

What's Lutheran About Higher Education? Theological Presuppositions

Robert W. Bertram

[Printed in "What's Lutheran About Higher Education?" Papers and Proceedings, 1974 Lutheran Educational Conference of North America, St. Louis, MO January 11-12, 1974.]

(Four Theses)

In the encyclopedia of the university's arts and sciences, the closer you advance toward that center where humanity was more substantively the object of your studies the more it would make a difference whether the general view of man from which you proceeded was Christian or something else.

(Editor's note: Dr. Bertram kindly agreed to present the luncheon address previously scheduled to be delivered by Dr. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, Graduate Professor of Systematic Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Dr Piepkorn died suddenly in December of 1973. In his introductory remarks Dr. Bertram indicated that while enunciating four theses to develop his theme, he would treat in detail only the first of them. During the question and answer period, much of his thought on the remaining three theses was presented, and he has consented, upon request of many LECNA members, to have this discussion also printed in these **Proceedings**.)

- 1) What is Lutheran about higher education is the claim to be able to speak not just for one denomination but for the whole of catholic Christendom and to be held publicly accountable for that whole claim. But such claims to universal validity and universal accountability are characteristic also of good higher education.
- 2) What is Lutheran (or Christian) about higher education is the discovery that Christian higher education is practically the same as any good higher education. What is distinctively Christian is the distinctively Christian ground from which that otherwise very general discovery proceeds.
- 3) What is Lutheran (or Christian) about higher education is that it is a way for students to learn about sin under Christian auspices.
- 4) What is Lutheran (or Christian) about higher education is the persistent re-asking of that very question, and the persistent re-answering of it.

Elaboration of Thesis One

If there was anything that the original Lutherans - say the first signers of the Augsburg Confession - did not want to be, it was original Lutherans. They wanted to be neither original nor merely Lutheran. They wanted to be only Christian - only that but also all that. No more than that but also no less. When they claimed as they did, to be confessing only what all faithful Catholics and the prophets and apostles before them had ever confessed, their claim was not so much an act of modesty as it was an act of audacity, at least of extraordinary self-confidence. They were saying in effect to the whole church and to the world that in that historical circumstance their confession was the one best way to confess the faith, for all Christians.

That is the sort of all-out claim which no Christian group can make within the hearing of the rest of Christendom and expect to get away with it - that is, without being challenged. The Lutheran confessors not only expected to be challenged, they invited challenge. Yes, they pleaded to be challenged. Most daringly of all, they called for God Himself to check them out. But also they appealed to the whole church not only of their own time but for all time to come to scrutinize their confession for its fidelity to God's Word. The confessors, in short, opened their books to public audit. And they did so, not because they were unsure of their confession but precisely because they were sure of it. They were sure enough to be utterly open and vulnerable. That is being church - and confessional and Christian and classically Lutheran. But isn't that also an objective of higher education: to claim only that which is valid universally but, in venturing such a large claim, to risk wholesale exposure?

However, that bold brand of Lutheranism - so heroically vulnerable in its claim to universality, demonstrable universality at that - is not the sort of Lutheranism, alas, which most of our churches dare to present to the world nowadays. I believe we could again begin to dare that, even in our higher education. Unless we do dare it, we are doomed to continue thinking of Lutheranism in the same cautiously insulated way we now do, namely as but one denominational alternative among others. That is playing it safe. That way our confession is less likely to be questioned by others, since we have been careful in the first place not to implicate them in its claims. But that way there is also no reason ultimately for Lutheranism's extension into other people's commitments, let alone into their arts and sciences. Then all we claim for our confession is that it reflects the particular way the Gospel happens to strike us Lutherans and our Lutheran ancestors and, just maybe (as we cross our fingers) our children. Whether or not our confession ought to strike other folks that way, we can at best wish. Even then we don't dare wish it for them too loudly lest we create an impression of intolerance. As if it were the claim to catholicity which makes for intolerance. But does it, really?

In fact might not the opposite be the case? Isn't it the denominations which want to be left alone theologically - out of fear of exposure, I suspect - which are most prone to intolerance, intolerance not to outsiders perhaps but at least to their own membership? Isn't this a real and present danger with those who are concerned to be just Lutheran without risking Lutheranism's catholicity and - aye, there's the rub - its ecumenical

accountability? And if such escapism, such flight into religious pluralism for one's own denomination immunity - if that is what is Lutheran about higher education, then isn't higher education under such auspices well-nigh impossible? I am tempted to say: show me a body of Christians who settle for a Christian faith which is merely their own version of it, and I will show you a church-body which is but one short step away from the harshest intolerance. For, having begun by saying ever so modestly, this is only the Gospel the way we see it, they are patsies for the next step which says, therefore the way we see it is all that matters. So instead of church, they mistake themselves for some private voluntary organization which speaks only for itself and which, like any business corporation, can decide by a majority vote of its members what its employees shall and shall not teach. As some of us can attest, denominations can get away with that without serious challenge from the rest of Christendom, so long as they prudently avoid claiming too much universality for their own confessions and content themselves with cultivating only their own traditions. And they have correspondingly narrow institutions of higher education to show for it.

However, as we are saying, to claim to be speaking only for Lutherans is not very Lutheran whether in higher education or anywhere else. To claim to be speaking for the whole Christian church, indeed for the God of all that is - that is Lutheran. Ah, but then wouldn't we be subject to audit by the whole Christian Church? Exactly. And wouldn't we be especially vulnerable if we made that claim in places of higher education? Right, especially vulnerable. But what if we could not make good on our claim to catholicity? Well, then, to quote one of the favorite sons of this state, if we cannot stand the heat we ought to get out of the kitchen. Or to put the matter a little more positively, let's do recapture the catholic boldness of our radical confessional heritage, and of course re-incur all the exhilarating risks and vulnerability thereunto appertaining. In the process we may not last any longer than the University of Wittenberg did. But oh, while we last, if we could do that much or even half that much, for all of Christendom and higher education!

Open Discussion

(After a re-reading of all four theses, response was invited from the audiences)

First Question: I don't want to let Bob get away without saying a word about one of the other remaining theses. And I guess I want to ask whether I understand number two as he wants it understood. In my notes: "the discovery that Christian higher education is the same as practically **any** good higher education, but what's distinctive is the Christian **ground** from which that discovery proceeds." Is that it?

Bertram: Right.

Questioner: Do I hear you correctly that it's not the Christian ground for all the ramifications of the education, it's the Christian ground for the discovery? There's chemistry and economics and history and business administration, all these disciplines

and their sub-disciplines. I take it you are not claiming that these disciplines rest on Christian grounds but that the discovery about the nature of higher education and the nature of the Christian enterprise rests on Christian grounds.

Bertram: Right, that much at least I was trying to say. Really I wanted to venture something even a bit more radical than that. (Perhaps what I regard as "even more radical" is what Dr. Jungkuntz was asking in the first place.) The standard conundrum is, "Is there such a thing as Christian mathematics?" And everybody in the room laughs and says, "Of course not." And the answer truly is "Of course not." You listed other disciplines in which the same answer would apply: chemistry, economics, even disciplines outside the laboratory sciences. How about a discipline as problematic and controversial as Dr. Ahlstrom's, namely, history? Is there such a thing as Christian history, Christian historiography — say, a Christian history of China? I am tempted to reply that even in the case of the discipline called history there is no such thing as Christian history. I mean history — like the history of China — Christianly revealed. History - writing done well is history - writing done well whether it is done by Christians or non-Christians.

Now that discovery is not particularly earth-shaking. But what I am suggesting is that it makes a great deal of difference what your grounds are for making that discovery, and your ground for asserting it. Any secularist, any noble pagan can see there is no such thing as Christian chemistry. So at least in their conclusions the Christian and the non-Christian are in agreement. But once they begin to probe as to why they drew that conclusion they are going to discover that the grounds for their reaching that conclusion are really quite different. The secularist makes the statement literally as a negative, "There is no such thing as Christian chemistry." The Christian, too, agrees with that negative form of the statement. But then he adds, "There is also an affirmative, a positive, shall I say a celebrative reason for asserting that there is no Christian chemistry. In short, **thank God** there is no such thing as Christian chemistry. Thank God that there is such a thing as chemistry. And thanking God is in this case not just a pious expletive but an assertion of full theological seriousness. In other words, God still runs chemistry, thanks be! At least, more or less He does. Just how far our chemistry teaching and learning are His operation, I obviously don't know. But in any case what Christians do have ground for believing is that chemistry has a great deal about it that is godly.

Just because there is no such thing as Christian chemistry it does not follow that chemistry therefore is god-less, spiritually neutral, something that God has nothing to do with. On the contrary, the chemical realities of the world and our teaching and learning of them are, as Christians believe, God's own doing. So much so that there are chemistry professors galore, by far the most of them perhaps, who do God's chemical bidding without even knowing whose bidding they are doing. That can be an advantage. That way God does not have to worry whether the world's chemists are sufficiently Christian in order for Him to advance the science of chemistry. That should be a source of assurance to us all. It can be that if our own final source of assurance is Christian. We Christians, so we claim, are in on the happy secret of who is behind all this chemistry. It is always reassuring for employees to know "who is in charge around here," at least when the

operation is in good hands. Given that basic reassurance, it is then a further assurance to know that chemistry does not have to be Christian in order to be good — that is, in order to be God's.

Put it another way. Christians, and I should hope this would be especially true of Lutherans, feel under no particular compunction to say, "Only that is Christian which is **distinctively** Christian." True, that is a fallacy which we have often gotten ourselves into when we ask the question, "What is Lutheran or Christian about higher education." Often we read into that sort of question a premature assumption. We assume mistakenly that in order for something like higher education to be Christian it would necessarily have to be unique, different from any other good kind of education. It would have to be something only Christians have and nobody else has, else it could not qualify as Christian. Since when? Admittedly, that may be so about many things, many of the most central things of the Christian proclamation, namely that they are distinctively Christian. But that certainly is not true of **all** the things which Christians do and enjoy. That is a great Christian fact to celebrate. For isn't it so that there are many, many things which characterize Christian existence even though they don't characterize Christian existence alone? How good it is to know that we Christians are not confined and limited to only those things which make us different, exclusive. There is many a good thing which characterizes Christian existence, for example, Christian higher education, yet not only in the sense that it is **uniquely** Christian but also in the sense that it is simply **characteristically** Christian.

Let's put the matter in the parlance of the theologian. We have been asking, What is the Christian reason - not only the negative but also the affirmative reason, for saying that there is no such thing as Christian chemistry or Christian political science? What we are asking about, in theological terminology, is the Christian doctrine of creation. The creation is available in one measure or another not only to the participation but also the knowledge, the intellectual grasp of all of God's human creatures, Christian or non-Christian. It comes as no great surprise that people doing political science, for example, are capable of doing it reasonably well independently of whether they are Christians or not. This then might raise a second orbit question, "Wouldn't you expect that Christian political scientists would do political science better than non-Christian political scientists would?" Yes, I guess you would expect that, and I suppose that God does have a right to expect that. Yet I have to say that in my experience that expectation is not being awfully conspicuously fulfilled. Perhaps that failure simply reflects the low estate of the Christian sector generally nowadays. May be in other generations Christians did perform better than their non-Christian neighbors, and did so conspicuously. However, if even in our own day the question keeps arising, Isn't there some way in which Christians do things superiorly, then I think the way we might better state the contrast between Christian and non-Christian is as follows. I'm not sure that Christian political scientists do political science all that much better than non-Christian political scientists do. But what I certainly hope is that Christian political scientists do political science better than those same political scientists would if they were not Christian. Now that would be some gain. At least let us be thankful for that much. When you look at the Christian political scientists on your faculty, just say, they could have been worse.

Second Question: Well, I think I understand well what you mean. It does seem to me that you are perhaps presuming a more objective kind of chemistry and political science and mathematics then you really have a right to presume. After all these are human disciplines, and it's people who decide the kinds of problems that political scientists and chemists and mathematicians and historians will deal with. Even the hard sciences do not really grow out of themselves. They grow out of the endeavors of human beings who have values and whose work in their discipline is in part dictated by the kinds of people they are. So there is a sense in which the kind or work done in chemistry by a chemist may be different if his value system is different. Or the kinds of problems he cares to deal with as a chemist are different from those of the non-Christian.

Bertram: I do appreciate that comment. In fact, my own comments were meant to presuppose the one you made. Mine were only a kind of antiphon to the one you just made — a kind of corrective, may I say, to the way in which your sort of comment has often been exaggerated among us. May be my experience differs from the experience of the rest of you. My experience generally has been one in which that accent of yours has been the overwhelming one, often to the point of caricature. And I suppose I had hoped with my comments of a moment ago to provide a counter accent by way of balance. Nevertheless, even when I concede what you said about the false presumption of "objectivity", even when I concede that the most traditionally objective sciences — astronomy, for example, or mathematics or some of the more questionably objective ones like economics — are not really so objective after all, do I by that concession contradict the point I was making: namely, that the discovery that there is no such thing as Christian chemistry may itself be a Christian discovery? To be sure, as more and more of the scientist himself and his valuings enter into the object of his research, naturally his conclusions, his judgments, are going to reflect himself and who he is. That I suppose is true enough. But that very observation, of course, has been made by non-Christians as well as by Christians, just as both Christians and non-Christians can agree on the observation that there is no such thing as Christian chemistry. Allow that to stand as an observation which both Christians and non-Christians agree to, namely, that as you reach those perimeters of objectivity where the man's own subjectivity begins to transgress those limits, his "object" will reflect increasingly his own subjectivity. In other words, granted that subjectivity makes a substantive difference. However, I would still ask whether the kind of valuing that the man does necessarily makes his science less valuable if the kind of valuing he does is not Christian. Different, perhaps. But less valuable? Suppose his scientific conclusions are just plain good, despite the fact that they reflect his own non-Christian subjectivity. Isn't that possible?

Suppose the non-Christian in question is a humanist. Lying here on the table is a book which Mrs. Farwell has been reading for her book club; the author is Abraham Maslow. Maslow is a humanist psychologist. Because he is, you and I might say, well, there are all sorts of places in Maslow's view of man where we would have to bow out, being the Christians we are and his being the non-Christian he is. To be sure. Yet at the same time it may be a bit more difficult, might it not, to identify just how it was that objective clinical research and therapeutic techniques had been vitiated by the **humanism** in Maslow's subjectivity. It may well be that where his conclusions went wrong they could

have been corrected by simply improving on his humanism, not necessarily by transforming his assumptions into uniquely Christian ones. In short, maybe what Maslowian psychology could profit from is not less humanism but more of it, and more of the right kind of humanism.

Now having said all this, I would like to come back to the main thrust of what you said. I don't mean to say for a moment that Christian subjectivity may not enhance what a scientist does with his object. Emil Brunner used to speak of the law of the closeness of relations. What he was talking about was that in the encyclopedia of the university's arts and sciences, the closer you advance toward that center where humanity was more substantively the object of your studies the more it would make a difference whether the general view of man from which you proceeded was Christian or something else. That Brunnerian thesis is still true and still pertinent. However, I think what is also needed in our appeal to the people we have to reach today is to affirm the secular - however, to affirm the secular for radically Christian reasons. That is why I have been arguing that our reasons — **our** reasons — for saying there is no such thing as Christian chemistry - ought to be Christian reasons.

Third Question: Would you comment on Theses 3 and 4.

Bertram: All right. First of all, Thesis Three. I owe that definition of a Christian university to one of my all-time favorite colleagues, John Strietelmeier of Valparaiso University. A church-related university is a place where young people learn about sin under Christian auspices. Not that they need Christian auspices to learn about sin. That they can learn elsewhere, perhaps almost as well. No, the implication is rather that Christian sinning is apt to be a more auspicious context in which to learn about sinning at all. What do they learn about sin that is particularly helpful for having learned it under Christian auspices?

By Christian auspices I do not mean merely the fact that the campus has a department of theology and a chapel. If I were a church-related university administrator today and you gave me a choice between a) a department of theology with required courses in theological instruction, b) or a chapel with the kind of liturgical commitment you might expect from undergraduates today, or c) a campus community with a sizeable majority of Christian faculty and Christian students, I think that if I had to choose between those three, I'd choose the third one, the Christian community. For it would be hard to imagine having the other two without first having that community. That's generally what I would mean by "under Christian auspices."

But under such auspices, what advantage is there for learning about sin? Well, for one thing, one advantage that comes to mind, one cardinal Christian lesson about sin is that sin is not ultimate. I don't think that that lesson, by itself, would come as a revelation to most American youth. By itself, in fact, that is not a Christian lesson at all. I mean that many people, Christian and otherwise, believe that sin is far from ultimate. As a matter of fact, for many folks what is far more important about sin than its ultimacy is that it is fun.

Or at least necessary. Or at the very least, inevitable. Christian lesson about sin is that there is a **reason** why sin is not ultimate and, apart from that reason, sin **is** ultimate. In Jesus as the Christ (and sooner or later you've got to name the Name) — in Jesus — the Christ sin is not ultimate. But anywhere else it is. That is partly what I had in mind by my third thesis, concerning the advantages of learning about sin under Christian auspices. The first lesson, as we just now said, is that in Jesus Christ sin has been domesticated, trumped, dethroned. But a second lesson is like unto that. What Christians learn in the process is that therefore they need not be so intimidated by sin that they hesitate to stand up in prophetic criticism of it. I guess the older I get and the more involved I become in political situations not of my own choosing, the more I am convinced that one of the greatest of the *beneficia Christi* is the gift of speaking judgment. The Lord knows it is a difficult enough lesson to accept criticism of oneself. But often enough it is more difficult by far to have the guts, if I may use such an expression, the sheer Christian courage to stand up and advance critical judgment against someone else especially against principalities and powers in high places. And what makes that already difficult task even more difficult is that there seem to be so many clear biblical injunctions against it, against the passing of judgment. What is significant though, is that the same prophetic biblical spokesman who inveigh against passing judgment are the very ones who perhaps in the selfsame sentence do just that themselves, that is, pass judgment. Which only underscores that judgment is by the Lord, not by us, and that any mere mortal who dares to speak that judgment in His behalf had better proceed with fear and trembling. And yet, **not** to speak His judgment when that is what He requires is more fearful still.

In this connection I remind you of one of the sub-themes in Professor Ahlstrom's presentation this morning, and that is the high endorsement I took him to be giving to that one of the three strands in Lutheran higher educational tradition, to the **critical** tradition. I would endorse his endorsement, and I would say that the theology of the Lutheran Reformation is peculiarly suited to that capacity for criticism. Martin Luther observes, not once but many times, that one of the greatest cultural achievements of the Reformation in his own lifetime was the way ordinary Christian people were suddenly able to stand up and to make judgment, *indicium* upon all the realms and sectors of secular and ecclesiastical life. For example, said Luther, the plainest people in the parishes are now, thanks to the unloosing of the Gospel in their midst, so liberated that they can judge the vocation of a wife or of a merchant or of a prince to be every bit as prestigious and pleasing to God as the vocation of a monk. And so Luther predicted that if the Reformation would continue — though he did not seriously think it would — then before long all of life would be *sub judicio nostro*, "under our judgment." That is, it would be subject to our own critical evaluation of it.

Now Luther took such ability to criticize to be an act of great freedom. Of course he had good precedent for that. That observation did not originate with him. He had appropriated that from the New Testament. At 11 Corinthians 3 Paul, in his rather esoteric distinction between the two dispensations, tells how his fellow Jews gathered in synagogue to read from Moses, that is, from the Torah. When they are face to face with the *logos tou theou*, that law of God which judges sin, they cannot bear to face it and instead have to continue to read it the way their forefathers had had to look at the blinding terrifying light of

Moses' face when he came down to them from the mount of legislation. They had to have their Moses — that is, their Law — veiled, masked, toned down, filtered. So intimidating was God's critical activity against them. That is indeed what the divine criticism is, intimidating, whether you have to suffer it against yourself or have to exert it against others. It's intimidating, that is, "until you have seen the Lord," the Lord Christ. Seeing him enables the sinner to look the divine criticism — or at least to begin looking the divine criticism — full in the face without being destroyed by it.

Now that happens also to be the modern western university tradition at its ideal best: free to be criticized and to criticize. That being so, might we not expect that one of the happiest assets for Christian community of teaching and learning would be that it is empowered with the kind of liberty to raise the Mosaic masks and to engage in criticism without fear of even that awful reprisal which comes upon all Christians and non-Christians alike who pass judgment. You know that if you judge you will be judged in return. But then if we know that, how can we so boldly extend sovereignty to all the people in a society like ours and thereby extend the franchise and with that extend the obligation, not just the right but the obligation, to be critical. For isn't that what the "public opinion" in a democratic society dares to do: to exercise a lawful and godly responsibility for judgment without fear or favor? In our society the people are obligated by God himself, so we believe, to cooperate in the divine *krinein*, *krima*. (That's where we got our word criticism.) The citizens are divinely obligated to engage in criticism. Yet at the same time, according to the New Testament witness, there is hell to pay for them when they do. No wonder they renege at the prospect of being critical.

But then given that agonizing dilemma, how can people deal with that? To which the Christian community replies, We thought you'd never ask. How can people bear their responsibility to be critical when at the same time there is hell to pay for being critical? God so implicates them in the critical process that, when The Last Analysis comes, He can justly say to them, You have no right to protest against my now criticizing you, because by your own active complicity in my critical process — as a seminary professor or a chemist or a reader of editorials in the Post-Dispatch or whatever — you have forfeited any right to exempt yourself from that process when it now turns on you.

How can you lure Christians to engage in that critical process which they are under divine obligation to perform and still be honest enough to warn them that the risks and the cost of engaging in that process are exorbitant? Well that raises, to the point almost of a scream, the Christological question. Here finally we have supreme reason for making use of the history of Jesus Christ. For, as we believe and confess, he underwent the divine *krima* for us. Having done so he has liberated us in turn not only to accept the criticism which is our due but also courageously to engage in the advancing of that criticism wherever and whenever it needs to be advanced. I think that would be a major contribution by the theology of the Lutheran Reformation to our post-Enlightenment, critical-liberal university situations today.

Robert W. Bertram