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ROBERT BENNE

What *Could* the Lutheran Colleges and Universities Contribute to the ELCA Discussion of Sexuality— But What *Would* They Actually Contribute?

THE CHURCHWIDE ASSEMBLY of the ELCA took on some tough sexuality issues during its August 2005 meeting in Orlando, Florida. It voted to continue under the guidance of the 1993 Bishop's Statement that there were no grounds in scripture or tradition for blessing gay or lesbian unions, but at the same time it refused to provide for the discipline of those who ignored that guidance. A narrow majority voted down the provision for the ordination of partnered gays and lesbians through an exceptional process. However, such a provision would have required a two-thirds majority since it would have meant constitutional changes.

The preassembly Sexuality Task Force and Church Council ducked the normative question that has to be answered by the newly constituted Task Force: are there adequate biblical and theological grounds for lifting the age-old and near-universal Christian proscription of homosexual conduct, even if it occurs in committed same-sex pairs? The clear answer to that question may lead to a church split, especially if the ELCA answers the question affirmatively.

The question before us is this: Would the active involvement of college and university faculties in this possibly church-dividing conflict be helpful? What I would hope for in answering that question is far different from what I think would happen.

What I would hope for goes something like this: I would hope for a balanced mixture of what James Davison Hunter

calls the "orthodox" and "progressive" perspectives among the faculty of the religion and social science departments on the issues being dealt with by the ELCA. (By "progressive" Hunter means those who believe we ought to revise or reject central tenets of received moral tradition according to the enlightened opinion of the day, informed as it is by contemporary experience and practice. On the other hand, the "orthodox" believe that these central tenets are settled moral truths that have been revealed in the tradition and therefore cannot be compromised by even the most enlightened opinion of the day.) Between those poles would be a segment of the faculty who would occupy a middle ground on these contested sexuality issues.

Given this sort of balance, the Lutheran colleges could actually model fair discourse on something as volatile as the subject of homosexuality. Theological ethicists from both sides would be invited to make their best arguments, realizing that a moral tradition of two thousand year duration and of near universal acceptance among the major Christian churches would need overwhelming arguments and evidence against it to call it into serious question. In other words, traditional moral teaching would be given the benefit of the doubt and treated with high respect.

The social sciences would evenhandedly marshal the huge amount of new research on marriage, divorce, gay and lesbian unions, cohabitation, sexual abuse, and family life. Where our culture is heading on these issues would be presented from

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various ideological perspectives, but there would be a search for reliable empirical material that all sides would consider accurate. The many other disciplines could enter the conversation from their perspectives. And, of course, students would be invited to listen in and participate in appropriate ways.

Perhaps the conversation would not—and maybe should not—lead to a definitive conclusion. But such fair moral discourse could be funneled into the larger church discussion in the many ways already provided by the ELCA. Perhaps colleges could publish articles and books on these issues similar to what the seminaries did.

That is my idyllic expectation of how a Lutheran college faculty might carry on fair moral discourse. But such a marvelous thing is not likely to happen because the preponderance of “progressives” in the academy is so large that real moral discourse would be nearly impossible. That majority, reflecting American elite opinion in general, is so hefty that its opinions have often taken on the characteristics of unchallengeable truths. These “truths” are so deeply assumed by the majority that they no longer need to be argued; any intelligent person of good will would hold them. Those who depart from that alleged consensus are then considered to be neither intelligent nor goodwilled. Indeed, the “dissenters” are then often met with derision while those of the majority opinion are cheered on, sometimes literally so. Such an atmosphere tends to intimidate minority opinion and squelch debate.

I have much anecdotal evidence for the truth of such an analysis since I have been often in the minority in the academy and elite levels of the church on sexuality issues, as well as on political and other cultural issues. However, it is easy to move to other contexts where the deep-running assumptions are just the opposite. Neither situation makes for good debate. The academy, however, is definitely in the hands of the “progressives.”

The famous research by Klein, Stern, and Western¹ indicates a ratio of more than ten to one in favor of liberals over conservatives in six nationwide social science and humanities associations. Political and cultural liberalism are not exactly correlated but there are some pretty strong convergences. Earlier studies done on Lutheran colleges suggest that they are more liberal than other private colleges. My hunch is that few Lutheran colleges would have a healthy balance between “orthodox” and “progressive” faculty on these hot-button sexuality issues. The imbalance would be sufficient to make debate very difficult. The great majority would wade in on the “progressive” side and merely reinforce the already progressive views of the seminaries and the national level of the ELCA.

Of course, if you believe that the “progressives” have the right “take” on this matter you might cheer this kind of contribution

on the part of the colleges and universities. But such a one-sided contribution would not help the ELCA come to a careful judgment that both respects the Great Tradition and the challenges presented by the modern world.

But hold on. It **would** be possible to gather a fair balance of perspectives from across the colleges and universities that could indeed enrich this weighty debate. However, it would take the wisdom of Solomon and the courage of St. Paul to do the selection and the gathering. Thus far the ELCA has not been able to gather the proper balance for such fair moral discourse. Maybe the colleges and universities could actually pull off such a gathering. But who would do the selecting, the gathering, and the hosting?

End Note

1. For a summary of the findings see “National Survey Finds Academe Politically Imbalanced.” *NAS Update* 14.2 (2005): 9. The fuller study is published as Daniel B. Klein, Charlotta Stern, and Andrew Western, “Documenting the One-Party Campus,” *Academic Questions* Winter (2004-2005): 40-52.