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The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and St. Olaf College

The Lutheran Reformation of the sixteenth century began at a university with the instigation of a theological professor, Martin Luther. From the beginning that reformation included a strong intellectual element along with the religious, aesthetic, and practical. In its decisive break with Rome, the Lutheran movement articulated its faith in a refined and systematic theo-

^{37.} Mark W. Roche, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Letters, interview with the author, Dec. 9, 1999.

^{38. &}quot;About the University of Notre Dame," 1999-2000 fact sheet made available to campus visitors.

logical confession, the Book of Concord. As it developed it paid strong attention to the education of its clergy into this confessional tradition. Its
clergy were academically trained in university faculties. This emphasis on
an educated clergy is one of the defining themes of Lutheran identity. A
second theme is the calling or vocation of all Christians. Christians are to
act on behalf of their neighbors with faith, love, and hope in the specific
worldly roles they have been given. But they are also to act with competence. This means provision for the education of the laity as well as the
clergy, an education that extends from elementary through university education. A third theme in Lutheran theology is a high evaluation of human
reason as a guide to earthly, civil life; in the words of Luther, "How dare
you not know what can be known!" Lutheranism teaches that while reason
cannot achieve saving knowledge of God, it can reach trustworthy knowledge of our world.

These three themes combined in Lutheran lands to encourage the development of high-quality universities. The calling of the professor became revered in those countries, as were the schools in which they served. Lutheran universities became great engines of knowledge both secular and theological. However, with the coming of the Enlightenment they were susceptible to the same kinds of secularization pressures that we recounted earlier in this book. Moreover, the church itself has had a tendency to ossify into dry orthodoxies against which many renewal movements have protested.

Among the great waves of Northern European immigrants who came to America between the mid-nineteenth century and World War I were many Lutherans from different nations. While generally pietist in orientation, they were not anti-intellectual. They had the three themes we described above deeply engrained in their minds and hearts.

When they arrived on these shores, Lutheran immigrants immediately established churches and schools — academies, colleges, and seminaries. The Norwegians of the upper Midwest followed paths similar to those of other Lutheran ethnic groups. The early days featured many scrambles over church alignments. Theological and ethnic differences created a fluid church scene. But by 1917 most Norwegians wound up in the Evangelical Lutheran Church, which persisted until its merger in 1960 into the American Lutheran Church, combining both German and Norwegian groups. Finally, the American Lutheran Church merged in 1988 with the Lutheran Church in America, which included a large wing of colonial

Lutheranism and the Augustana Lutheran Church, a church of Swedish heritage. This new denomination became the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), a body of about 5.2 million Lutherans with headquarters in Chicago. These many mergers reflected both the acculturation of ethnic Lutherans into American life and their theological commonalities.

In 1874 a Norwegian Lutheran pastor, the Rev. Bernt Julius Muus, established an academy in Northfield, Minnesota, called St. Olaf's School. Interestingly enough, it was coeducational from the beginning and stressed lay rather than clerical education in the liberal arts and the Christian faith. St. Olaf added a college program in 1886. Negotiating its way through many church-political squabbles in its early years, St. Olaf finally became in 1899 the approved college of the United Norwegian Lutheran Church, the predecessor body to the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Its strong bond with this church was crucial for its flourishing from the turn of the century through the 1960s. ³⁹ The Norwegian love of literature, language, music, the Lutheran faith, and foreign missions was embedded in the life of the college through the many Lutheran Norwegians who taught at and attended the college.

It was under Rev. L. W. Boe (1918-1942), its energetic fourth president, that St. Olaf developed into a quality liberal arts college. He provided the context for two giants of Norwegian immigrant culture, O. E. Rolvaag and F. Melius Christiansen, to give St. Olaf national prominence in literature and choral music, respectively. The college achieved academic luster enough to be granted a Phi Beta Kappa chapter soon after his regime. The Christian character of the college was rich and unabashed, though mostly in an "add-on" context. Faculty and students from a strong Norwegian Lutheran church life lived out their academic lives at St. Olaf ensconced in a religious atmosphere.

In the post World War II years, the intellectual challenge of relating faith to learning came to the fore. Using the opportunity of a mid-1950s self-study and then later the occasion of its centennial, St. Olaf engaged in very sophisticated reflection about the nature of a Christian liberal arts college. The writing of two important documents in the life of the school,

See the fine historical account of St. Olaf by Mark Granquist, "Religious Vision and Academic Quest at St. Olaf College," in Models for Christian Higher Education, pp. 82-96.

Integration in the Christian Liberal Arts College (1956) and Identity and Mission in a Changing Context (1974), was strongly influenced by Harold Ditmanson, a theologian who gave his life's energies to the college. These documents lay out a Lutheran version of the engagement of faith and learning. The first document encourages an integration of all liberal arts learning through a framework provided by theology and philosophy and enjoins a "critical participation" of the faithful church in its cultural context.40 The second, written two decades later, calls for a "Christian context" or framework of meaning for the liberal arts at St. Olaf. "Christian context" means giving equal weight to theological and rationalistic approaches to reality, encouraging a dialogue about the vocation of the Christian teacher and probing "the relevance of Christian faith for the academic disciplines."41

For years the college enjoyed a steady supply of faculty and students from the Norwegian Lutheran tradition, but that began to change in the 1970s and accelerated thereafter. St. Olaf became a genuinely national liberal arts college as its reputation grew. But with that came a newly diverse student body and faculty that no longer automatically shared the assumptions of earlier generations. In the past decade the college has held vigorous - and sometimes contentious - discussions on its identity and mission, particularly as they are embodied in its curriculum. It has used the occasion of its 125th anniversary to produce a fine celebrative and reflective volume entitled Called to Serve: St. Olaf and the Vocation of a Church College. 12 Its mission statement also expresses a forthright intention to make the Christian faith in its Lutheran construal publicly relevant to all the facets of the college's ongoing life:

St. Olaf College, a four-year college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, provides an education committed to the liberal arts, rooted in the Christian Gospel, and incorporating a global perspective. . . . It offers opportunities for encounter with the Christian Gospel and God's call to faith. The college intends that its graduates combine academic ex-

cellence and theological literacy with a commitment to life-long learning....⁴³

St. Olaf enjoys an administration of theologically literate Lutherans. Its board — 60 percent ELCA Lutheran, including two bishops and a pastor — is chaired by renowned Lutheran church historian Martin Marty. Its programs in the arts — particularly Christian choral music — are nationally known and appreciated. It has had a significant Lutheran momentum that has kept it a seriously Christian college until the present day. Indeed, James Burtchaell found it to be one of the most attractively Christian colleges he examined among the seventeen he visited: "Clearly a Lutheran identity was more purposefully claimed, a lamination of scholarship with piety and theology more bindingly achieved, an institutional integrity with responsiveness to the church more amiably combined, and secularization much longer staved off, at St. Olaf than at Gettysburg."44 Though he voices doubts about its future, Burtchaell gives a rare bow of appreciation to St. Olaf's accomplishments.

St. Olaf enrolls about 3,000 undergraduates on its solidly built campus that occupies a remarkable hill above the flat and fertile Minnesota farm plains. It is a very selective school that maintains about a 50 percent Lutheran student body. Its ample faculty of 347 (275 full-time) constitutes a very low student/faculty ratio that has led to two painful retrenchments in the past decade. Somewhere between 30-40 percent of its faculty is Lutheran. St. Olaf is ranked forty-fifth among national liberal arts colleges by U.S. News and World Report and ranks in the top 5 percent among colleges in the country whose graduates earn doctorates in all fields. Its most popular majors currently are biology, economics, and English. Fully 40 percent of its student body participates in its music programs. 45

^{40.} Integration in the Christian Liberal Arts College, ed. Howard Hong (Northfield, MN: St. Olaf College Press, 1956), pp. 65-69.

^{41.} Harold Ditmanson, Identity and Mission in a Changing Context (Northfield, MN: St. Olaf College Press, 1974), p. 19.

^{42.} Pamela Schwandt, ed., Galled to Serve: St. Olaf and the Vocation of a Church College (Northfield, MN: St. Olaf College Press, 1999).

^{43.} St. Olaf College 1995-96 Academic Catalog, p. 27.

^{44.} James Burtchaell, The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 518. 45. St. Olaf Web site, www.stolaf.edu.