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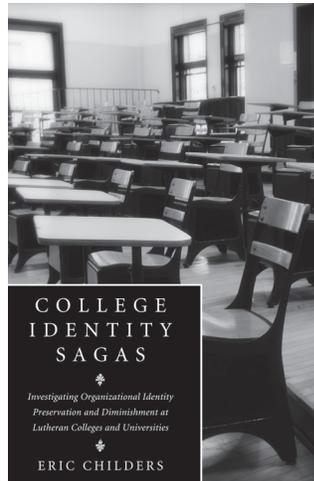
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Types, Methods, and Sagas in Lutheran Higher Education: Learning from Childers

In 1977, the Association of Lutheran College Faculties published *The Church-Related College in an Age of Pluralism: The Quest for a Viable Saga*. The book was the result of a resolution passed at Dana College in 1969 “to formulate a philosophy of Christian higher education” and to identify “key issues for discussion” (Baepler 9). In a series of annual presentations during the early 1970s, Lutheran college faculty in that era reflected on the current state of church-related higher education, offered an extensive bibliographic review of the subject, and sought to articulate for a new time what it meant to be engaged in Christian higher education. “Pluralism” was the resounding theme of the period, and these authors were keen to engage its ethnic, epistemic, religious, and ethical forms.



of an institution is the most important element of a college’s distinctiveness. Too many colleges, argued Clark, lack distinctiveness and a sense of their unique purpose in American society. Their missions are bland; their stories are not compelling; and they look and act like others as a result.

“We are attracted to Mr. Clark’s category of the ‘saga’ for a variety of reasons,” stated the Association’s authors, and then continue:

The concept fits our experience. Those with positive experiences in church-related colleges can recall, in retrospect, being inspired by the story of the college. Those with negative experiences can recall disappointment in the contrast between the saga and reality. Moreover, the concept provides a “handle” for diagnosing the current dilemmas of our institutions. The state of the story of an institution is a barometer of its health. (Baepler 12-13)

The authors cautioned readers against confusing a college’s saga with the lofty goals and fanciful educational philosophies of “catalog prose,” but how the “rhetoric” relates to the “reality” of the college is itself part of the saga that must be studied to grasp the college’s distinctive mission.

Valuing an Institution’s Saga

For the Association, the organizing trope that guided their book was “the saga.” Perhaps it had a natural appeal to Scandinavian Lutherans, but its connection to Biblical narrative was not lost on the authors. Its more immediate debt was to another book that few would recognize today. Burton Clark’s *The Distinctive College: Antioch, Reed, Swarthmore* (1970) argued that the “organization saga”

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Most importantly, the Association's authors learned from Clark that the college saga must be told and retold even as it is lived, reshaped, and grown. This too fit their experience because the Biblical saga was never far from their minds:

The narration of Biblical events is never undertaken for merely historical reasons. The story of the Exodus is retold at a critical time as a way of establishing confidence in a new and radically different future. The God who led the Israelites out of Egypt is leading them still. This theological dimension of saga should especially encourage church-related colleges to view their convictional basis—not as a millstone which binds those institutions to past performance and past possibilities—but rather as a charter which inspires them to think through a creative and courageous relationship to the future. (Baepler 13)

The reference to Exodus is especially interesting because the Association did not see the college's saga as something to slavishly follow and measure disobedience against as much as it is (or should be) the way a college's character and ethos is formed and lived amidst rapid change.

From Sagas to Types and Back Again

This must be the starting point for understanding Eric Childers' *College Identity Sagas: Investigating Organizational Identity Preservation and Diminishment at Lutheran Colleges and Universities* (2012). Based on Childers' doctoral dissertation in higher education at the University of Virginia, the book adopts Clark's concept of the saga to understand three Lutheran institutions: Gettysburg College, Concordia College (Moorhead), and Lenoir-Rhyne University. While Childers seems unfamiliar with the importance of the same idea to the Association of Lutheran College Faculties thirty-five years earlier, he knows Clark well and sees in the institutional sagas of Lutheran colleges an unexplored opportunity.

Childers offers a "thick description" of his three chosen institutions using interviews, documents and observations as his primary resources. The interviews are particularly illuminating because he spoke with presidents at each as well as key faculty and staff leaders, including campus ministers. Two of his important socio-scientific approaches

in this process are isomorphism and critical events theory. Isomorphism holds that organizations facing similar environmental conditions will move towards homogeneity and seek to mimic organizations seen as "leaders" in the field (Childers 16-17). This is why at various times colleges and universities have sought to describe themselves as the "Harvard of the Midwest" or the "Harvard of the South." Critical events theory is just what it sounds like—institutions have "turning points" or important times in the institution's history when identity is reaffirmed or transformed (24). These theoretical approaches also give Childers a way to compare the institutions, and he chose to look at a forty year history for all three. Reflecting on his data collection, Childers concluded "that each school's narrative exhibited striking characteristics of the organizational saga: heroic leaders, villains, institutional struggle, victories and failures, distinctive campus ethics, clear mission and stories of creation, decline and recovery" (47). Each has a distinctive saga that explains the past, shapes the present, and guides the future.

Why these three schools? Childers has a second theoretical foundation that cannot be ignored, and it is decidedly theological. To find the right schools and offer a full range of distinctive Lutheran sagas, Childers turned to Robert Benne's *Quality with Soul: How Six Premier Colleges Keep Faith with their Religious Traditions* (2001)—unquestionably, an essential work in the scholarship on faith-based higher education. While George Marsden's *The Soul of the American University* (1994) and James T. Burtchael's *The Dying of the Light* (1997) focused on colleges that "disengaged" from their ecclesial roots, Benne advanced a different line of inquiry, recognizing six exemplary church-related colleges and universities from several denominations that resisted secularizing trends. Benne asserted that we should see colleges and universities along a "spectrum," ranging from "those with a fairly rich connection to those with virtually none at all who nevertheless persist in claiming one" (x). Seeing things this way would also allow institutions to imagine potential paths for strengthening their faith identity while also recognizing ongoing dangers of secularization.

The result was Benne's "Types of Church-Related Colleges" that named four positions along the spectrum (orthodox, critical-mass, intentionally pluralist, and

accidentally pluralist) with markers that would indicate where a particular college or university might find itself. The markers included the role of chapel in the life of the community, denominational membership requirements for faculty, institutional leaders and trustees, the number and type of religion courses, financial support by the denomination, and the ethos and public rhetoric of the institution

“Some denominational traditions, like Lutherans, may not want to be orthodox because in their theological convictions ‘reason is respected enough that even non-believers can contribute genuinely to the quest for truth.’”

(49). Benne also noted that some denominational traditions, like Lutherans, may not want to be orthodox because in their theological convictions “reason is respected enough that even non-believers can contribute genuinely to the quest for truth” (50). Moreover, for critical mass institutions, the theological paradigm can demand some pluralism to ensure intellectual honesty and to avoid “a coercive smugness that is neither genuine nor strong” (50). In contrast, denominational traditions are “dethroned” at intentionally and accidentally pluralist institutions even though the remaining level of faith-identity will vary with intentionally pluralist still offering some privileged place for the denominational tradition while the accidentally pluralist treats the tradition as just one among many, when it can even be found at all (50-51). The further you go on the spectrum, the more secular an institution becomes.

It is impossible to read Benne’s typology and not seek to place your institution in a category. Few schools fit perfectly into one type or the other, but that is part of the intellectual fun. So, what if you took Benne’s typology and made it into a rubric? You could then assign a score to different colleges and universities and “objectively” assign them a type. This is exactly what Childers does. Specifically, he used six criteria from Benne’s typology: chapel attendance policy, whether the president must be Lutheran, percentage of Lutherans that must be on the

governing board, the percentage of Lutheran faculty, the percentage of Lutheran students, and financial dependence upon the church. My former institution, Wartburg College, earned a 3 for a protected chapel time more than once a week, a 2 for requiring a Lutheran president and 60 percent Lutherans on the governing board, a 3 for having 36.5 percent Lutheran students, a 1 for not tracking the percentage of Lutheran faculty (all schools receive a 1 for that reason), and a 2 for a relatively low dependency upon the church for a total score of 11. This landed Wartburg in the critical mass category.

Studying the scores given in the “Sorting and Analysis Worksheet” of Appendix B, we find that scores ranged from 14 to 5 with Concordia at the top and Gettysburg and Wagner tied at the bottom (215-19). In the final count, ten of the ELCA’s schools made the critical mass list, fourteen were classified as intentionally pluralist, and three were named accidentally pluralist (42). Childers adopted Benne’s theological claim that no Lutheran institution would seek to be orthodox, and the scoring process did not allow for that possibility (43). From the sorting into types, Childers then selected one institution from each category as his sample. This gave him Concordia for critical mass, Lenoir-Rhyne for intentionally pluralist, and Gettysburg for accidentally pluralists.

Three Lutheran Institutional Sagas

As the oldest of the Lutheran institutions, Gettysburg is an obvious choice for almost any study. It suffered under Burtchaeff’s blistering gaze in *The Dying of the Light*, but Childers is more descriptive than judgmental. The Gettysburg saga begins with Samuel Schmucker and a vision for a Lutheran college that was non-sectarian from the start, and this is the founding story that Childers hears repeatedly from his informants. As a result, it is easy for the faculty, staff, and president to describe the college’s Lutheran identity as a “historic relationship” that can only be seen in a few formal rituals (prayer and faculty meetings and official college events) and the presence of a Lutheran campus minister (148). Childers names three “critical events” in the diminishing of Gettysburg’s Lutheran identity: a president with an open hostility to the church, a thrust to be a nationally recognized liberal arts

college, and a decision to form a Center for Public Service and, in so doing, separate the service program from campus ministry. Few if any on campus can articulate what it means to be a Lutheran college and most appear to view it as a curious oddity, but Salvatore Ciolino identified an inescapable fact to Childers: "In an age when church affiliation is not popular, Gettysburg has kept it" (166). It may have been severely neglected but at least it has not been rejected outright.

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Lenoir-Rhyne was the choice for intentionally pluralist, missing the critical mass list because it has chapel only once a week and because its Lutheran enrollment is so low. The college's southern location and the fact that Lutherans are a religious minority in the region are important parts of the saga reported by Childers for Lenoir-Rhyne, and the university fares remarkably well in Childers' analysis with the conclusion that, given the institution's challenges, it has maintained its Lutheran identity. Committed leadership is a critical part of the saga, including presidents, faculty and staff, as well as a commitment by non-Lutherans to support and maintain a Lutheran identity within an ecumenical context. Childers names this later point "the fanning factor." If an institution cannot achieve critical mass of Lutheran faculty and staff, then the school must depend upon strategically placing the few it does have in key positions, attracting others who will support its mission" (127). Professor David Ratke even questions whether simplistic head counting is enough in determining critical mass or whether "intentional institutional dialogue" is more valuable (134).

As the highest ranking critical mass school, the saga of Concordia College in Moorhead tells the story of a mission-focused institution guided by strong leadership. In his interviews, Childers was surprised by the depth of

commitment to the college's mission statement and its impact on the life of the institution, but Concordia has also been guided by strong presidential leadership committed to Lutheran identity. It is that presidential support and vision that led to multiple faculty and staff development programs, including the Dovre Center for Faith and Learning, which keep alive explorations of the mission and its meaning. Paul Dovre served as president of Concordia for over 20 years, and it is impossible to ignore his impact. But even Concordia has changed, and "as Concordia became less sociologically and ethnically Lutheran, the college attempted to become more theologically Lutheran" (89). Dovre has described this as the transition of Lutheran identity from ethos to logos, and it was a commitment shared by former president Pam Jolicoeur as well. Childers concludes that "the Concordia saga is a story of continuity and like-minded administrators" who intentionally and purposefully resisted isomorphism and the potential for secularization that can come with it.

On Studying Stories

With much talk about being both "mission-driven" and "distinctive" in higher education today, a renewed interest in "saga" by church-related colleges makes great sense. It makes sense not only as a socio-scientific method but also as a potential practice for shaping and forming an institution, its faculty and staff, and its students. We need more storytelling, and that storytelling can and must include an institutional account of "critical events," including heroic and failed leaders, resistance and capitulation to homogenization with other educational models, and an account of how the institution has engaged various forms of pluralism. At Mercer, we tell a story of repeatedly resisting the fundamentalist trends of the Georgia Baptist Convention in order to welcome a full diversity of ideas and people, but only a prophetic remnant still try to connect "Mercer's story" to "God's story"—a critical element if the saga is to maintain a faith dimension.

Childers not only reintroduces sagas, he also makes an important contribution in his use of socio-scientific methods to explore mission and identity at faith-based institutions. This is long overdue, and the use of qualitative research and theoretical approaches like isomorphism and critical events theory have much to offer. While

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Childers needed some way to select his schools, the weak link in the study is likely his effort to quantify Benne’s typology to sort the ELCA’s colleges and universities. The project would have still offered great insight if he had picked three schools at random. Childers notes that there are other typologies applicable to Lutheran higher education, including those of Ernest Simmons and Tom Christianson, and doing the qualitative work first may have allowed him to engage multiple typologies later in his assessment of the institutions. However, that may have made the project more theological than intended. At the very least, another talented graduate student in higher education might turn to a different framework as a way to begin a similar project.

What may be the most startling aspect of reading Childers’ study is how fast things are changing in Lutheran higher education. Childers did much of his research using 2005 data, and the transitions since then have been dramatic. Gone is the ELCA Office of Vocation and Education. Gone are the requirements at two of the “critical mass” schools that the president be Lutheran. Gone altogether are Waldorf College (critical mass) and Dana College (intentionally pluralist). Most surprising of all, Lenoir-Rhyne has now “merged” with Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, making the seminary part of the university.

No typology of church-related higher education that I know has a box for “started or acquired a seminary,” and given the recent hardships most Lutheran seminaries have faced, it is hard to imagine a greater act of institutional faith than doing it. With two more points, Lenoir-Rhyne would have reached “critical mass.” Should they have made it? The fundamental problem with a typology is that you have to make things fit even when your subject resists easily classification. One of the strengths of a socio-scientific investigation relying on qualitative methods should be that the types emerge out of the study rather than being imposed from the start.

In addition to the value of sagas, the wisdom of the Association of Lutheran College Facilities back in the 1960s and 1970s was recognizing that church-related higher education was in a period of rapid change. We would do well to make that wisdom our own. While some change is to be welcomed and some to be resisted, we would also be wise to follow their lead and approach both with a spirit of hope, for it is only hope that makes a faith-based saga truly viable.

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