: Vol. 2014: No. 40, Article 9.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2014/iss40/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Intersections* by an authorized administrator of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

Journey Toward Pluralism: Reimagining Lutheran Identity in a Changing World



Who are we as an institution? Who do we want to become? What does it mean to be a Christian college when our students, faculty, and staff are atheist, “nones,” Muslims, Christians, Baha’is, and Jews, among others? These questions pepper the pressing conversations regarding

mission and identity happening all across the United States, especially in church-related institutions such as ELCA colleges and universities. As one result of wrestling with these questions, Concordia College in 2011 founded the Forum on Faith and Life, which takes as its mission “to foster a deeper and more compassionate understanding of one another across traditional boundaries” by creating “opportunities for genuine encounter with the intra-faith and interfaith neighbor.” Hired to help establish and direct this interfaith resource center, I was overjoyed to be a part of a pioneering initiative that so clearly took seriously the reformation claim that the church—and its colleges and universities—must live *semper reformanda*, that is, always being reformed in light of a changing world and the ever-changing needs of the world’s people. This essay will share crucial insights gleaned and practical steps taken by

Concordia College thus far on our journey toward religious pluralism, in the hopes that our learning might prove illuminative for institutions on a similar trajectory. I begin with two anecdotes.

First: It is August, 2012, and Dr. Eboo Patel, founder and president of Interfaith Youth Core and the first Forum on Faith and Life guest speaker, has just given the keynote at Concordia’s fall convocation. A mother whose daughter is considering a religion major sits in my office and muses, “I don’t get it. Why would a Lutheran Christian school have a Muslim convocation speaker?” Her tone is curious, not confrontational. It’s not the first time this question will be asked, nor will it be the last. I ponder: Are we, as a community, prepared to answer this together in an articulate, thoughtful, informed, and theologically-grounded way?

Second: It is January, 2013, and Concordia is offering for the first time its new course on interfaith studies entitled Faith in Dialogue: Interfaith Leadership. My students and I visit various sites of worship and also invite community members from diverse faith traditions to speak to our campus. My friend Fauzia, a member of the local mosque, comes to our class and shares her faith journey. After class, Fauzia comes up to me with tears glistening her eyes and says, “Because I am Muslim and Concordia is Christian, I never believed I would be welcome here. I can’t tell you what today meant to me.” I am left wondering:

Jacqueline Bussie is Director, Forum on Faith and Life and Associate Professor of Religion, Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota. She teaches and publishes in the areas of theology, service-learning, problem of evil studies, Christian ethics, interfaith cooperation, and faith and public life. Her second book, *Outlaw Christian: Straight Talk You Never Hear About Faith, Grief, Evil and Hope* is forthcoming.

How can our college be more intentional about articulating what it means to us to be a Christian college in a religiously pluralistic world? How can we expect people to know they belong unless we tell them so?

Strategies for Loyalty and Reverence

Diana Eck, Director of Harvard's Pluralism Project, explains that diversity is a fact, while pluralism—diverse religious folks coming together and cooperating toward a common good—is an achievement (Eck). Concordia College has publicly committed to working toward achieving pluralism. Our engagement with interfaith work is a clear expression of this desire to reimagine what a Lutheran institutional identity might mean in a world where even the once predominantly Lutheran Fargo-Moorhead area now has over 5000 Muslims, numerous synagogues, and thriving Baha'i and Buddhist communities. As a college, we aim to avoid what I identify as the two extreme pitfalls of the institutional identity-crisis continuum. At one extreme, we are

"Our engagement with interfaith work is a clear expression of this desire to reimagine what a Lutheran institutional identity might mean in a world where even the once predominantly Lutheran Fargo-Moorhead area now has over 5000 Muslims, numerous synagogues, and thriving Baha'i and Buddhist communities."

not interested in eschewing who we are, as if heritage and rootedness is a source of shame ("We were once a Lutheran school, but that doesn't mean anything to us now"). At the other extreme, we have no interest in defining our identity in negative or exclusivist terms—in defining ourselves by who we are not or by who is not welcome or included ("We are not a college that hires only Lutheran faculty, teaches exclusively Lutheran students, or seeks to convert all students to Lutheranism"). Who then are we?

Interfaith activist Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once pithily explained that the challenge we face in a pluralist

society is how to simultaneously sustain loyalty to our own religious tradition with a deep reverence for other people's religious traditions. Fortunately, Lutherans are adept at what I call "simul" or both/and thinking. It was Martin Luther who paved the path to resist the either/or mold with his designation of human beings as *simul justus et peccator* (simultaneously righteous and sinner). What specific steps, then, can a Lutheran institution take in order to lay the tracks toward pluralism's *simul* challenge of loyalty and reverence? Three concrete strategies have greatly helped Concordia College and might prove useful to other institutions.

Assess the Campus Climate

First, we forged a productive partnership with Interfaith Youth Core, which recommended we perform an initial baseline assessment of our campus religious climate. As one of 25 schools participating in the Campus Religious and Spiritual Climate Survey national pilot, Concordia discovered numerous unknown strengths as well as areas for growth. We discovered to our delight, for example, that our students place an incredibly high value on learning about diverse religious traditions, with 99 percent of students reporting a medium-to-high pluralism orientation. But we also discovered that not all of our students saw our campus climate as hospitable, with 38 percent of secular and non-religious students reporting that they felt coercion or a lack of acceptance toward their beliefs. This latter data point helped our school establish its first-ever secular student organization, an organization that had always been denied official recognition in the past because it was understood to be at odds with our school's Lutheran identity. Lessons learned? *Don't fear assessment*. Courageous assessment is essential to the reformation tradition of *semper reformanda*, which Martin Luther helped to establish in the sixteenth century. We cannot know what areas in our community life might be in need of reform until we intentionally ask our community members this question. Assessment is akin to using a GPS. As any GPS user knows, heading anywhere new requires an accurate understanding of where we now stand.

Invite Many to Participate

Second, Concordia established an Interfaith Scholars program and a President's Interfaith Advisory Council. The Interfaith Scholars are students who receive a fellowship to serve as liaisons between Fargo-Moorhead's religious communities and the college and engage in interfaith studies research. Concordia's Interfaith Scholars have presented their scholarship at national venues including the National Council on Undergraduate Research. The 22 member President's Interfaith Advisory Council (PIAC) includes interdisciplinary faculty, staff, students, and administrators from across the institution who serve as an advisory board to the president and campus on all matters related to interfaith engagement. One faculty member said he would love to be on the council, but then confessed, "I'm an atheist, so I don't think you want me." I replied, "That's exactly why you need to be on it. Your voice needs to be heard." One of our advancement officers on PIAC became such an articulate advocate for interfaith work that she brought in the college's first gift earmarked for the Interfaith Scholars program. She confided that Concordia's journey toward pluralism allowed her to build relationships with alumni who felt alienated by a narrower understanding of our Lutheran heritage. Additionally, several members of PIAC were recently awarded a competitive grant from the Teagle Foundation to establish an interdisciplinary interfaith studies minor. Lessons learned? *Be intentional about engaging members from all sectors of your community in religious pluralism conversations and efforts.* Many old wounds might be healed and resources unearthed by an explicit invitation to belonging.

Message the Reasons Why

A third and extraordinarily constructive step taken on our journey toward pluralism was the articulation of a succinct thoughtful answer to the question raised in the above anecdotes—"Why does a Lutheran college commit itself to interfaith cooperation, dialogue, and service?" At Concordia, we knew our Better Together Interfaith Alliance students were doing amazing interfaith service projects and winning national awards; we knew our president listed interfaith engagement as a priority in the 5-year strategic plan; we knew that our Office of Ministry had an innovative

and well-attended Interfaith Harmony week. We knew that these values and activities somehow expressed who Concordia is in the twenty-first century, but we still had not, in unison and in relation to our mission and Lutheran tradition, answered the simple question of the inquisitive parent in my office: *Why?*

"Consistent messaging really matters, because if you do not know as a community who you are and articulate why you do the things you do, tragic misperceptions fill the gaps."

While some of us across campus had our own individual answers to this query, any business major could easily have diagnosed our woeful lack of consistent messaging. And while some academics—including myself at times—may frown on "messaging" as the for-profit concern of corporations and not colleges, my conversation with Fauzia taught me that consistent messaging really matters, because if you do not know as a community who you are and articulate why you do the things you do, tragic misperceptions fill the gaps the same way that weeds grow in your lawn precisely in those empty spaces where you fail to sufficiently water or feed the grass. This is especially true in the dichotomous, polarized, us-vs.-them culture of our day, in which it is virtually assumed that identity is a polarizing and exclusivist force.

In 1991 in a social statement on ecumenism, the ELCA intentionally disallowed polarization by explicitly stating its relationship to other Christian traditions in this manner: "It is a communion where diversities contribute to fullness and are no longer barriers to unity...The diversities are reconciled and transformed into a legitimate and indispensable multiformity within the one body" (ELCA 4) While the ELCA does not yet have a social statement on interfaith relations, I believe that a key principle—reconciled diversity—can be extracted from this statement on intra-faith relations and applied to interfaith relationships. When I once asked ELCA former Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson about the ELCA's relationship to interfaith work, he eloquently responded, "We are called to be stewards of unity within diversity in a

culture which confuses unity with uniformity” (Hanson). How shall we respond to diversity? The ELCA’s answer strikes a chord similar to Eck’s: Embrace, not erase, diversity; seek reconciliation in diversity’s midst.

Because Lutheran, Interfaith

In keeping with these principles, last year Concordia’s PIAC decided to construct an official college statement on interfaith engagement and pluralism. After all the word-smithing, focus groups, and countless meetings, the end result was a sentence we cherish for its connections both to our specific college mission and to the ELCA’s values:

Concordia College practices interfaith cooperation because of its Lutheran dedication to prepare thoughtful and informed global citizens who foster wholeness and hope, build peace through understanding, and serve the world together.

We were delighted to discover not only that any group of people in an academic setting could unanimously agree to a one-sentence answer to any question (miraculous!), but also that the process of creating the statement evoked some fascinating (and long overdue) conversations. None of us will ever forget the meeting wherein an extraordinarily lively yet respectful debate broke out over the subordinate clause, “because of its Lutheran dedication....” Several Christian (Lutheran and other Protestant) members of the group argued for the milder subordinate conjunction “guided by,” but—perhaps contrary to expectations—an atheist student and a Muslim faculty colleague argued adamantly for the unequivocal phrasing “because of.” My Muslim colleague passionately insisted, “I want to know that there will *always* be a place for me here...that I belong here because this

place is Lutheran, not because some folks might possibly be ‘guided’ to create a space for me...or not.” In the end, she persuaded everyone in the room. No one has ever thanked me before or since for facilitating a meeting, but that was a meeting for which people openly expressed gratitude. We all sensed that we were part of a conversation in which who we were was in the process of being revealed to us. Lesson learned? *The process of creating a pluralism statement for your institution is as informative and necessary as the actual statement itself.* Let the process surprise you.

“My Muslim colleague passionately insisted, ‘I want to know that there will always be a place for me here...that I belong here because this place is Lutheran.’”

Although an official statement like this can be seen as mere words, for mission-driven institutions like ours they are a point of departure, a proclamation that what lies behind the words is a community that understands genuine pluralism as an achievement and commits to the hope-driven goal of reconciled diversity. On Concordia’s journey toward pluralism, we have learned that, for institutions as well as individuals, identity results from the wondrous alchemy of continuity and change. Identity and heritage are as much about seeing who we want to become and becoming it, as they are about who we were yesterday. In the words of Eboo Patel, “We need spaces where we can each state that we are proud of where we are from and all point to the place we are going to. I fear the road is long. I rejoice that we travel together” (Patel 182).

Works Cited

Eck, Diana L. “What is Pluralism?” The Pluralsim Project, Harvard University. Accessed 1 August 2014, http://pluralism.org/pluralism/what_is_pluralism

ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). *The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*. Accessed 1 August, 2014, http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/The_Vision_Of_The_ELCA.pdf

Hanson, Mark. “Vocation and Reflection.” Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education Conference. Public Lecture, California Lutheran University, Thousand Oaks, California. March 9, 2012.

Patel, Eboo. *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*. Boston: Beacon, 2007.