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## From the Editor

Robert D. Haak

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## From the Editor

Run an experiment ... first on yourself, and then on others—maybe your students. What is the answer to the question, “Why are you religious? What is the goal of religion, your religion?” I try this experiment in most of the religion classes I teach. The answer is surprisingly consistent. “I’m religious so that I can get to heaven (or, in some cases it is stated as avoiding the alternative).” This seems to be by far the dominant reason for religion in the minds of our culture. It is true of young people and those who are in our congregations. Religion is about the future world. Religion is a retreat from world....

All around we see the result of this sort of religion. The focus is on “saving your soul” (however that is imagined by the practitioner confronting us). Will you get to heaven? Or will you be left behind?

It’s not the case that there isn’t precedent for this way of thinking. From near the beginning of our history as a religion, Christians have withdrawn from the world—some seeking the grace of God in the solitude of the desert, some within the walls of monasteries. The complexities of the relation of religion and culture has been explored famously by Richard Niebuhr. It continues to be debated by those who wonder what the role of religion should be in our own day. Should religious folks withdraw to the scrubland of Texas to build their own society? Should religious folks take over the political system for good, Christian purposes? How do/should Lutherans be heard in this conversation?

It might be surprising to some who have had the experience of Lutheran churches (and colleges?) as insular that Lutherans, because they are Lutheran, enter the conversation among those who seek, even demand, engagement with the world as a religious principle. That viewpoint is well represented in the contributions in this issue.

What draws Lutherans into engagement with the world rather than retreat? Maybe the first motivator is the first story we read ... and confess. “We believe in God ... the creator.” This world, with all its mystery and complexity is the world created by (and blessed by) God. Those who hold this view are

understandably reluctant to leave a connection with this world too easily. It is the good gift that has been given. We are not too eager to walk away from it.

And secondly, this is the place that God has come to us. Incarnation. He may draw us to himself ... but first he comes to us—here. In this world. God seems to think that it is pretty important to be involved. It seems like a dangerous *hubris* to claim that this place isn’t *really* that important, that what concerns the divine is really only that which happens next, in some other/un-worldly place.

What are the implications of such doctrines? That is what is explored in the articles that follow ... and we hope in the conversations that they spark.

This movement toward the world is clearly the thesis of Guy Erwin as he suggests that, as Lutheran colleges and universities, we must define ourselves as places that move across the flatland of the globe and engage. He suggests that, to be Lutheran, we have to move from our comfort zones into the larger world. He also suggests that we *tell* our constituents that we intend to do this. Mary Carlsson points out that at times the comfort zones that we need to leave are much closer than we admit. How do we as Lutherans relate to the borders that exist in our local communities? Peter Marty would claim, I believe, that this is not an either/or situation—either global or local—but rather a good Lutheran both/and. Mark Mattes provides one helpful example of how history shapes and defines one place—and might shape others.

This reach into the world may be exemplified by the image on the cover of this issue. It is a pattern of cloth encountered by students and faculty from Augustana (RI) while on foreign term in Ghana in 2006. These sorts of programs, to engage our students at home and around the world, are not unique to Lutheran colleges and universities ... but they should be characteristic of what we are about as Lutheran institutions. We expect our students to engage “the other.”

This Adinkra cloth is also appropriate for another reason. It is cloth about “farewells.” With this issue if *Intersections* we say

“Farewell” to Arne Selbyg who, as Director for ELCA Colleges and Universities, has been responsible for the continuation of this publication.

I have known Arne for many years. He was my “boss” when he was Dean of the Faculty at Augustana College in Rock Island (as much as any dean can be the “boss” of a member of the faculty!). Those years ago I remember him well working hard to increase diversity at the college. It seems fitting that the last issue of *Intersections* continues that theme on a broader canvas. Since that time Arne has provided leadership from the ELCA offices to all twenty-eight colleges and universities. He

has made a difference for me and for many of us. He will be well remembered. Arne, we wish you well and hope that from here onward you board only flights that are of your own choosing!

ROBERT D. HAAK | The Augustana Center for Vocational Reflection, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois

### **Works Cited**

Niebuhr, H. Richard. *Christ and Culture*. New York: Harper, 1951.