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Knowing and a Tradition to be Known

Kurt Keljo

I have a bird feeder on two of the windows of my house. A number of birds which have become quite familiar to me over the years make regular appearances at those feeders, but occasionally an unfamiliar bird shows up. On these occasions, I quickly pull out my field guide to try to identify the stranger. Colleges and universities can also be viewed in such a manner. There are colleges and universities that are immediately recognizable as to their species, but there are also those strangers out there. In Lutheran higher education, there are colleges and universities that are immediately recognizable as such, and then there are those other Lutheran schools for which we must get out our field guides. For better or worse, much of what has been written about Lutheran or even Christian higher education often has the character of a field guide or perhaps a diagnostic chart. Mark Schwehn's paper provides a welcome contrast to such fare. Schwehn extends a vocational call. While I embrace the call, I would like to challenge some of his perspectives and issue an alternative form of his call to vocation.

Schwehn begins his discussion by inviting Lutheran colleges and universities to consider themselves to be Christian. He is not distinguishing Christian from Lutheran. Rather he is trying to remind Lutherans that they are part of a larger family. While this move has ecumenical implications, I believe it is chiefly a call to vocation. When we focus on our Lutheran identities, we often become preoccupied with what it is that makes us distinctively Lutheran and wind up producing field guides to Lutheran colleges and universities. Schwehn wants to call us to a task. The first element of that task is ecumenical. He calls us to be a voice in conversation with other Christian colleges and universities "about the ways to organize our common life and to integrate higher learning with the Christian faith."

I am not sure that the appellation, Lutheran vs. Christian, matters as much as the call. We are indeed called to have a voice in a larger conversation. I sometimes wonder if we have both lost our voice and ignored the conversation. To the degree that we have done either, Schwehn offers a welcome invitation. We do have perspectives to bring to the larger Christian conversation regarding the role of Christianity in shaping colleges and universities. There also is a larger conversation to engage than our own intra-Lutheran discussions. As Schwehn suggests, there is much we could learn from other Christian colleges and universities. In addition to the institutions Schwehn identifies, I would lift up such institutions as Calvin College and its intentional efforts to maintain a coherent academic ethos, Earlham College and its commitments to consensus and peace-making, Alverno College and its curricular innovations, Berea College and its emphasis on regional, low cost education, and Emory University and its work with interdisciplinary faculty seminars.

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Beyond this ecumenical aspect, Schwehn suggests that being a Christian university has certain epistemological implications which he develops in four sections. First, he argues that to be a Christian university means that our central task is to pursue the truth in an age in which such a pursuit has often been understood as a quest for power. I must confess that I am not entirely clear as to what is at stake for Schwehn here. What is the nature of the Christian contribution to the pursuit of truth? What sorts of truth are we dealing with? Is truth objective, propositional, relational, existential, or contextual? Do Christians have particular insight into the truth? To some degree, the mere call to pursue the truth is relatively empty.

His major concern is dissociating the quest for truth from the quest for power. Can we truly dissociate the two? In contrast to Schwehn, I am not convinced that the association of truth with power is either avoidable or negative. The larger question here has to do with the nature of power. The relationship between truth and power looks very different in the light of the Cross than it does in the light of empire. I share with him the desire to dissociate the quest for truth from the quest for domination, repression, and oppression. However, truth may well be closely associated with power, power understood in terms of love and service.

I would also suggest that we are not so much called to pursue the truth as we are to bear witness to the Truth. Christians are a people who follow someone who is described in our tradition as the Truth. We are committed to One in whom the universe finds its foundation and center. This faith gives us hope. There can be hope that at some deep level the disciplines hold together, that the academic enterprise has meaning and value, and that academic community, even human community, is possible. To have hope for such things is a great gift that Christian higher education has to offer. To have such a hope is part of what it means to bear witness to the Truth.

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Schwehn's second epistemological point is that Christians have certain ways of knowing to offer to the academy, "our own theories of knowledge and truth." That we have such theories is a worthy hypothesis. Modernity has sufficiently affected the tradition to cause me to question the hypothesis. I am more persuaded that certain theories of knowledge and truth fit more comfortably with the tradition than do others.

There likely are certain ways of knowing embedded in the tradition and in our communal habits. However, I maintain that we offer our tradition to be known as much as or more than we offer particular ways of knowing. The tradition has been productively studied and explored in many different ways, even if some ways may have been more fruitful than others. Our tradition is rich and complex enough to transcend any particular ways by which it is known, and is robust enough to endure multiple forms of inquiry. Indeed, I believe there are multiple ways of knowing which could be derived from the tradition.

To illustrate this contention, one can examine Schwehn's third point. Here Schwehn argues that Christianity needs to advocate for objectivity as an important form of knowing. He draws on the story of our being created in the image of God and the theme of repentance as support from the tradition for objectivity. However, a similar case can be made for connected knowing.

Created in the image of God we are called to relationship with God, connection to God. One of the chief failings of humanity is idolatry. Idolatry is the problem of wrong attachment. It is not so much that we fail to see ourselves objectively. Rather, we have the wrong loyalties. To know rightly we need to be rightly attached. We need to be connected. In a similar vein, to repent in the Bible means to turn around. This is not necessarily a matter that flows from seeing reality more objectively. To return is a matter of reattachment. We are reconciled, connected to what we had become alienated from. One could further build the case for connected knowing by drawing on such things as the biblical notion of knowing, which is associated with sexuality, and the Christian understanding of the Incarnation, God's connecting with us.

My point is not to claim that connected knowing is more biblical or more Christian than objective knowing. Instead, I would like to suggest that there is not any single Christian way of knowing. The Truth, truth and truths are subject to and the result of multiple ways of knowing. There may indeed be modes of knowing that are less suited to the Christian tradition than others. Even so, in Christianity the problem may not be so much what ways we know as who and what it is we know.

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Schwehn's final point is that Christians can help the academy recover a reading of texts whereby they bear what I would call authority. He suggests that if we are to maintain a liberal arts tradition whereby texts are able to teach us, we may need to learn from religious traditions wherein some texts are regarded as sacred. I do agree that the Christian tradition has something to offer here. We have a long hermeneutical tradition to contribute. Yet, we also have many allies within the liberal arts tradition for the endeavor

to recover the authority of texts. Indeed, it is not clear to me that the authority of texts in the academy has been as badly eroded as Schwehn suggests. Christians do have ways of understanding texts as authoritative to bring forward, but we are not and will not be alone in this task.

Christians do not have a particular epistemology to offer as much as we have a foundation for epistemology. We do not have a way of knowing to offer as much as we have a tradition to be known. Our challenge is to give the tradition life in the context of the academy and allow it to rub up against the disciplines and epistemologies of the modern world. This is not to say that we cannot advocate certain kinds of epistemologies. I appreciate Schwehn's doing so. He provides a wonderful model for a dialogue that ought to enliven academic discussion at Lutheran colleges and universities. I have sought to contribute to that discussion in this response. In responding, I am aware that my perspectives have been informed by James Fowler's discussion of the public church, an image I offer as a slightly different formulation of the kind of calling I have tried to shape.

Fowler (1987), drawing on the writing of Martin Marty and Parker Palmer among others, maintains that the public church has four characteristics:

First, the public church is deeply and particularly Christian.... It is a particular community of faith standing in the normativity of a religious tradition.

Second, it is a church committed to Jesus Christ, under the sovereignty of God, that is prepared to pursue its mission in the context of a pluralistic society.... A public church, therefore, is one that is faithful to its particularity and shares its central story but is prepared to join shoulder to shoulder with non-Christians in order to address and work redemptively at problems confronting or threatening the common good.

Third, a public church is one in which the encouragement of intimacy within its community and the concern for family feeling are balanced by care about the more impersonal and structural domains of public life.... The public church blesses and strengthens persons for Christian presence in the ambiguities and amoralities of large-scale corporate and governmental processes....

Fourth, a public church is one unafraid of engagement with the complexities and ambiguities of thought and ideologies in this age of ideological pluralism.... Therefore, it engages with others in confident openness, guided by the confidence that God often uses the truths of others to refine, regroup, or correct our own. The public church is a nondefensive church: it does not have to coerce or control.... It can be a witness that God's kingdom is not advanced by violence or by tactics of ideological storm troopers even if they carry the sign of the cross. (pp. 24-25)

Fowler claims in developing the fourth characteristic of a public church that these communities are committed to civility - "to a quality of rigorous but calm discussion of truth."(p. 25) This

brings me to my final point. Even as we are called to bear witness to the truth, are we not called to embody love? In an age that is increasingly polarized, alienated and violent, what greater calling could there be than to find ways to embody love as communities of learning? While I would not wish to reduce love in community to civility, neither would I want to dissociate the two. We could do far worse in our communities than aspire to civility in our efforts to embody love. In any case, love and truth are closely tied together in our tradition. Both are central to our calling as Christian colleges and universities in the Lutheran tradition.

In sum, I very much appreciate what Mark Schwehn has contributed to the conversation about Lutheran higher education through his article. I agree with his vocational call to dialogical reflection on our communal life and on the integration of Christian faith and higher learning. While I challenge his epistemological hypotheses, I value the model he provides. Too often, Lutherans

have removed the tension from the relationship between faith and reason, allowing them to function in totally different spheres. We have failed to keep the dialogue going between the Christian tradition and academic disciplines. The future of Lutheran higher education does depend on our ability to revitalize the role of the Christian tradition in academic life. The tradition must become integral to the academic endeavor, not simply the possession of the religion department or campus ministry. It belongs in dialogue with the whole life of the college or university as we seek to bear witness to the truth and to live in love.

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Fowler, James, Faith Development and Pastoral Care (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 24-25.

Lutheran Colleges: The Context for the Conversation

Thomas Templeton Taylor

This essay focuses on the first of Mark Schwehn's arguments, that we ought to conceive of Lutheran colleges/universities not as ends unto themselves but as voices among many within the conversation over Christ and culture. That is a worthy goal for church-related colleges. But ultimately, I will suggest, Lutheran colleges face a predicament: the American academic culture from which we seek respect is not much interested in such a conversation. Schwehn's sage advice is of much use in my personal vocation as an academic. The issue I will address is that of the vocation of the institution we call the college.

I have been deeply influenced by Lutheran educators: a Missouri Synod Lutheran undergraduate advisor, an LCA/ELCA Lutheran master's thesis director, and a Lutheran-turned-Episcopalian dissertation director. Their training in intellectual history rooted me in the traditions upon which Schwehn skillfully draws. References to Niebuhr and MacIntire, to Haskell and Putnam, not to mention Augustine and Luther, are comfortable and comforting.

But colleges are about more than traditions. They are dynamic communities whose members change yearly: The student body changes at a rate of about 25% every year, while the faculty changes

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at a rate of about 25% every eight years. By the time the ink is dry on any report, the special community around the report has changed--mission statements reflect yesterday's consensus. Change is the great constant, and we would do well to ask how the transforming trends of our age have affected the affinity between the purposes of the church and those of the academy.

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. . . the trend among mainline Protestant colleges has been first to play down and then to abandon their religious identities, a process in which many Lutheran colleges are only behind, not headed in a different direction.

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When Lutheran colleges were founded, the commonalities between higher education and church were great, and not simply because the church often started the college. The pursuit of "academic excellence" corresponded well to the educational needs of churchly people in the nineteenth century. One did not need to choose between academics and spirituality. But that was then. Nowadays, we are hard-pressed to defend "Lutheran higher education." We now face choices; the question haunting church-related colleges is whether the academy and the faith have anything left in common. Ecumenism, secularization,