Sojourners in a Pluralistic Land: The Promise and Peril of Christian Higher Education

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I am certain to make some enemies here before the evening is over, so I might as well get started. Despite my respect for church-related schools, including Lutheran schools, the schools of the Christian Reformed Church, and even the parochial school system mandated by the Third Plenary Council of 1846, and despite my strong conviction that parents have every right to educate their children anywhere they please (including at home), I am—and have been for nearly half a century—a passionate advocate for public education at the elementary, junior high, and high school level. Public schools, originally known as “common schools” in the nineteenth century, may be the only place in our society where children from various racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds can come together and, in the context of both the classroom and the playground, learn to get along with one another at least a measure of comity. That sounds to me like a recipe for democracy, and it is one that has served us well for a further Balkanization of American society, which cannot help but have deleterious effects. I believe that if we, as a society, care anything about the future of democracy, especially in a pluralistic context, we cannot afford to give up on public education.

I realize full well the implications of what I am saying for people of faith. It means, at the very least, that parents and churches have to bear more of the responsibility for the religious formation of their children. That’s not a simple task, especially in the context of a media-saturated, peer-driven society. And I also recognize the ways in which religious schools—whether they be Jewish, Lutheran, Catholic, or Christian Reformed—have safeguarded the ethnic identity and particularity of specific populations. That is not a negligible consideration, and I acknowledge its importance. I first became aware of this when I studied the religious dynamics in colonial New York City. The Collegiate School, which is still in operation on the upper west side of Manhattan, was founded by the Dutch Reformed Church in 1628. Shortly after the English Conquest of 1648, Trinity Church, a congregation of the Church of England, established

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Religious Diversity

I conclude as promised, by turning to the question of religious diversity in colleges and universities. To focus the present discussion, I will set aside several very important questions and issues. First, I focus here on religious diversity rather than on other issues of diversity. At my college, for example, the question of racial diversity is a pressing matter of ongoing concern and attention. From the point of view of Lutherans (or Christian) identity, it seems to me that the theoretical reasons for valuing and preserving such diversity are evident; the hard part (for isolated colleges in the land of Norwegians) is strategy for achieving and preserving it. Religious diversity, on the other hand, is easy to achieve (maybe too easy), but its theoretical support, or its compatibility with robust and particular religious identity may be less clear.

Next, in focusing on a religiously diverse faculty, I set aside for now the religious composition of the student body and of administrative boards, etc. I hope that the applicability of ideas expressed so far to wider constituencies will be plain, but to the extent that it is not—or that different considerations are relevant—I leave that work for another occasion.

Finally, I want to acknowledge that schools very clearly and narrowly define the range of faculty religious diversity which is compatible with their religious identity and academic mission. Here I have in mind those schools whose faculty positions are open only to members of the founding denomination, or to scholars who hold a specified range of theological views. In articulating a model for a wide range of faculty diversity, I want to be clear in saying that I don’t intend to imply that more restrictive models are less consistent or desirable. I myself am a graduate of Wheaton College, and I consider Wheaton (and Calvin, so as not to appear entirely self-serving) to be an example of religious and academic integrity, and of exemplary academic excellence. Others disagree, of course, (see Kenneth Wagner’s “Faith Statements Do Restrict Academic Freedom” in Academe, January-February 2006, and responses in that themed issue) but that too is an argument for another day. For now, I only want to resist that notion that colleges and universities must choose between adopting the Wheaton/Calvin model or abandoning substantive Christian identity.

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There are strands of that way of thinking on my campus—proponents of the opposing choices all being dubious (at best) that we can long maintain a strong Lutheran identity and a religiously diverse faculty. I am arguing that there is more than one model for a strong and thoroughgoing Lutheran or Christian institutional identity in church-related colleges and universities, including models with religiously diverse faculties.

I hope that at least some elements of the model I propose will be evident already. Lutherans and many other brands of Christians may—because of their religious commitments—be inclined to academic virtues, and if those commitments inform the ethos of the school, the institution will encourage good pedagogy, interdisciplinary engagement, and academic freedom. So it’s great to have plenty of Lutherans (or relevant other brands) around. But the question of religious diversity is, what about having others around?

One sort of response to the question goes by the name of “critical mass” theory. The idea is that if you have enough Lutherans (etc.) around to keep the ethos and identity strong, you can have some others and the benefits they bring without bringing the house down. I guess it is obvious that Lutheran identity is going to require having Lutherans (or suitable substitutes) around, but I’m a little uneasy about tendencies of some versions of critical mass theories. To be specific, I’m uneasy because they focus more on the mass than on the rest of the faculty. The problem is that faculty with other religious commitments, in some sort of free-rider status, may be at best indifferent and at worst threatened by the mission and identity of the school. In practice, younger colleagues in this situation duck and run when talk about mission and identity comes up, and others may gather resources and allies to resist or subvert such talk and its object. I don’t know if that’s the kind of fun you want to have in promoting or preserving institutional identity, but it’s not the only option.

Here I’ll suggest that the resources of the Lutheran tradition for promoting our highest academic aspirations are of central importance in conceiving of a vibrant, mission-oriented, and religiously diverse faculty. First of all, why might those principles promote a diverse faculty? Because Lutherans’ commitment to search for truth, to critique all perspectives (even their own), and to nurture creative imagination is served by the presence and active engagement of opposing ideas.

Here I’ll suggest that the resources of the Lutheran tradition for promoting our highest academic aspirations are of central importance in conceiving of a vibrant, mission-oriented, and religiously diverse faculty. First of all, why might those principles promote a diverse faculty? Because Lutherans’ commitment to search for truth, to critique all perspectives (even their own), and to nurture creative imagination is served by the presence and active engagement of opposing ideas, presented by smart and articulate people who are committed to the mission. Fine, but how can others be committed to the mission if, for example, they are not Lutheran or Christian? Well, they have their own reasons for being committed to the academic and pedagogical virtues (if they don’t have reasons or don’t have those commitments would you hire them even if you didn’t care about religious identity?). Chances are, nobody told them in grad
The necessity to acknowledge uncertainty, however, should not be considered an external restraint on the Christian religious tradition as personally or institutionally expressed. The notion of human weakness—including epistemic weakness—as is central to Christianity as any idea. Allow me to return to Richard Hughes for an eloquent expression of this academic implication of the doctrine of human finitude:

This position means that every scholar must always confess that he or she could be wrong. Apart from this confession, there can be no serious life of the mind, for only when we confess that we might be wrong can we engage in the kind of conversation that takes seriously other voices. And only when we confess that we might be wrong are we empowered to assess in critical ways our own theories, our own judgments, and our own understandings (86–7).

It is especially pertinent for the present discussion that Hughes cites this doctrine and its implications as a particular contribution of the Lutheran tradition to the life of the mind. Since the possibility of being mistaken is an important motive to free inquiry in the pursuit of truth, such inquiry ought to be a hallmark of the Lutheran tradition, and to its institutions of learning.

Thus the Christian tradition, and by extension associated learning institutions, stands for allowing the discussion and questioning—even of their own basic truth-claims. But this is not the only motive for actively encouraging discussion and questioning—even of their own basic truth-claims. It is not merely to the extent that one might be mistaken that one ought to welcome questioning, but also to the extent that one is confident of the truth of one’s commitments. This point also reiterates Mill, who held that the highest intellectual ideal is not just to hold true beliefs, but to hold them in a certain way. His summary of the argument in *On Liberty* is this:

Even if the received opinion be...the whole truth; unless it be suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will...be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds. And not only this, but...the meaning of the doctrine itself will be lost or enfeebled, and deprived of its vital effect on the character and conduct (50).

Free inquiry serves the truth, then, regardless of the status of the received opinion or tradition. Truth is served by the questioning of false received opinion for obvious reasons. Truth is served by free questioning of partially correct received opinion because the truth is thereby winnowed from the false. And, finally, even wholly true opinions benefit from rigorous questioning since the vitality of our understanding and use of the truth is enhanced.

The familiar argument for absolute freedom of inquiry and expression in the second chapter of *On Liberty* seems to be an elaboration of the claims implicit in the AAUP’s statement on academic freedom, since Mill’s argument depends crucially upon truth-seeking. To the extent, therefore, that Christian religious commitment is genuinely characterized by truth-seeking, it is wholly congenial to promoting rigorous free discussion and inquiry, both as advocated by a key founder of the modern liberal tradition, and as defended by the primary American academic organization for promoting and protecting free inquiry. If Christian scholars or Christian institutions are perceived as being at odds with that tradition or the goals of that organization, they should respond by vigorously emphasizing—in profession and in practice—the common commitment to truth.

Here I would like to acknowledge again that not all institutions with strong Christian commitment put this theory into practice (hence the preceding exhortation). But I would also like to say that this theoretical account is more than an apologetic exercise—a way of reconciling Christian commitment and academic freedom. To a greater degree than some may realize, the philosophical foundations for the AAUP’s paradigmatic defense of academic freedom have been challenged, and in some circles abandoned. Commitment to these academic standards may depend far more upon social convention in the academy than upon theoretical foundations. People defend academic freedom because that’s just the way we do things. Philosopher Richard Rorty has argued that this reliance upon convention is sufficient support for academic freedom. I disagree. I’m not sure that convention and tradition is a strong enough foundation, and I fear that the intellectual justification is possible. This is part—indeed really—all of a larger debate in contemporary political theory about the viability of classical liberalism (Mill being a key figure in this tradition). The details of that argument are better left for another occasion. I will observe, however, that if Christian commitment can be a theoretical foundation for principles of academic freedom, and if those principles do turn out to be in need of theoretical support, then the considerations above may show again that our institutions can exhibit their academic integrity because of—not merely in spite of—religious identity.

“The possibility of being mistaken is an important motive to free inquiry.”

Trinity School. The fortunes of the Collegiate School suffered thereafter so that by the middle of the eighteenth century, the Dutch congregation appealed to the ecclesiastical authorities in the Netherlands for an English-speaking minister; the younger generation, educated at Trinity School, could no longer understand the Dutch language.

Such is the power of education in transmitting both faith and culture. I acknowledge that, and I honor its importance. Still, despite these considerations, I stand by my defense of public education, while, at the same time, I support the prerogative of parents to educate their children in any venue they see fit. Having said that, and although it may sound counterintuitive, I am equally committed to the importance of Christian higher education. Some of this, I realize, is autobiographical. I grew up in parsonages in rural Minnesota, Michigan, and Iowa, where I attended public schools—and I happen to think that I am none the worse for wear. For college, however, I went to a Christian liberal arts college and had there (on balance) a wonderful experience, and it is on that experience that I should like to focus the balance of my remarks this evening.

A few more autobiographical details—of necessity, I’m afraid. I very nearly didn’t attend college at all; I had started a small business as a teenager, and I was convinced at the time that this was what I wanted to pursue as a career. My father, however, urged me to go to college. I finally agreed, first, to attend a state university within commuting distance so that I could continue operating my business. Then, succumbing to a bit more pressure, I relented and submitted a last-minute application to Trinity College in the North Shore suburbs of Chicago. The decision to attend college was, I see now, the first of many Robert Frost moments in my life, where I stood at the fork in the yellow woods and contemplated two pathways, both of which seemed equitable at the time. I have occasionally reflected on “The Road Not Taken,” and I imagine that, all things considered, I probably chose the better route. And what if I had chosen the state university? All of this is speculation, of course, but I suspect that, given my rootedness in evangelicalism, I would have burrowed deeper into the subculture, this vast and interlocking network of congregations, denominations, Bible camps, Bible institutes, mission societies, and publishing houses that was constructed in earnest during the middle decades of the twentieth century to protect innocents like me from the deprivations of the larger world, a world that my parents believed was both corrupt and corrupting.

There is safety within the evangelical subculture, I’ll not deny it—or any religious subculture, for that matter. My religious upbringing—in the home, at church and youth group and Sunday school, at vacation Bible school, and Bible camp—had provided me with a firm grounding in the faith, and I might very comfortably have remained safely within the bosom of the subculture. Instead, I attended a Christian liberal arts college, one supported by my own denomination. Like many such institutions, it began as a Bible institute, but it evolved, as these schools often do, into an accredited four-year college. (It now bears the rather grand moniker of Trinity International University—having passed, apparently, on Trinity Intergalactic University!) Soon after I shuffled onto campus in early September 1971, I recognized that Trinity was an unusual place, at least by the standards of Christian higher education. A wise and forward-looking dean had hired a cohort of young, energetic, newly-minted PhDs who challenged the presuppositions of their students, most of whom hailed from politically and theologically conservative households. But they did not so as provocateurs but as fellow-travelers, and they did so not with the intention of boggling us of our faith altogether. As a student, as someone whose notion of rebellion was to wear blue jeans to the Sunday evening service, the experience of probing the parameters of the faith and questioning the dogma of the subculture was unsettling. But it was also bracing, and it changed me in ways that even now, in late middle age, I appreciate only in part.

Beginning with the publication of the first edition of *The Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America* (1978), I’ve heard from dozens of people over the years who were reared evangelical but who left the faith, many of them in late adolescence. Their letters are poignant, even plaintive. They reminisce, ppe single-spaced page, about their religious background—Sunday school and singing songs around the campfire. They express appreciation for their upbringing and sadness for having left the faith. Some left because of intellectual doubts or because of sexual orientation or because of what they perceived as hypocrisy in the ranks of the religious leadership. More recently, I hear utter disgust at the ways in which the leaders of the Religious Right have denied the faith captive to right-wing politics.

I express this as a kind of envy of someone who has been able to retain his faith. For some, those who perceive me as an intellectual, the fact that I teach at a presti-

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igious university deepens the conundrum because they assume, I guess, that no one with academic credentials can simultaneously be an advocate for the faith. I respond carefully to these letters, and I acknowledge that even a college professor can explain faith away as hysteria or delusion or the search for a father figure. Then I generally explain my decision years ago that I would not allow the canons of Enlightenment rationalism be the final arbiter of
truth. I elect to inhabit an enchanted universe where there are forces at work beyond my understanding or control. I wouldn’t live anywhere else.

I don’t know whether or not my testimony is compelling, but I’ve come to reflect on why it is that I’ve been able to retain the faith when so many of my contemporaries have lost or discarded theirs. I suspect that, as with all such matters, a variety of factors come into play, but I have to believe that my formation at a Christian liberal arts college was crucial. Trinity College was far from perfect, but I think the place struck the right balance in a number of ways.

First, I think that any such institution faces the challenge of navigating between the Scylla of secularism and the Charybdis of sectarianism—although I think that channel is wider than is commonly believed. I heard a lot of rhetoric about “the integration of faith and learning” when I was an undergraduate—a lot of rhetoric. It was an effective mantra, a comforting piety, but I was never exactly sure what it meant, nor do I know today.

The dangers inherent in such pieties are obvious, and they have been amply illustrated in recent years in the calls for a kind of reappropriation of America’s educational institutions. Yale is no longer a safe haven for Congregationalists, the lament goes, or Princeton for Presbyterians. No one will argue that many of the nation’s elite institutions of higher education are still the “nurseries” of the ambitions of their founders intended. But the accompanying argument that people of faith should be granted special pleading in the academy is, to say the least, suspect. I will never contend that the academy is a perfect meritocracy—I have my own quiver of anecdotes and more than a few bruises to refute that—but people of faith need to play by the same rules and abide by the same standards of academic scholarship as everyone else.

For example, as a person of faith and as a historian of religion in America, I believe that the hand of God was present in the event historians call the Great Awakening, a revival of piety that swept along the Atlantic seaboard in the 1730s and 1740s. When I teach the Great Awakening, however, or when I write about the topic, I describe the historical, social, and cultural circumstances of the Great Awakening, and I quote the perceptions of contemporaries that it was an event of supernatural inspiration. But for me to attribute the revival solely to divine providence would be to distort my responsibilities as a historian.

Or, to take another recent example, consider the case for intelligent design, a topic I cover extensively in My Kingdom Come. For that chapter, I framed the issue by describing a debate at Princeton University between Lee Silver, a molecular biologist at Princeton, and William Dembski, a kind of high priest of intelligent design and the chief evangelist for the intellectual design movement. I made it clear in my narrative that, as a person of faith, I happen to believe in intelligent design or something very close to it, although I confess that I have grown accustomed over the years to referring to the “intelligent designer” simply as “God.” I exhorted Dembski’s very impressive academic credentials and suggested that, although I laid no claims to being a theologian or a philosopher, he struck me as a very competent theologian and philosopher. But the issue is the validity of Dembski’s assertion that intelligent design is science and therefore should be taught in the science classroom.

If he means to be a scientist, Dembski should be prepared to make his case as a scientist and not angle for special pleading, as he did in the debate at Princeton. He argued, in effect, that because he is a person of faith he should therefore be exempted from the mores of inquiry peculiar to the discipline he claims as his own. As I emphasized in the chapter, I have no objections whatsoever to the teaching of intelligent design in colleges or universities; in fact, one of my Ph.D. students, with my blessing, taught a course in intelligent design at Columbia this past summer. But the appropriate venue for such inquiry is the religion classroom or the philosophy seminar—at least until Dembski or someone can make a case that intelligent design is science. (Even the judge in the Dover, Pennsylvania, intelligent design case, a George W. Bush appointee, found this claim ludicrous. By peddling their theological claims as science, Dembski and the intelligent design advocates seek a double standard: “Hey look, I’m a scientist! I don’t do any of the things that other scientists do, I refuse to submit my work for peer review, I don’t ask the same questions that other scientists ask, and I don’t want to play by the rules of scientific inquiry, but, trust me, I’m a scientist!”)

That, I submit, is no way to integrate faith and learning. It fails to abide by the professional standards of the academy, and, more important, it demeans the faith because it suggests that faith needs the imprimatur of science in order to be valid. I emphatically reject that notion.

If that sort of intellectual dishonesty represents the caricature of scientism, the caricature of religion at institutions of higher education is a kind of intellectual arrogance that is allergic to expressions of piety. I understand this aversion, especially because I grew up within evangelicalism, where piety tends too often toward the rote and formulaic. I too participated in this cult of intellectualism, especially in graduate school—a reaction, no doubt, to my upbringing.

Engendering spirituality and encouraging piety is a tricky business, and I’ve never trusted institutions with this task. Institutions, in fact, are remarkably poor vessels of piety, in my experience; they tend to quash it more often than abet it, so not only represents Christian apologetics but is also the phrase not only represents Christian truth-seeking but is also likely to incite just the sort of suspicion that we are undertaking to address. Why it is that academically-inclined people get nervous when the phrase comes their way.

One reason (and here we might go all the way back to the notorious—even if abused—example of Galileo) is that authoritative professions have to struggle to be taken as grounds to stop looking for it, or asking questions, or listening to others. Academic liberty (at least one version of) Christian commitment.

Academic Integrity: Free Inquiry

I won’t beat around the bush about this. One of the reasons why we have to talk about academic freedom in this context (and one of the reasons why we are talking about science and the academy may be well-founded) is a very real history of abuse of this principle by religiously-affiliated colleges and universities—in the name of their religious identity. It is by no means the case that only religious institutions, or that all religious institutions, have violated this principle. Nor is it true, in my view, that every religious restriction is an unjustified or abusive violation of academic freedom. It is nevertheless the case that religiously-based violations of academic freedom too often occur. Some think that, for this reason alone, religious commitment must be considered a threat to the academic integrity of educational institutions. I don’t think that’s true, and I’ll try to explain why in terms of (at least one version of) Christian commitment.

The preeminent banner under which academic freedom is promoted in the United States is the American Association of University Professors’ 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure. Justification for policies urged in the document is offered, in part, as follows:

Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution as a whole. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition.

Academic freedom is essential to these purposes and applies to both teaching and research. Freedom in research is fundamental to the advancement of truth. Academic freedom in its teaching aspect is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and of the student in freedom learning.

The 1940 Statement advocates academic freedom on grounds that the principle is crucial to the search for truth, I want to make it clear that this line of justification for free inquiry does not put it at odds with Christian commitment. Insofar as principles of free inquiry aid the pursuit of truth, scholars and institutions committed to the Christian tradition should be vigorous advocates for academic freedom—given the importance of truth-seeking to that tradition.

For the sake of brevity, I will not make even a cursory attempt to survey or explain the role of truth-seeking in the Christian tradition. Allow me simply to represent this long-standing (even if recently underemphasized) aspect of the tradition with Cardinal Newman’s claim from The Idea of a University that “Truth...is the main object of Religion.” (Discourse II). This will suffice because the phrase not only represents Christian truth-seeking but is also likely to incite just the sort of suspicion that we are undertaking to address. Why it is that academically-inclined people get nervous when the phrase comes their way.

One reason (and here we might go all the way back to the notorious—even if abused—example of Galileo) is that authoritative professions have to struggle to be taken as grounds to stop looking for it, or asking questions, or listening to others. Since this attitude has too commonly accompanied strong religious commitment (both in- and outside the academy) it has undoubtedly encouraged widespread resistance to the notion of truth being "the main object of religion," and a corresponding lack of appreciation for Christianity’s conceptual capacity to undergird principles and policies of academic freedom.

Nevertheless, an attitude which impedes the search for truth because truth has already been found fails to take sufficient account of uncertainty. Mill makes this point in his classic argument for free expression: “All silencing of discussion,” he writes in On Liberty, “is an assumption of infallibility (c).” To shut off questioning or the airing of alternative views on grounds that the truth is known is—to give the assumption that the truth is important—implicitly to claim certainty. (Mill points out that even the practical considerations which may require an end of discussion are served by prior open inquiry.) Certainty is, of course, a vanishingly rare commodity if taken to refer to the impossibility of being mistaken rather than to mere strength of conviction, and thus the consideration is a compelling one.
Others have articulated this more elegantly and in more detail than I can pretend here, and I’ll refer to just a couple of familiar examples. Almost fifteen years ago, Mark Schwehn described how spiritual virtues are indispensable to academic inquiry and emphasized the role of Christian communities of learning in Exod from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America. More recently, Richard Hughes has elaborated how Christian faith can sustain the life of the mind in his book of that title. Hughes claims that “a scholar’s Christian faith can express itself in the highest and finest kind of scholarship—a scholarship committed to search for truth, to engage a variety of conversation partners, to critique all perspectives, even one’s own, and to nurture creative imagination” (11). When (appropriately for our present discussion) he focuses on the Lutheran tradition as a whole, Hughes has this to say: “The truth is, the Lutheran tradition possesses some of the most potent theological resources for sustaining the life of the mind that one can imagine. It encourages dialogue between the Christian faith and the world of ideas, fosters intellectual humility, engenders a healthy suspicion of absolutes, and helps create a conversation in which all partners are taken seriously” (9). On the subject of teaching and pedagogy, I need only mention the familiar work of Parker Palmer. Though much of this work is not explicitly Christian or religious, I agree with both Schwehn and Hughes that all of it is deeply and substantively rooted in Palmer’s Quaker heritage. A more explicit illustration from a colleague at a Lutheran college is Lendol Calder’s “For Teachers to Live, Professors Must Die” presented at Baylor University’s conference in 2004. Calder powerfully applies to classrooms the claim from the Gospel of John that “unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit.”

The example of Luther College’s faith and learning discussions (with the reader’s indulgence) will also serve to introduce one way in which religious identity can enhance what I’ve labeled institutional or curricular virtues. In the course of our wide-ranging discussion about the meaning and implications of the Lutheran academic tradition, contributions by workshop members were often prefaced by phrases like “As a biologist I...” or “In Social Work we...” or “historians sometimes...” The idea here is that the nature of the conversation not only elicited varying disciplinary perspectives on a common idea, but also required the articulation of what that disciplinary perspective consists of and how, to some extent, it works internally. The fact that such articulation is necessary even among faculty and that opportunity for conversation that requires it is increasingly rare reflects increasing fragmentation along disciplinary lines in higher education. In their Devil’s Dictionary for Higher Education, Gary Nelson and Stephen Wart have labeled the extremes of this trend as “entrepreneurial disciplinarity,” a circumstantiality which despair of identifying any common mission even within disciplines. Of the many ways in which liberal arts colleges might emulate the habits of faculty-producing research universities, surely this is one of the more pernicious.

The discussion in our faculty workshop on faith and learning illustrates a more general principle. Institutional religious commitment or identity serves the academic goals of learning communities by inviting—or provoking—conversation across disciplines, and providing a framework for integrating disciplinary pursuits and perspectives. Insofar as the core claims of the institution’s religious tradition cut across disciplinary lines, and insofar as those claims are taken seriously, they provide a set of questions serving as integration or contact points for the various elements of an academic course of study. [These core claims or questions serve this academic function for all members of the academic community—whether individually within the affiliated religious tradition or not.]

I ran across an extreme example of this during my visit to Patrick Henry College last December. Patrick Henry was founded in 2005 by Michael Farris to provide a place where parents who home-schooled their children could secure a college education free from such alien influences as feminism or Darwinism, a place where, in effect, parents could not assure that their children would never encounter an idea that the parents would find objectionable or even questionable. The school’s website (www.phc.edu), for example, informs parents that all “biology, biology or other courses at PHC dealing with creation will teach creation from the understanding of Scripture that God’s creative work, as described in Genesis 1:1–31, was completed in six twenty-four hour days.” Students who attend Patrick Henry College, moreover, pledge to “reserve sexual activity for the sanctity of marriage” and promise to “seek and obtain parental permission when pursuing a romantic relationship.”

Patrick Henry, as I said, is an extreme example of insularity, but the unfortunate corollary is that Patrick Henry College also aspires to train America’s leaders for the twenty-first century. Michael Farris, the founder and now the chancellor of the school, told the New York Times that the sentiment he hears most often from parents is that I want my kid to be on the Supreme Court someday. Farris added that, if we get enough kids into the “farm system,” that will happen. Since 2005, Patrick Henry College, a school with an enrollment of only two hundred, has placed twenty-four of its students as White House interns; a larger number have served internships in other governmental agencies and on the Congressional staffs of elected officials sympathetic to the Religious Right. These are the people who aspire to lead the United States, this gaudy, pluralistic nation, in the twenty-first century. Because of their home-schooling and their experience at Patrick Henry College, these students most likely have never had any sustained or significant interaction with anyone outside of their own cohort of white, middle-class evangelicals. Because of the insular nature of their upbringing and their undergraduate education, they have never encountered an idea or an argument— for feminism, for instance, or for gender mixing, or gay or Darwinism or environmentalism—except in caricature. As I ask in They Kingdom Come, I wonder how many graduates of Patrick Henry College have ever read Das Kapital or The Feminine Mystique on Fast Food Nation or Catcher in the Rye or The Autobiography of Malcolm X. How many of them have watched the “Eyes on the Prize” documentary or “The Future of Food,” or “What Happened to the Electric Car?” What goes on at Patrick Henry is not so much education as indoctrination. I emphasize (a second time) that Patrick Henry College is an extreme example of insularity, but it points to a real danger faced by institutions of Christian higher education. Instead of a hot house, I prefer to think of Christian liberal arts colleges as halfway houses, a place where students reared in a religious subculture can begin to interact with the wider world. They experiment with new ideas and try on new personalities (which, of course, is the task of every adolescent). They interact with the larger culture not by plunging directly into the sea of pluralism and secularism, but by means of tentative forays—dipping a toe in the water, testing the waves, and then maybe a few dog paddles into the current, but never far from a mentor navigating the same waters.

This is my vision for Christian higher education, a venue where students thoroughly grounded in the religion of their parents can begin to interact with the world outside of their own
subculture—not from a posture of fear or defensiveness, though some of that is inevitable, but from a position of strength and curiosity and engagement. Are there risks inherent in such a strategy? Of course there are, and we all have stories of those who have lost their faith in the process. But my experience, not to mention my theology, tells me that we have to trust the process and, more important, trust that Jesus will ultimately gather his children unto himself.

“This is my vision for Christian higher education…”

If I am right that Christian liberal arts colleges represent a good place to make an effective transition from the subculture to the larger world, one key component for that transition is exposure to pluralism and the avoidance of insularity. How to do that? Admissions officers, in my experience, make a good-faith effort to recruit students beyond the usual cohort, but the competition for qualified students of color is often fierce. There are other ways to combat insularity and to expose students to the universe beyond their subculture. In a perfect world, one with unlimited resources, I’d start by providing every student with a daily subscription to the *New York Times*—not because the *New York Times* is perfect or incorrect, but because it opens a window to the larger world and it instills the importance of becoming conversant with developments beyond the campus. I’d encourage faculty to expose students to ideas other than those sanctioned by the religious subculture—and to do so with primary sources rather than through the lens of secondary treatments. Internships are also effective (Patrick Henry College is right about that), but let’s encourage students to think creatively about the path that led me to a Christian liberal arts college all those years ago. My undergraduate education shaped me in important ways by exposing me gradually to a larger world that I never would have encountered had I remained sequestered in my religious subculture—or certainly would have encountered on very different terms. I’m grateful for that. I’m grateful for the example of my mentors, fellow-travelers in the enterprise of sustaining the faith in an environment that all too frequently is hostile to faith. The whole experience of baccalaureate studies made my faith stronger and more resilient, but it also ensured that I could never again hide my light under a bushel or burrow back into the insularity of the subculture.

I function today as a person of faith in a pluralistic context. As such, I simultaneously inhabit two worlds, and I embrace them both—sometimes with fear and trembling, but more often with gusto and enthusiasm. I wouldn’t have it any other way.

**Works Cited**


**STORM BAILEY**

**Lutheran Identity, Academic Integrity, and Religious Diversity**

**I WOULD BE PLEASED** to discover that my approach to the question of “Lutheran Identity and Academic Integrity” is shaped by an outdated concern. I am concerned about the assumption that religious commitment in general—and Christian commitment in particular—threatens purely academic aspirations. If this is no longer the dominant view in American higher education, that fact is very good news. Even so, some—perhaps some few—continue to suppose that, when it comes to religious identity and academic integrity, the only real question is which one will give way to the other. I want to say that neither has to give way to the other. In fact, I want to say more than that. If we are past the point where people say “that can’t be a good school because it’s religious,” another sentiment may still be common: “that’s a pretty good school in spite of being religious.” I propose to emphasize ways in which Lutheran identity might promote our academic aspirations; that is to say, I want to suggest the possibility that someone might say “that’s a pretty good school because it’s religious.”

In suggesting this possibility, I’ll mention three kinds of considerations: academic virtues, institutional or curricular virtues, and the matter of academic freedom. In spite of the fact that religious (or Lutheran) colleges and universities have not always exhibited excellence in these areas, not only can they do so, but they can do so for emphatically religious (or Christian, or Lutheran) reasons. I will try to make this case fairly quickly, because even if it is persuasive, questions should remain about the third aspect of my professed topic (and the emphasis of this conference): diversity. I will focus on religious diversity because it may seem most out of line with the argument so far proposed. After all, if whatever we are up to is a substantively Lutheran mission, doesn’t it stand to reason that we need Lutherans to pull it off, and that Lutherans are the ones who will enjoy the fruits of it? I don’t think so. Actually, what I think is that we don’t need only Lutherans. I will argue in the concluding discussion of religious diversity that the people who can say “that’s a pretty good school because it’s Lutheran” don’t have to be Lutheran or Christian to say it—if it’s true.

**Academic Integrity: Academic and Curricular Virtues**

Recent critiques of Enlightenment ideals such as individualism, objectivity and certainty have carried over to academic practices and institutions which bear the stamp of those ideals, and I should confess at the outset that I do not side wholeheartedly with critics of the Enlightenment academy. Nevertheless, even if one is enamored of individualism, the communal nature of learning and the pursuit of knowledge is undeniable. Further, no matter how significant the ideals of objectivity and certainty may be, it must be regarded as folly to ignore the limits of finite (and interested) reason—bound by perspective even if reality is not. Since this is the case, the academic enterprise—learning, research, teaching—requires communities in which the virtues of humility, hospitality and charity (to name but a few) are deeply ingrained. Christian communities are not the only ones in which these virtues ought to flourish, but they should be exemplary ones.

**STORM BAILEY,** Associate Professor of Philosophy at Luther College, recently published a related essay, “Uneasy Partners? Religion and Academics” in *Academe* (92:4).