

## **Does the Christian god have a body with two hands? One introduction to Lutheran higher education**

Throughout the application and interview process for a tenure-track position at PLU, no discussion of Lutheran higher education, the significance of a school owned by 600 ELCA congregations in the Pacific Northwest, or my understanding of what it might mean to teach at a Lutheran university ever took place. I could have been applying for a position at Cornell or the University of Washington. During new faculty orientation, our attention was focused on the singular importance of teaching and the need to work on the craft of teaching and mentoring students.

And, then, three weeks into the first semester, I received an invitation from the university's Office of Church Relations to attend a dinner and discussion of Lutheran higher education. My interest was piqued by the topic: while I hold two degrees from Lutheran institutions of higher learning, I had never been invited to a discussion of the very thing I had experienced for eight years: "Lutheran higher education."

On the evening of the dinner, sixteen (of the 30) new faculty were warmly received by the director of church relations, a Lutheran pastor, and his ebullient assistant. Before the meal began, he invited us to join him in prayer. Sitting next to me was a professor of physics, a native of China who had received his doctoral degree from one of the Ivies. Other than his campus interview, he had been in Tacoma for all of four weeks, his first time in the Pacific Northwest. Sitting to my other side was a professor of philosophy who held a master's degree in theology from a Southern Baptist seminary and a doctorate from a research university on the West Coast. A historian with no experience of religion or a Lutheran college sat across from me. During dinner, she informed us that a new faculty member in the division of social sciences, whose office was next to hers, received the invitation to this evening discussion and then snorted in her presence: "Well, here it comes: Lutheran brain-washing 101. No thanks." The self-identified Jewish professor of literature at the table said that she was actually interested in the evening: "I want to know what he's going to say about the Luther and the Jews," she remarked. And then wondered why we need to talk about religion. "Can't we just discuss spirituality? Religion divides but everyone's spiritual," she said. "Well, I wonder how much the religious piece really matters" wondered the new Spanish professor at our table. "My chair told me that the only people on campus who have to be concerned with the Lutheran thing are the pastors."

As we were finishing dessert, the director came to the podium and began his power point presentation. He offered a very brief biography of Martin Luther and then began to discuss different dimensions of Luther's thought: his teaching on justification by grace, the incarnation, law and gospel, and the two kingdoms of the right and left hands of God. It was at this point that the Chinese physics professor turned to me, knowing that I was a member of the Religion Department, and whispered: "The Christian god has a body with a right hand *and* a left hand? This seems very odd. What is he talking about?" It was at this point that I thought to myself: "I think you, the speaker, have lost this crowd." The people around me had dazed looks on their faces as the presenter continued to speak in a "foreign" language.

While much time was spent on various dimensions of Luther's theology, only a few moments were actually devoted to education. And that discussion focused on the relationship between education

and vocation. The historian at our table whispered a little too loudly, “Vocation? What is vocation?”

We were then asked if we had any questions. There was an uncomfortable silence until the Jewish professor asked why Luther promoted persecution of Jews and sanctioned the killing of peasants during the Peasant Uprising. To say the least, the speaker was not prepared for this line of questioning. He hemmed and hawed and appeared uncertain in his response. The historian then asked what he meant by vocation. In his response, he noted that Luther expanded “vocation” to include “just about every job” a person could have, not only religious professions. “So it’s about an occupation and every occupation is OK?” she asked. As the discussion came to a close, the assistant announced that she looked forward to seeing each and every one of us in chapel. “I assume this will be a Christian service, right?” asked the Jewish colleague of her table mates.

As a new faculty member, this was my one and only introduction to Lutheran higher education. A week later, when the same group was gathered at a faculty development workshop on teaching, it became apparent that the evening gathering with Church Relations was a wonderful opportunity for continued “cohort cohesion” but that the intention of the gathering had been less than successful.

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As an armchair critic, it is easier to reflect on such an experience in hindsight. And yet this was the university’s only attempt (at the time) to welcome faculty into the distinctive character of Lutheran education. It was an experience similar and, perhaps, quite dissimilar from what takes place at other Lutheran colleges and universities, an experience nonetheless that prompts a number of questions, questions that are not comprehensive in scope but simply emerge out of reflection on one introduction to Lutheran higher education, at a particular school in the early 2000s:

*1. How well do school leaders grasp the many faculty, administrators, and staff unfamiliar with Lutheran education?* Clearly, the church relations presenter was not aware that only one person out of sixteen had attended a Lutheran college. And does attending a Lutheran school guarantee an understanding of the Lutheran intellectual tradition? After all, how many practitioners in higher education are actually familiar with the history of higher education? And then, what of the diversity in religion in the room at that evening presentation – Confucian, Jewish, and Baptist – and resistance to any form of religion?

*2. Are school leaders sufficiently aware of the fact that most faculty have been trained to question what is presented as “normative,” bring a measure of healthy skepticism to their work, and thus engage in critical assessment of claims made about anything, including an educational tradition that springs from religion?* The presenter was befuddled by questions that didn’t fit what he thought was the point of the presentation. What’s surprising is that there seemed to be no recognition that the educational tradition being presented arose out of criticism of religion. Rather than “Lutheran indoctrination 101,” the evening’s presentation could have made an alliance with skepticism about anxious, conforming, and unhealthy forms of religion. That would have been a surprise to many in the room. It would have provoked more questions.

3. *How should the gifts of the Lutheran intellectual and educational tradition be presented to prospective students, faculty, administrators, and staff who have no experience of Lutheran education? Luther's theory of "two kingdoms and the two [metaphorical] hands of God" and the "doctrine" of the incarnation made no connection with the faculty present at this gathering. Or say it this way: Must one understand and affirm Lutheran language (theological or educational) before one can enter into and support Lutheran higher education? In other words, what role does "translating" the rich though limited language of Lutheran education play in welcoming faculty, administrators, and staff who have no experience of this "language"?*

4. *How well do school leaders understand the regional culture their school inhabits and how that regional culture influences expectations of higher education, religion, and church-owned/related schools? For instance, the Pacific Northwest, from Oregon through British Columbia, has one of the lowest levels of church affiliation in North America. In Washington State, there is deep and profound skepticism of government, higher education, and religion. On the other hand, a Lutheran school in the Southeast inhabits a regional culture suffused with the presence of Southern Baptists, Pentecostals, and historically Black Protestants. How might distinctive regional cultures shape the assumptions school leaders hold about Lutheran higher education?*

5. *Are school leaders sufficiently aware of the ways in which print, online, and television media shape perceptions of religion and thus, indirectly, colleges owned or related to religious groups? Given remarkable competition for market share and the tendency to promote extreme views for the sake of increasing market share, do Lutheran schools not have to wade through and criticize media-shaped perceptions of religion in order to claim another vision? Fundamentalism: No. Conformity to a religious code: No. Any and every religion is basically the same: No. Faith trumps rational thought: No. You're a Bible school: No.*

6. *How does the history of a college or university continue to shape its ethos, even when that history may be unknown to many administrators, faculty, staff, students, and alumni? The origin story of a school does not disappear: it remains alive in the living organism we call the college or university. How does that origin story continue to shape a school's identity? Do the Pietist (personal conversion) or Scholastic (ethically indifferent) origins of a school not shape its understanding of education? While our presenter spoke briefly about Luther, not one word was mentioned about the university itself and what its founders envisioned as its purpose.*

7. *Why can there be no cookie cutter approach to Lutheran education? In other words, how do regional culture, a school's history and contemporary ethos, its particular gifts and strengths, and community (marked by homogeneity or heterogeneity) shape a distinctive form of Lutheran education that might not be found anywhere else?*

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