

2011

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Dovre, Paul J. (2011) "A Lutheran Learning Paradigm," *Intersections*: Vol. 2011: No. 34, Article 4.

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PAUL J. DOVRE

A Lutheran Learning Paradigm¹

*This essay identifies some of the distinctive resources of the Lutheran tradition and the ways in which they inform the learning paradigm of Lutheran colleges. This project is prompted by the recent renewal of interest in such matters among Christian colleges in general and Lutheran colleges in particular. For a variety of reasons, many Lutheran colleges are seeking to recover and extend the distinguishing elements of their religious tradition and identity. In most cases, the faculties are religiously diverse and most, including the Lutherans among them, lack an awareness and understanding of the distinctive elements of the Lutheran tradition. This essay is also motivated by the work of others, especially the volume edited by Richard T. Hughes and William B. Adrian, *Models of Christian Higher Education*.*

The distinctive connections between particular religious traditions and their learning paradigms are evident from a cursory survey: While Roman Catholic colleges vary from one order to another, they maintain a relatively consistent focus on the social teachings of the church as well as the work of the great philosophers and theologians. In addition, one notes the Thomist and neo-Thomist traditions of the Jesuits and the focus on hospitality and service among the Benedictines. The Mennonite schools have a particular focus on the application of Christian ethics and social justice teachings in domestic and international venues of service. There is the rigorous Kuyperian tradition among Dutch Reformed schools with their emphasis on the formulation of a Christian worldview, discipline by discipline, leading to a true integration of faith and learning.

Hughes and Adrian's book (*Models of Christian Higher Education*) was published in 1997. The editors and other contributors characterized, and distinguished among, various learning models (or paradigms) in religious higher education. They noted that Lutherans, out of their culture affirming, two kingdoms dialectical construct, typically seek to establish a dialogue between

the Christian vision and the world. Out of their sacramental tradition, Roman Catholic schools seek to bring the presence of Christ into a world in need. On the other hand, out of their convictions about the sovereignty of God, schools in the Reformed tradition seek to approach every discipline from a distinctive Christian perspective. In cryptic expression, schools in the Reformed tradition seek to transform learning by bringing it under the sovereignty of God, Lutherans seek an engagement between faith and learning, and Roman Catholic institutions seek to integrate a Christian vision into the life of the academy. Spurred by the work of Hughes, Adrian, and others, I think it is useful to explore in more detail the resources inherent in the Lutheran tradition and the ways in which they might conceivably shape the learning paradigm—that is, both the program of learning and its execution.

Five Contemporary Resources

The work of others shapes this paper in a number of ways. In addition to the works of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions, I have been informed most recently by the work of five contemporary scholars. They are Ernest Simmons, Darrell Jodock,

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Tom Christenson, Robert Benne, and Richard Hughes. In his text designed to introduce faculty to the Lutheran tradition in higher education, Simmons sketches out the history of Lutheran higher education and mines the theological lode of Lutheranism. He identifies the doctrines of justification and the incarnation as formative as well as the Lutheran distinction between law and gospel and the Lutheran teachings on vocation. He describes the Lutheran notion that we are simultaneously saint and sinner, unable to escape human temptation yet capable of righteous acts. He cites the work of K. Glen Johnson describing the Lutheran penchant for paradox and the “tension-filled distinctions such as law and gospel, faith and works, saint and sinner, finite versus infinite, reason and faith.”

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divine guidance.”

Simmons gives extensive treatment to the notion of vocation as does his friend and colleague, Darrell Jodock. Jodock has written frequently and lectured widely on Lutheran higher education. He places vocation in a Lutheran context and sees it as a response to the grace of God that is lived out in service to our neighbor and the world and for the sake of the common good. Vocation is lived out in the home, church, career, and community and it is inclusive of all honorable callings, both secular and sacred. Drawing on the Lutheran understanding of human nature, living out one’s vocation involves struggle, ambiguity, and change. For that reason among others, we live out our vocation with others, that is, in community where together we test ideas, share wisdom, and seek divine guidance. As Jodock and other writers note, Lutherans stand in a tradition of encouraging diligent study in preparation for the living out of vocation in the world. With the encouragement and assistance of the Lilly Endowment, vocation has become a widely employed tool for centering and focusing Christian higher education.

In his well read book, *Quality with Soul*, Robert Benne identifies three defining themes in the Lutheran theological tradition including a strong emphasis on the confessions and confessionally trained pastors, the emphasis on calling or vocation, and the affirmation of “human reason as a guide to earthly, civil life.” For Benne, the Christian account of reality should give vision, direction, and content to the academic enterprise of a Christian college

in intentional, self-conscious ways. It should be embedded in the faculty and staff, in the course of study, and in the ethos of the community. Benne’s assessment of St. Olaf College and Valparaiso University illustrate the dynamics of his template.

A fourth contemporary resource is Tom Christenson and his *The Gift and Promise of Lutheran Higher Education*. In this book Christenson takes into account the significant changes in the Christian academy and seeks to tell the Lutheran story using both new and familiar categories of thought. He is committed to the Lutheran idea of vocation as an organizing principal. He identifies eight theological theses inherent in the Lutheran tradition with fresh language and engaging illustrations. One of the other unique contributions of his book is his discussion of the constituents and dynamics of a Lutheran epistemology. He goes on to identify some of the implications of the Lutheran gift in the formation of the curriculum and its pedagogy.

Especially interesting is the work of Richard Hughes. What makes it interesting is both his perspective as an outsider from the Lutheran tradition and his assessment of both the strengths and weaknesses of our theological resources. He identifies our key resources as Luther’s insistence on human finitude, the sovereignty of God, and the notion of paradox that is embedded in Luther’s theology of the cross and is expressed in his notion of the two kingdoms. Hughes has great confidence in this tradition to keep questions alive, to live with complexity, to avoid the dogmatic, and to deal with the limits to human understanding gracefully. He also warns of the temptation of paradox thinking to fall off one side or another of the paradox or, alternately, to surrender to a relativism.

To conclude this survey, I note again that my task is to draw on these several insights about the Lutheran tradition in sketching a Lutheran learning paradigm and its implications for both the content and pedagogy of the curriculum. To be sure, while this is the sort of thing that people in, for example, the Dutch Reformed tradition do with discipline and regularity, it is not the sort of thing Lutherans have done for a variety of reasons. So in providing this sketch I mean to be helpful by providing a template and not a formula, a list of possibilities and not a fixed plan. I do so knowing that Lutheran college faculties will, in any case, make their own best judgment on these matters.

Four Deep Narratives

So to the task at hand: I submit that the Lutheran tradition is shaped by four narratives: the *biblical*, the *confessional*, the *theological*, and the *vocational*.

Luther was an Old Testament scholar and the biblical story was the bedrock of his preaching, teaching, and leadership. Most of his published work was about Biblical resources. He came at his

theology, never systematized, out of his biblical work for the most part. For Luther, “Word alone, grace alone, faith alone” starts there.

The Lutheran *confessional* narrative was shaped by many church leaders over the centuries. It includes the classical creeds of the church including the Apostles, the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creeds, as well as the Augsburg Confession. Each was an attempt to express biblical truths in relationship to the believer and the world. These confessions provide Christians with a paradigm for understanding themselves in relationship to God and the world. Inspired by God’s spirit and created by God’s people, they are subject to interpretation and reconsideration from age to age. But over the centuries they have proven durable and useful guides to the Christian life.

Lutherans do not claim a unique *theological* system but they do affirm the importance of the human quest to understand the implications of God’s revelation for the lives of God’s people in the world. Lutherans have sought out and affirmed theological work from many traditions. With strong grounding in the scholastic, pietistic, and critical traditions, Lutherans have been in the first rank of the world’s theologians. Lutherans bring to the ecumenical theological conversation certain distinctive motifs including most notably the two kingdoms, the priesthood of all believers, original sin, the theology of the cross, *simul justis et peccator*, the incarnation, and its teaching on justification. Imbedded in the Lutheran theological tradition are some pedagogical proclivities including the dialectic, the paradoxical, the commitment to moral deliberation, and freedom of inquiry. As exemplified by Luther’s theology of the cross, “there is a persistent warning...to avoid the facile, the simplistic—to offer easy religious answers to human questions” (Hall).

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The *vocational* narrative is also distinctive in the Lutheran tradition. Luther’s passion for the priesthood of all believers, his commitment to love the neighbor, and his sense that all areas of life are avenues for the expression of our love for God constitute substantive elements of the Lutheran vocational narrative. For Luther, vocation was not to be equated with a career or a job or the calling to a holy order. Rather, our vocation comes to us in

baptism and is lived out in joyful response to God’s gift of love. God frees us to love our neighbor and promote the common good in all of our places of responsibility in daily life—home, congregation, work place, neighborhood, nation, and global society. For Lutherans, vocation is where God’s gift and call come together in the concreteness, the humus, of life. In this context, the purpose of Lutheran higher education is to prepare students for vocation, with all that implies.

So if these are the key narratives, what might a Lutheran learning paradigm look like and what would be its implications for curricula and the pedagogical design of academic programs in Lutheran colleges?

Toward a Paradigm of Lutheran Learning

First of all, the aim of a Lutheran paradigm of learning is the engagement of faith and the secular disciplines. Consistent with its two kingdoms framework and its respect for the secular disciplines of the academy, Lutherans seek to discover what the propositions of faith have to contribute to secular disciplines and vice versa. Since God is a transcendent reality, knowledge of the faith and knowledge of the world is all from God and all about God.

Now in light of the goal and nature of the learning paradigm, what about the curriculum? In view of the centrality of the biblical narrative, the study of sacred scriptures will be *de rigor* in the curriculum. The objective here is both knowledge of the story and knowing how to read it for oneself. This kind of knowledge will be of value to all persons, Christian and other, since it is a cultural and world shaping literature. Given the dismal state of biblical literacy in a world of many faiths and cultures, one could give special priority to this matter in the modern age, especially at Lutheran places.

Studies in theology will be another explicit element in the curriculum. These courses will set up and address both the big issues of meaning and the ordinary issues of living. The study of theology comes in many forms from history to systematic theology to confessional theology to ethics. What used to be thought of as the sole province of professional theologians is now claimed by practitioners in a variety of academic disciplines (e.g. ethics and business, ethics and science, ethics and communication, etc) for the Word has something to do with everything and everyone and theologians are not the only players in this arena. However, at Lutheran schools it would be most desirable to see theologians involved as partners in the “and” curricula.

It is anticipated that the Lutheran confessional narrative may be nested in both the study of scripture and the study of theology. The confessions provide evidence of the way in which human beings have come to understand the truths of the

scripture and the continuing revelation of God. They answer the perennial Lutheran question, “what does this mean?” Such questions are especially germane in the lives of the millennial generation that seeks both significance and status.

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The vocational narrative is receiving growing attention in Lutheran and other Christian colleges in America. This development reflects both a response to the initiatives of the Lilly Endowment and the reclaiming of a central theological theme. Not many places will establish courses devoted solely to vocation. Rather, the idea of our calling to vocation underlies the whole academic project at Lutheran places. It becomes foundational for the whole enterprise. But the groundwork, the building blocks, must be established and then reiterated through out the college years. Some schools introduce the idea in the orientation of new students, others include it as an explicit consideration in one or another core courses (sometimes in religion).

Closely related to the unfolding of the Lutheran idea of vocation is the call to serve the neighbor, the common good. Again, in recent years we have seen the advent of service learning in which theory is integrated with practice. In this way, the curriculum and service to the neighbor and the advancement of the common good are of a piece. Lutheran schools are in a unique position in that they may bring to this form of applied learning the rationale of our theological tradition and thus value is added to the experience.

In what ways might the Lutheran tradition inform pedagogical practices? Luther exemplified moral deliberation in his life, ministry, and scholarship. He was especially committed to, and confident in, the moral deliberation of the community. He would say, in effect: “Here is what scripture says and here is the situation we face, so what shall we do?” He felt such deliberation was necessary both because there were not always clear answers in scripture to every situation and because human beings, by nature, distort reality. So he believed deliberation, the give and take of the community, was needed. Luther didn’t always get it right and he knew that but he believed in the power of the Spirit working among the

people of God as they sought practical solutions in both material and churchly matters. He also had confidence that in graciousness, God would forgive the mistakes. All of which suggests that Lutheran places will, explicitly and self consciously, be places of moral deliberation in which faculty serve as models and students are engaged in the discernment of wisdom.

Closely related to moral deliberation is the dialectic. Dialectic, or dialogue, may be a solo activity or a communal activity. We often speak about the dialogue between faith and learning wherein we attempt to discover what the truth of faith has to contribute to our understanding of a body of knowledge and what that body of knowledge can contribute to our understanding of faith. Such conversation is tinged with the realism of ambiguity, of not knowing all there is to know, of sometimes coming out in the wrong place. Thus there is a necessary humility about it. Mistakes in human judgment and the humility those mistakes engender are among the reasons that many Lutherans (and Protestants) have tended toward quietism and retreat in the face of the inscrutable or imponderable or the merely controversial. But that historic fact is not an excuse for inaction. Indeed, Luther was quite aware of these problems and, in spite of them and in view of God’s grace, encouraged his followers to “sin boldly.”

“...the implementation of the tradition must reach to all elements of the curriculum for each provides an opportunity for dialectic, all provide venues for vocational reflection, and many provide challenges in moral discernment.”

This approach I have described necessitates a strong faculty commitment to, and literacy about, the tradition I have described. It also implies that the religion faculty will carry a college wide responsibility for instruction in the Lutheran biblical and theological tradition. While there will be some specific courses dedicated to particular areas of narrative content (e.g. Bible, church history, theology, etc), the implementation of the tradition must reach to all elements of the curriculum for each provides an opportunity for dialectic, all provide venues for vocational reflection, and many provide challenges in moral discernment. Some schools are introducing the underlying learning paradigm of the school in early course work, reinforcing key

ideas strategically throughout the college experience and then seeking a comprehensive integration in the form of a capstone course on the eve of graduation.

In an examination of the resources of various religious traditions, Richard T. Hughes observes that “the Lutheran tradition possesses some of the most potent theological resources for sustaining the life of the mind that one can imagine.” So while the Lutheran tradition, filled with ambiguities and paradox, is a challenging one to grasp and live out in the academy, it is buttressed by an account of reality that is full of hope. It is a tradition that is appropriate to a world that is both wonder-full and broken.

Endnotes

1. This essay was previously published as Chapter 14 in Paul J. Dovre, *The Cross and the Academy*, 170-78. Besides small formatting changes, it is reprinted verbatim here with permission by The Dovre Center for Faith and Learning, Concordia College, Moorehead, MN; Ernie Simmons, Director.

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Endtimes

Dave Hill

There will come a day, a last perfect day
When an unblemished Sun makes the cool Ocean roll,
And the great sea beasts cast their perfect white spray
For the very last time with untroubled soul.

It is our conviction that something remain,
Engendering life when our time has passed:
The Sea, the Life-Giver, the clouds and the rain,
Making forms ever new and the drama recast.

For each frail mortal and each questing mind
Stands to the Ocean as foam to the wave.
Before it is scattered, it longs that it find
The pulse of the Deep at the edge of the grave.

When the Sun shall expand, and the great Ocean dies,
When the blues become black and greens become red,
Let it die full of Life! Let its murmurs and sighs
Give the drama a meaning. Let it not, Lord, die dead.

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