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MARK WILHELM

Even Lutheranism Can Be Cool Now: Changes in Religion and American Culture

How many among you applied to four or more colleges?

Applying to multiple colleges became a standard practice by the 1990s. When I was a teenager in the late 60s, most college applicants applied to one or two colleges (as did I) because prospective students did not shop for a college or—to put it more positively—did not have a large universe of colleges open to them. Prospective students for the most part applied to “their” colleges, that is, the school or schools their community expected them to attend.

Although seemingly unrelated to a shift in the role of religion in American culture, this change in college application practices is in fact an example of one of the chief markers of the changing role of religion in the United States: the proliferation of religious options and an openness to consider those options.

When Wartburg College was organized, when Harvard College was organized, when nearly all colleges in the United States were organized, most were either formally or informally organized to benefit a particular religious group. (In the case of Wartburg: German Lutherans.) Even most publically sponsored institutions of higher education were organized or at least functioned to benefit middle class Protestants of what came to be called the Protestant establishment. At one time much of so-called secular higher education in the United States served as an extension of public primary and secondary schools, as part of the *de facto* parochial school system for Protestants.

Now it is important to note that nearly all colleges were always technically open to all people, but it is also clear that schools served certain religiously defined constituencies. It was the rare

person who was brave enough to attempt to cross the barrier and attend a college outside of his or her tradition. A person did not apply to many schools. You went where you belonged, as I did in 1969. Doing so was part of the practice of religion and the way religion and education inter-related. Colleges functioned in culturally accepted, religiously defined patterns. They served their own and people kept to their own. Once upon a time in America, religion functioned in a closed and parochial way. And higher education, which had its origins in American religious practices, operated in a closed, parochial way.

All of this has changed in the last few decades, with religion and religious institutions functioning in a much more open and ecumenical way, and the change therefore came to higher education as well. The pace of this change has picked-up radically during your lifetime.

A number of factors have converged in recent decades to proliferate religious options and generate an openness among people—no matter what their background—to consider those options, including the option of considering a college not from your religious background. The fact that most of you applied to many schools instead of restricting yourself to a school that was the school for your religious group or heritage—and the fact that the religious background of a school (including Wartburg’s) may in-and-of-itself have played little or no role in your decision to apply to those schools—is a marker of a huge and significant shift in religion in American culture.

But I’m getting ahead of myself.

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I do first want to thank you for welcoming me to visit Wartburg and share some reflections about recent changes in religion and American culture. It's one of my favorite topics: I love to think about this theme. (Yes, I'm certifiably weird; I can put you in touch with both of my sons who will verify its truth!) But seriously, this is important stuff because religion plays an important role in American society. If you are going to be an educated person who understands and contributes to American society, you need to know about and understand the public role of religion in American culture, both for those of you who practice and those who do not practice religion personally. Religion remains a culturally significant force in America because religion provides the conscience for America and at its best provides the platform and opportunities for public debate and moral deliberation.

So it's great to spend a bit of the morning with you, thinking about changes in this culturally significant reality. Our time together is sponsored by the Faith Task Force, and my understanding is that you are being asked to assess the implications of my talk for the role of religion at Wartburg. That is, you are to try to derive from my discussion of changes in religion and American culture the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that the points I'm about to make imply for Wartburg. Let me apologize in advance for probably not making your job an easy one because you will have to do the analysis on your own—no clues will be offered.

But to help you out a little, let me tell you that I will focus on two themes in my presentation this morning. First, I will talk about two major changes in the role of religion in American culture. Then, I will mention a few implications of these two points for the ongoing public role played by religion in the United States.

Two Major Changes

Here are the two major changes I want to discuss. The first is a change in the rhetoric about religion, that is, a change in how we talk in a culturally significant way about religion. American Christians have always honored the individual, but our rhetoric—the way we talk about religion—has always emphasized the communal and institutional nature of religion. We talk about congregations and their roles in communities. But in recent decades Americans have increasingly adopted a rhetoric of individualism in talking about religion, in which organized and institutional religion has no part. The second change I will discuss is a substantive change in the practices of religion that I started to talk about earlier, namely, the proliferation of religious options and an openness by Americans to consider those options. But first, the rhetoric.

In recent decades, we have seen a turn toward favoring the individual over the collective in American culture. Labor unions have fallen into disfavor and government is described as a problem not a solution. A few years ago, the Bush administration wrongly believed that a commitment to individualism was currently so dominant that it could successfully implement a plan to privatize Social Security, that quintessential symbol and practice of collective action for the common good. The plan to privatize Social Security failed and in the wake of hurricane Katrina, the Enron debacle, and now the meltdown of the retail mortgage industry and our financial markets, the nation shows signs of moving toward an affirmation of the importance of collective action be it through a restored FEMA or a renewal of banking and financial industry regulation.

“The first is a change in the rhetoric about religion.”

This turn toward the individual is not unusual in America. We tend to go through cycles of emphasizing the individual instead of the collective in American life. And as just mentioned, we now seem to be experiencing a return to the collective (such as a renewed emphasis on banking regulation) because of the excesses created by an over-emphasis on “everyone for themselves.” But the tide seems to have turned more permanently to the individual in religious rhetoric. Individualism has grown into a dominant rhetoric in recent decades, and to many it feels as if we have largely lost the capacity to describe religion as a communal, public practice. The emblematic slogan “spiritual but not religious” exemplifies this change in popular rhetoric about religion. To adopt this expression is to adopt the turn from the collective to the individual in religious rhetoric. Spirituality labels faith that is individual, not collective, freed from religion with its communal or group or institutional commitments. By rhetorically emphasizing the individual in religion, we downplay the importance of the communal aspect of religion, even if we still belong to a congregation or practice other communal aspect of religion. Our rhetoric says that all of that is extra and not of central importance. This is the dangerous outcome of a rhetorical privileging of the individual in religion. The rhetoric can keep us from finding the right interplay between our religious life as both individual and communal.

The most famous example of the turn toward religious individualism expressed as “being spiritual but not religious” comes

from a time before this rhetoric became widespread. In the course of a large research project in the 1970s led by the sociologist Robert Bellah, a woman was interviewed who described her religious practice as extremely individualistic. Bellah wrote:

One person we interviewed has actually named her religion (she calls it her faith) after herself....Sheila Larson is a young nurse who has received a good deal of therapy and who describes her faith as "Sheilaism." "I believe in god. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. (But) My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice." (221)

The publication of Sheila's story marked the shift a generation ago toward individualism in American religious rhetoric that has now become dominant.

It is important to note that American religion has always honored the individual. Every person—the importance of the individual—has always mattered in the United States, including in our religious practices. It is also true that, from the beginning of our nation, religious leaders have worried that the rights of the individual would win out over the common good. As early as the colonial period, Jonathan Edwards (he was a prominent eighteenth-century minister; you may know about him from reading his "Sinner in the Hands of an Angry God" in a high school American literature class) complained that the new Americans in his settlement in Massachusetts showed no respect for their communal religious commitments. He couldn't get his young adults to conform to the rules of their New England town and congregation.

But even though individualism and personal freedom have always played a central role in American culture and religion and still do, our public and common rhetoric about religion—the words we use—have always equally emphasized the collective and communal aspects of religion and religious practice. Americans have never privileged individualism with our language, our rhetoric until recently. The emphasis on and debate about individualism is nothing new in American religion, but the dominance of rhetoric about individualism *is* new.

Individualism matters in religion as well as other aspects of life, but our individualism is for the sake of the group, the community. It is through groups and the common good that our individual good is sustained and our individual freedom finds meaning and fulfillment.

Nonetheless, at this point in our history, the way we talk about religion in the United States—our religious rhetoric—is more strongly shaped by individualism than in previous times. Our public rhetoric about the proper role of religion in

American culture is skewed toward individualism, and this compromises our capacity to function at our best as a society. More about that later.

Let's move to the second of the major changes: proliferation of options in religion and an openness to consider these options.

I will mention four of the many factors that have conspired to create this change: 1) democratization of authority; 2) the simultaneous ending and beginning of ethnicity; 3) the success of ecumenism; and 4) the information revolution.

Democratization of authority

By "democratization of authority," I mean that we have entered a time when typically "everyone has a say" in organizations, including religious organizations.

Here's an example. In the 1990s, I interviewed political, business, and community leaders in Atlanta to learn their opinions about the role of religious leaders in public life. My interviewees agreed that religious leaders were largely absent from public life, to the detriment of Atlanta and that region of the country.

"Second of the major changes: Proliferation of options."

Almost to a person, however, they also agreed that they could easily excuse religious leaders from sharing the task of public, community leadership. Why? Their answer was the democratization of authority. These business executives, university presidents, and politicians believed that most congregations no longer gave their pastors the authority to lead. Authority was now equally shared by all members, which required pastors to spend all their time sustaining consensus and seeking permissions, leaving no time for work outside the congregation in public matters.

One implication of the democratization of authority is that we all believe we can explore and decide things for ourselves without reference to another authority, without checking in with anyone to find out if our decisions complement or complicate the collective life of our community. For better or worse, the change in our exercise of authority means more people can claim the authority to explore more options, including more options in the practice of religion. The democratization of authority is the foundation upon which rests the proliferation of options in religion we have experienced and a willingness among Americans to consider those options.

The end and beginning of ethnicity

In recent decades, we have experienced huge demographic shifts that reflect both the ending and beginning of ethnicity in America.

Changed realities in the communities related to Wartburg College are a good example of what I mean by the “ending of ethnicity.” Until recent decades, German ethnicity and religion, especially for German Lutherans, still defined people in this part of the country. They were Germans, not mainstream Americans, and places like Wartburg College were created as ethnic institutions, separated from the American mainstream. The same was true for other Lutheran communities of German American heritage and Americans who had emigrated from Scandinavian countries.

But this is no more. Americans of German and Scandinavian background have fully entered American life. Among the chief evidences:

- The nation has become the neighborhood. German and Scandinavian Americans once “stuck to their own,” living in separate communities and building their own institutions. But persons of German and Scandinavian background now feel at home living anywhere in the nation and are at home in all American institutions.
- These persons have a low birthrate like mainstream America. It was once commonplace for Lutheran households to be composed of four or more children. Now Lutheran households have the typical, American mainstream two or fewer children.
- Because the nation is our neighborhood, the Lutheran community has joined mainstream America in a process of regionalizing our population, and the parallel de-populating of certain areas.

All of these factors have an impact on our lives, and especially our institutions. (For example, with the Lutheran birthrate collapsing, is it surprising that there are fewer children in Lutheran Sunday schools or fewer Lutheran young persons enrolled at Lutheran colleges?) The significance of these factors for this presentation, however, is that they are marks of the “end of ethnicity” for the German (and Scandinavian) American communities. These communities, of which Wartburg is a part, are now fully engaged with mainstream American culture and with that, they have engaged many more options in life, including educational options (exemplified by Lutheran kids applying to many colleges, not just “their own”).

The flip side of this is the rise of a new ethnicity in America, brought about by a new wave of immigration. Since 1965, when the United States re-opened its doors to new immigrants from the entire globe (after largely closing them in the 1920s), American has experienced a new diversity owing to large

populations from backgrounds outside of Europe. This new ethnicity creates many tension. Most prominent are the tensions over undocumented immigrants. Nonetheless, from restaurant offerings to the experience of formerly exotic religions now just around the corner, many native born Americans are engaging and are increasingly open to considering new options. Owing to the new ethnicity, Americans are open to engaging other cultures and religions in a way inconceivable just a few decades ago.

Success of ecumenism

In early 1960s, my parents refused to allow my older brother to date Patty Wilson. Why? She was Roman Catholic. Since dating could possibly lead to a long-term relationship and marriage, their dating relationship had to be stopped before “things became serious.” It was self-evident to my parents that a “mixed marriage” of a Roman Catholic and a Lutheran would only lead to divisiveness and heart-ache, because the religious practices were incompatible.

From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, this viewpoint is hard to understand. It is hard to understand in part because of the most successful movement within Christianity during the twentieth century—ecumenism. The ecumenical movement sought to convince Christians in all the churches that more united them than divided them. And although many leaders of that movement bemoan their failure to institutionally unify the Christian community into a single church, the popular success of the ecumenical movement is undeniable. Today nearly all Christians in the United States assume that the differences among the churches are practical difference, not substantive, and that Christians do in fact, share a common religion whatever their denominational tradition. There are many implications of this change, but for our purpose I want to point out that the success of ecumenism is another factor that has opened up more options in our lives, as persons feel free to explore Christian traditions outside their own, including doing so by dating a person from another tradition, like my brother could not. We have more options today in the religious marketplace, and we are more willing to engage them, because of the ecumenical movement’s success.

The information revolution

We all know that we have moved into a culture of 24/7 communication and mass access to information. Librarians (now “information specialists”) no longer know what a library collection should purchase because the explosion of available information has shattered traditional standards. Faculty in colleges often find it hard to keep up with publications in their area of expertise because of the breadth of information being produced. The democratization of authority I discussed earlier has become

more of a reality because easy access to information by googling any topic allow everyone, including students, to learn without depending upon an expert to provide the information. At Wartburg and in the rest of higher education, colleges and universities are becoming places where faculty and students explore subjects together in our curricula, with faculty acting more as guides and coaches than dispensers of information.

As with the other themes I have presented, the information revolution holds many implications for our lives, but today my concern is to highlight that this change is another source of the expansion of options in our lives.

Implications for Our Life Together

Having said all of this, what are the implications of these two major changes—the rise of a rhetorical emphasis on individualism and the expansion of opportunity—for religion and American culture.

First, despite my comments, it would be wrong to overstate any of the changes. As an example of this point, let me share a quote from a book I read not long ago that discussed the explosion of information:

Books have become so numerous, and the announcement of a new publication an event so common, that unless an author can promise something entirely new, either in the matter of his publication, or in its arrangement, he is considered as making an unreasonable demand on the public if he expect his book to be read. (Hopkins 5)

The information explosion makes people feel this way. As I said a earlier in this talk, libraries hardly know what they should catalogue and the internet has aggressively expanded our access to information. But the quote I just read is the opening line in the author's preface for Josiah Hopkins' *The Christian Instructor* published in 1825. My point is that every generation feels overwhelmed by information. Ours is truly a revolution in the availability of information and for the first time in history, the management and conveying of information is a primary vehicle for running our economy, but the basic issue is nothing new. As we reflect on these changes, we cannot overemphasize their significance. They are important factors in thinking about religion and American culture, but there is more continuity than change in the relationship of religion and culture in the United States.

Second, the rise of the rhetoric of individualism challenges but has not yet signaled the demise of religion as a public reality. Americans have always debated the best relationship between individual choice in religion and the public nature of religion. And the rise of the rhetoric of individualism has made this debate even more complex. But agreement remains in America that when

we say religion is a private matter of individual choice, we mean that religion is not governmental. It is not public in that sense. It is part of "the private sectors" of our society. Nonetheless these so-called private sectors have very public functions, and religion and religious institutions still play a very important public role in American culture. You saw this most recently when Wartburg and Lutheran-related social service agencies led the effort to address the flooding this year. Individualism matters—the freedom and glory of each person is recognized and valued in America, including in American religion. But our individualism is for the sake of the community. It is through our individual participation in the common good that our individual good is sustained, our individual freedom finds meaning and fulfillment, and our lives as religious people flourish.

The wisest relationship between individualism and community in religious practice is not found by claiming one or the other (the individual or the community) is more important. The wisest relationship is found by thinking of you and your community as being in constant dialogue, with each "side of the equation" holding each other responsible for good work. (Scholars call this reality "dialectic.") The rise of a rhetoric of individualism could result in privileging individualism to the point that Americans will lose their commitment to the communal and public reality of religion. That has not yet happened. Until now, the rise of the rhetoric of individualism has provided the opportunity to justify a greater openness of options, without denying the public, communal side of religious reality. This generation needs to work to ensure that the rhetoric of religious individualism does not degenerate into the demise of religion and a public reality.

Third, engaging these changes is not easy. As options expand through encountering new and different religions, new and different cultures, the conventional and "easy" answers to religion that were created when Lutherans were part of a homogenous and closed ethnic community will not work any more. For example, it was always easy to oppose the ordination of women as pastors when our religious communities were closed and we only talked to ourselves. But when a community is opened to a new context in which women do serve as clergy, and the opposition now is to Pastor Laura, not to women in the ministry in general, the opposition is much more difficult to sustain. The easy answers or beliefs about others, such as Christians of other traditions and persons who practice other religions, cannot be simply invoked now that our "world" is truly the world, not just our parochial communities. The changes in religion and American culture will require thought, patience and hard work.

Fourth, to help ensure that religion does not degenerate into crass individualism, creating a culture that assigns no public role

to religion, educational institutions in the United States should take steps to reinforce the public reality of religion. The rise of the rhetoric of religious individualism could lead to a retreat from the belief that religion counts for our common life. The rhetoric of individualism already makes it difficult to talk about religion having a public role, and this difficulty is further exacerbated as we focus on religion as an individual reality, losing public knowledge about religion and getting out of practice of publicly discussing religion and public life.

Higher education should, therefore, support Stephen Prothero's proposal for a core religious literacy requirement in higher education. In his book, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't*. He writes, "My goal is to help citizens participate fully in social, political, and economic life in a nation and a world in which religion counts." (15)

Core literacy in religion for Prothero is a civic need, not a religious or ethical one. He is not interested in promoting religious belief and practice. Since I believe he attends a Lutheran church in the Boston area, I suspect he is not opposed to higher education helping students think about the actual practice of religion. But the central point of his book, and my recommendation to you, is that at a minimum, higher education should ensure all students have a minimum knowledge of religion because it is an important public reality. Lutheran-related higher education should insist that, despite the rhetoric of religious individualism, one cannot be an educated person unless basic knowledge of religion is part of who you are.

Fifth, in the wake of the new diversity of options in religion, it is also time to reclaim the wisdom and value in our respective religious traditions. For Wartburg, this means that it will best fulfill its educational mission if it publicly emphasizes its own religious heritage as a platform from which to host reflection upon and study of many religions. An institution convenes a conversations about religious options and diversity best by taking a position in the conversation, not by being an uninterested, independent broker. When I was a student at St. Olaf College, there were voices urging the college to abandon its stance as a Lutheran institution in favor of taking a disinterested position toward religion, in the name of serving better the growing array of religions represented by persons on campus. Instead of offering a generic chaplaincy, the college responded by claiming its religious heritage so that it could take a place in the conversation. Diversity and options are taken more seriously in higher education when a college has skin in the game. Church-related higher education will best help America live into our new age of religious options by claiming instead of setting aside their institutional positions in America's rainbow of religions.

As Wartburg does this, it will even discover that Lutheranism has become cool in this new era of American religious options and diversity. My sociologist of religion friends tell me that it is the only Christian brand to increase in name recognition in recent decades.

This started about twenty years ago with the old sitcom, *Cheers*, in which the Woody Harrelson character announcing that he and his fiancé had broken up over irreconcilable differences. He was LC-MS and she was ELCA. Lutherans around the country roared, and they were astonished that internal Lutheran rhetoric found a voice in popular culture. (By the way, this is another example of American Lutheranism entering mainstream American life.) Then there was the 2004 movie, *Raising Helen*, starring Kate Hudson and John Corbett in which a self-absorbed Manhattan fashionista, whose life changes radically when she has to take over as guardian of her sister's children and move to Queens, meets the new man in her life, and that new man is a Lutheran pastor! But the principal reason for increased brand recognition for Lutheranism over the past thirty years is the public radio program, *A Prairie Home Companion* (<<http://prariehome.publicradio.org>>). The host of that program, Garrison Keillor, has single handedly caused Americans to know about the Lutherans.

Maybe this does not mean Lutheranism is cool, but many voices in religion itself urge that the Lutheran tradition claim its heritage and take its place at the table of American religion. For example, Mark Noll, a major scholar out of the conservative evangelical community, has long called upon Lutheranism to share more publically from the wisdom of its tradition. A college place like Wartburg, with its institution firmly planted in the tradition called Lutheranism, has an important contribution to make toward the wise navigation of the current changes in religion and American culture.

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