The Lutheran Intellectual Tradition: Paradox, Ambiguity, and Janusian Thinking
Or
How the Christian Faith Informs the Life of the Mind, and Vice Versa
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Introduction

I have had in mind for some time to write my own version of what it means to be a Lutheran scholar.

There are, you may be surprised to learn, diverse views of what this means among various members of this (WLC) college’s faculty. Some have argued that the only scholarship which is authentically Lutheran is that which uses the language of the Lutheran Confessions. I don’t particularly agree with that perspective, but it is one that does exist. That perspective seems to suggest that only those who are trained in theology and who have extensive knowledge of the Confessions can engage in scholarship that is truly “Lutheran.” When I say I don’t agree with that position, I mean to say that I consider myself a Lutheran scholar, that as evidenced by the work you presented today, you, too, are Lutheran scholars, whether you are Lutheran or not, and that a correct understanding of Luther’s theology will lead one to understand that true Lutheran scholarship requires neither a distinctively Lutheran “worldview” to be imposed on one’s scholarship, nor does it require a thorough integration of faith and knowledge or reason for it to be Lutheran. These latter viewpoints in fact are not Lutheran at all, but come from the Reformed tradition. Included in your folders for this symposium were several examples of articles written from that perspective, and the discerning reader will note expressions such as “integration of faith and reason,” “Christian worldview,” and doing scholarship from the “Christian perspective” as markers of that tradition.

I also have to say that just because a Lutheran engages in advanced study does not mean that the products of his or her work are evidence of Lutheran scholarship. A Lutheran chemist who synthesizes some new compound for Dow Chemical Company is not, by virtue of the fact that he is Lutheran, necessarily engaging in Lutheran scholarship. I have also encountered those who believe that they have an obligation to force a Christian application out of their research, no matter how arcane that may be, in order to be true to their calling as a Christian scholar. Such silliness is usually exposed for its superficiality.

I recognize that trying to define something by telling you what it is not is poor logic, bad form, and not very instructive. So, in order to develop some kind of working definition of Lutheran Scholarship, let’s first of all turn to the distinctives of Lutheran theology.

What Is the Lutheran Intellectual Tradition?

At the very least, the Lutheran intellectual tradition is informed by Luther’s theology, and at the core of Lutheran Christian faith is the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Whether you come
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from a Lutheran faith tradition or not, you will have learned this foundational doctrine at some point in your studies here. And it is absolutely essential to grasp the significance of that doctrine for faith and life if one is to seriously and consciously explore further how that faith informs intellectual activity.

The doctrine of justification can be considered from two perspectives. Objectively, all human beings have been cleansed of their sins and declared righteous. Jesus’ death and resurrection are sufficient to save every human being ever born. Subjectively, this righteousness is personalized when humans lay hold of their salvation through faith. This working of faith by the Holy Spirit is accomplished solely through the Means of Grace. Still, believers in this truth must acknowledge that saving faith doesn’t make one immune from temptation. We may be saints in God’s eyes, but we’re still sinners when it comes to living out our human existence. The Lutheran scholar realizes the paradox presented by this understanding of the human condition and says with Paul, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:24-25).

This paradox is one of the key distinctives Richard Hughes uses in his book, How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind, to describe the rich resources Lutherans have at their disposal in the practice of scholarship.

Luther prized the theme of paradox, not because the notion of paradox was philosophically intriguing, but rather because he found the notion of paradox at the very heart of the Christian Gospel. Indeed, the notion of paradox is deeply embedded in Luther’s “theology of the cross.” In this upside-down world of redemption, life emerges from the throes of death, the first are last and the last are first, and the Christian is the one who is simultaneously justified and a sinner. Because his “theology of the cross” stands at the very center of Luther’s thought, so does the notion of paradox. (Hughes, 2001, p. 88)

The other aspect of Luther’s theology that comes to bear on Christian scholarship is captured in the Latin expression finitum capex infiniti, or, “the finite is the bearer of the infinite.” Human beings are members of two kingdoms simultaneously, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. Both kingdoms, the kingdom of grace and the kingdom of nature, stand under God’s rule but in different ways. Not that one is merely a subset of the other as the Reformed argue when they say that all truth is God’s truth, but in the sense that the distinctions we make between the secular and the sacred are at times muddy, that the intellectual methodologies we employ in one don’t always work very well in the other, and that the truth claims made in one may seem to clash with truth claims in the other.

One additional attribute of Lutheran scholarship that should be mentioned is the demand for humility. Honest scholarship that comes at a problem from the perspective of man’s fallen condition recognizes the limitations of one’s abilities. To be sure, we should exercise our capacities to their fullest, but with the recognition that the truths of the universe are beyond our total comprehension. Still, we should confidently pursue truth wherever it takes us with the confidence that truth has a very interesting way of unfolding as time goes on and that a complete revelation awaits us in heaven.

It isn’t easy living with this sort of ambiguity. Paradoxes exist that test our beliefs. Compartmentalization of knowledge is not a tenable solution to the honest Christian. On the other hand, espousing opposite beliefs about something isn’t honest, either. And finally, resorting to simplistic clichés in the face of overwhelming evidence denies intellectual integrity. But this is exactly the type of academic tension that makes the kind of Lutheran scholarship undertaken at Lutheran colleges so vibrant and vital. Luther himself describes this tension in his 1520 treatise entitled “The Freedom of a Christian”:
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It does not help the soul if the body is adorned with the sacred robes of priests or dwells in sacred places or is occupied with sacred duties or prays, fasts, abstains from certain kinds of foods, or does any work that can be done by the body and in the body. The righteousness and the freedom of the soul require something far different since the things which have been mentioned could be done by any wicked person. Such produce nothing but hypocrites. On the other hand, it will not harm the soul if the body is clothed in secular dress, dwells in unconsecrated places, eats and drinks as others do, does not pray aloud, and neglects to do all the above-mentioned things which hypocrites can do. (Dillenberger, 1962, p. 54)

In other words, sacred and secular spheres overlap in remarkable ways and simply do not conform to the neat distinctions we wish to make from our finite angle of vision. As Hughes further describes the Lutheran intellectual ethos:

The authentic Lutheran vision, therefore, never calls for Lutherans to transform the secular world into the kingdom of God as many in the Reformed tradition have advocated over the years. Nor does it call for Lutherans to separate from the world as the heirs of the Anabaptists sometimes seek to do. Instead, the Christian must reside in two worlds at one and the same time: the world of nature and the world of grace. In Luther’s view, the Christian is therefore free to take seriously both the secular world and the kingdom of God. (Hughes, 2001, p. 90)

One of the images I have found to be useful to understand this tension between the secular and the sacred comes from ancient mythology. The Roman god Janus had two faces, one looking forward, the other looking backward. Their demeanors and perspectives were exactly opposite. In human terms we could say that one worldview was always optimistic and future oriented, the other reflective, regretful, and focused on the past. The Christian looks at life in two ways at the same time. We talk about saint and sinner, fallen and forgiven, humble but triumphant. In the same way, Lutheran scholars don’t try to look at problems from the perspective of one worldview, they see things both spiritually and temporally. They look for the areas of gray where one leaves off and the other begins. Lutherans live in the land of Janus’ peripheral vision.

How does all this play out in your lives as educated Christians? You may not characterize yourselves as scholars, but the fact that you have tried to do something today to demonstrate your academic abilities—something that your peers did not attempt—says that you value to some degree the use of reason; that attending a Lutheran Christian college has had some impact on your intellectual life; and that, implicitly if not explicitly, you don’t divorce your Christian faith from your academic pursuits. But in the event that you haven’t considered the relationship between your intellectual pursuits and your faith life, permit me to take a few minutes to explore this with you.

How Does Christian Faith Inform the Life of the Mind, and Vice Versa?

Having attempted to describe the unique particularities of Lutheran scholarship, I will now attempt to explore a bit further how the Christian faith can inform the life of the mind and, vice versa, how the life of the mind can inform the Christian faith.

To illustrate this challenge, I am going to describe the process I engaged in while conducting research for my doctoral dissertation. By doing so, I hope to illustrate the intellectual challenges and benefits for the Christian scholar. However, I also wish to state up front that at the time of this study, I did not have a clearly formed idea of what it meant to be a Lutheran scholar, let alone the dialectic that emerged between my research and my faith. Rather, I am telling this part of my story to illustrate the kind of intellectual journey I’m encouraging you to consider.
In the late 1970s and early 1980s, many private colleges in America were experiencing significant declines in students and money. Many closed, others merged, and still others radically modified their missions to attract non-traditional students. WLC was a small, struggling junior college, and I was a poor, struggling doctoral student. The College’s Board had just decided to make the transition from a two- to a four-year program. The question we lived with every single day was “Can WLC make it?” In the early years, we honestly never knew if we would have enough money or students to open the doors in the fall. My entire career has been in education administration, and I was especially interested in understanding better why some colleges survived those turbulent times and why others didn’t. It seemed to me that such knowledge would have a direct bearing on the kinds of decisions we would make at WLC.

I set about searching the literature to find other instances of research that explored the constructs of financial resiliency and strategic thinking. Eventually I defined financial resiliency in terms of four major variables that could be examined over time to determine positive or negative trends. I was especially interested in the types of strategic decision-making that were exhibited by college leaders in order to promote viability and continued institutional health. Just as many of you have had to search the literature to develop your theoretical backgrounds, I had to become very conversant with the existing research in business and educational management, strategic planning, higher education finance, and population demographics.

At the outset, my intentions were noble and certainly grounded in the reality that it was only by God’s grace that I was where I was, that the College existed at all, and that ultimately, regardless of our efforts, God would bless this College if it was his will to do so. That conviction was fairly deeply embedded as I began my work. Nevertheless, I also knew that God uses human beings, that I was in a position to learn something that could be put into effect to help the College survive, and that, doggone it, I was pretty smart and could figure out how this whole strategic thinking thing could be used to benefit everyone concerned. (Do you detect a bit of arrogance? Violation of the humility condition of the Lutheran intellectual tradition, remember?)

I decided to study four-year Lutheran liberal arts colleges in the United States. Of the 52 Lutheran colleges and universities existing at the time, 30 agreed to participate in the study. I obtained a great deal of financial and enrollment data (this was pre-Internet, mind you). I also developed a survey instrument that asked the respondents to indicate the use and perceived impact of 80 strategies which had already been identified as “survival strategies” by others in the field.

Thanks to a very significant study by Ellen Earle Chaffee in 1984, I was able to employ a typology of strategic thinking that helped make sense out of the decisions institutional leaders were making. According to Dr. Chaffee, there are two primary ways to think about any organization. One we called the “organismic” view. In other words, colleges are like organisms that exist in and are sensitive to their environments. Leaders who think about their colleges in this manner engage in strategic decision-making that is characterized by actions such as environment scanning, SWOT analysis, cost/benefit analysis, and other management strategies that help the organization adapt to its changing environment.

Let me give you some examples. If you need more students and the number of 18-year-olds is declining and your community just opened a cheap community college four blocks down the road, you might decide to lower admissions standards in order to serve more first generation and underprepared students. You could start evening programs for adult learners, open satellite store front campuses, develop international exchange programs, provide high demand technical programs, or start degree completion programs. In terms of staffing, you might lower your overhead by using more adjunct faculty, reducing the support staff, deferring maintenance projects, going to distance learning or online instruction, eliminating high cost and low demand majors like music or chemistry.
All of these strategies are intended to lower overhead costs and increase enrollments and revenues. Such strategies are adaptive in nature and are intended to change the institution to react to the changes in the environment. There are many examples in Wisconsin of colleges that employed many of these strategies during the turbulent 1970s and 1980s in order to survive.

The other type of strategic thinking is post-modern in the sense that it focuses on the meaning of the organization and the interpretation of that identity to others. The so-called interpretive model of strategic decision-making focuses on communication, managing the metaphors used to describe the college, identifying willing constituents, enhancing the quality of the shared experience, and developing shared understandings and commitment to the mission of the college. Institutions that engaged in interpretive thinking tend to sharpen their missions, invest in quality faculty and staff, place heavy emphasis on soliciting significant gift revenue, recruit students who could resonate with that mission and who enroll because of the value added by that mission. Instead of cutting budgets, college presidents spend their time “telling the institution’s story” to new contributors. Instead of putting ads in the paper for adult learners, interpretive colleges hire more admissions counselors.

At this point, let me interject another particular challenge to remaining true to the Lutheran intellectual tradition. I remember quite vividly during my research questioning many of the foundational underpinnings of my Christian faith. Not because I found them unbelievable on the surface, but because I had become so immersed in the scientific method of reasoning. I found myself subjecting everything to the coherence and correspondence tests of logic, entertaining hypotheses that offered alternative explanations for things described in the Bible, and enjoying the dangerous thrill of what Descartes called “mitigated skepticism”— a suspension of belief while believing. This deceit is like smoking marijuana without inhaling. It is utter hypocrisy. And it came about, not because I was being bombarded by false teaching (after all, how much is there in education administration that is contradictory to the Bible?), but because I had adopted a particular mode of intellection that leaves little room for the sacred, the mystical, the divine. I mention this because it is so imperative for the Lutheran scholar to remember his finitude and remain humble under the awesomeness of a sovereign God.

Ultimately, my Christian faith in Jesus and the Bible’s teaching of salvation by grace through faith in him alone helped shape the nature of my scholarship. How strategic decisions are formed may be of vital importance to the survival of small colleges, but it is God at work in the world who determines the places and the times of man’s rising and falling. And it is God’s grace that allows colleges like WLC to thrive. This faith perspective has provided a tremendous amount of confidence in those who try our best to lead the College. It also provides a powerful motivation for us to use every ounce of energy to his glory, not our own.

Christians who approach their scholarship with this type of perspective aren’t going to shy away from what they may uncover because God is finally going to use their efforts as he sees fit. When we humble ourselves and submit our work to him, it will be blessed.

What I eventually found was quite interesting, and has certainly informed my views not just about this College, but about the Church, and about my meaning and purpose in life. So in that sense I’m using this example to show how my scholarship has had a direct bearing on my life as a Christian—a life that has played itself out professionally for 22 years as the academic dean of this College, but also throughout 30 years as an educational administrator. The result of my study showed pretty conclusively that utilizing either type of strategic thinking alone was not as powerful as engaging in both modalities at the same time. Those institutions that emphasized interpretive thinking were significantly more resilient during financially trying times than those that utilized primarily adaptive strategies.
Here comes that mythological image of Janus again. How can one hold two competing constructs in mind at the same time? But this is exactly the dialectic thinking that Lutheran scholars engage in all the time. This is exactly the kind of dialogue between opposing viewpoints that has the potential to lead to greater understanding. It is Hegel’s thesis, antithesis, synthesis performed in organizational development and shaped by Lutheran theology.

This discovery has helped chart the course of action for WLC. Many of the decisions we made in the early years were intuitive, but most were confirmed or directed by this type of thinking. Things like establishing a common architectural vernacular for all new buildings; demanding that faculty have or obtain the terminal degree; creating measurable expectations for teaching, scholarship, and service for the faculty; raising admissions standards; promoting a very high quality of campus life; assessing academic outcomes in order to continuously improve the quality of teaching and learning; and retaining a strong focus on the value and marketability of the traditional liberal arts—these were all done to create a college that understood what it was, who it served, and the quality with which it would do it. Compromise has not been part of WLC’s culture.

The Lutheran Dialectic: Dealing with Paradox and Ambiguity

I share this description of my dissertation research to make a couple important points. First, my scholarship during those two intense years had a profound effect not only on how I think about WLC, but on how I think about my congregation, my church, my family, my life. I cannot help applying my insights to the mission and ministry of the church and as a result have felt compelled to say and write some things that at times make others uncomfortable.

But conversely, I also have to say that my Christian faith, and my Lutheran way of thinking, has helped me move beyond thinking about the very secular notions of financial resilience and strategic management in spiritual terms. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not advocating a unified theory of business management and planning for the Church, nor am I suggesting that I artificially impose a Christian spin on a secular business model.

What I am saying is that the Christian scholar cannot divorce his theological framework from his intellectual modes of thought. I think about these things AS A LUTHERAN CHRISTIAN, and at the same time what I am as a LUTHERAN CHRISTIAN is influenced by what I learn from these secular things. Not only do I evaluate secular theories from the paradigm of my Christian faith, I also use my secular knowledge to better understand the object of my faith. This is not the same as polluting the sacred with the profane. We are to be in the world, but not of it. It means that, guided by God’s Word, we are free to explore everything else. The analogy I like to use for this is a lighthouse. If the secular university espouses lenifiehadt, the value-less freedom to learn, then students are like sailors who set off into a fog bank with no point of reference other than what other sailors have told them from similar experiences (reviewing the literature). Where they go is subject only to their direction, the wind, the currents, and other things we call “limitations of the study.” But the Christian scholar can set sail with the lighthouse of God’s Word as the reference point. The light and the foghorn provide a metaphysical reference point against which to evaluate the hypotheses of exploration.

Thinking Strategically as a Lutheran Scholar

How do you think about yourself? Perhaps you employ that century-old linear strategy of management by objectives. You are at point A, and you want to get to point B. You identify the education, resources, and tools you will need, and you develop a set of action plans and a timetable to move from A to B. Your dream is to be the CEO of a Fortune 500 company by the age of 40.
Therefore, you need a BS and an MBA in business, a trophy wife, exactly 2.5 kids, a sprawling house with a three-car garage in Mequon, and a carefully laid-out plan to move up the corporate ladder.

But you and I know that life is never that simple. We fail calculus. Women won't look at us. A BA in communication is about as good as it's going to get. Linear thinking is very limited—not only for us but for colleges and businesses as well.

So you engage in adaptive strategizing. You conduct a SWOT analysis. You identify your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. You carefully lay these out on a piece of paper and then select that course of action which takes the most advantage of your strengths, minimizes your weaknesses, seizes the best opportunities while avoiding the threats. This is in fact a very logical and sensible way to make decisions. However, things change. You have to drop out of school because you can't afford a private college. You operate only in your comfort area and don't try to stretch yourself to overcome perceived weaknesses. And finally, in the interest of being able to adapt to changing circumstances, you ultimately change who you are—all in the interest of just surviving.

But the Christian has an identity. It is linked to the millions of Christians who have gone before and to all who will come after. This identity is interpreted to others through actions that amplify and clarify that identity. You approach challenges in life with confidence, knowing that who you are is more important than what you do, that changing circumstances in life are God's ways of strengthening and perfecting you, that triumphs are causes for thanking God, and failures are opportunities for repentance and restoration. It was this interpretive insight that helped inform my understanding of grace. And it was God's grace revealed in his Word that helped me put interpretive strategic management into a useful context for this college and the Church at large.

Conclusion

How will your faith inform your future life of the mind? How will your intellectual development at WLC help support you in your Christian walk? The Lutheran intellectual tradition provides a rich resource from which to draw. It is based on paradox and ambiguity. Sin and grace. Athens and Jerusalem. The cross and the empty tomb. We have feet in both worlds. How the languages of these very different dimensions are used and communicated will determine how you continue to participate in the life of the mind. I pray that God will lead you to look at your entire life as an opportunity to develop your intellect and exhibit in your lives the attributes of the truly educated Christian.

References


