THE CRESSET
A review of literature, the arts, and public affairs
Advent/Christmas 2007

Nothing Lutheran is Our Subject Matter
The Lutheran University in the Twenty-First Century

Steven Schroeder

At its heart, Lutheran theology is a servant theology, a theology of the cross grounded on the confession that God entered into human form and died. This theology proclaims what Thomas Sheehan terms "the absolute absence of God," the paradoxically good news that God has wholly disappeared into humanity. This has special significance for the university as a place of openness rather than a factory in which to reproduce culture, a museum in which to preserve it, or a fortress from which to protect it. In this regard, repeating what was said by Luther, Melanchthon, or other architects of the Lutheran Reformation (and hence the Lutheran university) would leave the university as little more than a sixteenth century curiosity. This approach would be suitable, perhaps, for a museum piece, but hardly is an appropriate guide for a Lutheran university in the twenty-first century. Repeating what they *did*, however, may be another matter.

I. A Practice, Not an Idea

Discussions of the Lutheran university routinely underplay a key dimension of the history of Lutheranism as a social movement: the movement started with a public academic exercise in the context of a catholic university situated in a local community. When we locate the beginning of Lutheranism, we turn to the public posting of academic theses, not to sermons, trials, excommunications, creeds—and not to the theses themselves. Sermons, trials, excommunications, and creeds are all derivative from the academic act—an important piece of information if we are to think of a "Lutheran" academy

and, more importantly, if we propose to be one. Lutheranism is creeded, but it is also deeded. Deed and creed are rooted in academic practice that is public, not private, catholic, not sectarian.

In the spirit of Luther's academic act, I offer five theses for public debate. Academic theses acquire their edges at intersections of description and prescription, observation and action, as imperatives under the form of declaratives. They are little confessions—not simple description in a distorted world but also not the imposition of order by an act of will. This leads to a cautionary note about Lutheranism and secularism. Strictly speaking, Lutheranism is not Lutheran, nor is secularism secular. Secularism is religious, and Lutheranism is idolatrous. Lutheran practice—which is cheerfully, thoroughly, and unapologetically secular—rejects both, partly via the academic act referenced earlier, which is also *implicated* in both.

Departing from tradition in what could be construed as two typically postmodern breaches of etiquette, I will not assign these theses to a graduate student for defense, and I will intersperse comments that are fragments of an essay which anticipates response rather than waiting for it. My justification for this method is that I have entered into the middle of a conversation, as a student not a master. Though they invite debate, these theses are not intended to start so much as to join. Hence, the theses are composed by a student, not a master; rebuttal may appear prior to refutation; and the cart may appear before the horse—all directional artifacts that can be creatively addressed by turning around.

One of the chief obstacles to conversation about Lutheran universities is that we have no idea what a university is. To qualify something about which we have no idea as "Lutheran" is to identify nothing Lutheran as our subject matter. That may not be a bad thing. With due respect to Cardinal Newman, it is not an "idea" we need but a practice.

II. Five Theses

1. **A college is a community of scholars.** This means that if we are to speak of a college, we will need to attend to the meaning of "community" and what it means to be a "scholar." The term "scholar" too often has been associated with elitism and exclusion, and communities too often have been defined by literal or figurative walls, including walls erected by language. Though these associations bear the mark of historical convention, they are

often treated as historical necessities.

2. **A university is a college of colleges.** This runs counter to historical development, in which universities came first, but the constitution of universities as colleges of colleges by forming colleges within public institutions is instructive. It represents formation of communities in an act of recognition that is also an act of transformation: old institutions are made new.

3. **The term "Lutheran," as a modifier, denotes a disciplined rhythm of freedom and obligation.** It has not, of course, always been used this way. I take it as deriving most authentically from the paradox near the beginning of Luther's essay on the freedom of a Christian: the Christian is a perfectly free lord, subject to none; the Christian is a perfectly bound slave, subject to all. A community characterized by disciplined rhythm of freedom and obligation is "Lutheran," and such a community is quintessentially academic: academic freedom depends on disciplined practice.

4. **To be characterized by disciplined rhythm of freedom and obligation, a community must be engaged in the world.** This is to assert that obligation arises in relation to other people—and that the same may be said, though less self-evidently, of freedom. Where other people exist (and as Frank Zappa noted, we *are* the other people), freedom and obligation—along with their disciplined rhythm—become possible. Without a world of other people, they do not. To say "we" is to enter into the world, and, though it is not my purpose to make the argument here, it is not possible fully and truly to say "I" without also saying "we." (On this point, cf. Agnes Heller, who notes that the "we" is that through which "I" am.) A Lutheran community, therefore, must be engaged in the world. In the traditional sense of the term, this means that a Lutheran community is "secular" by definition. It abandons the monastery understood as an enclosed place separate from the world, but it does not abandon community or discipline. It is not merely coincidental that universities emerged out of schools formed at intersections of monasteries with the world (an intersection that arose because the monastery as an institution denied the separation by the fact of its location) or that their emergence coincided with definitions of academic discipline with which we still live in universities, though not always comfortably. This is an example of a creative boundary, and it locates the Lutheran church in the same movement that gave rise to the friars, preaching orders constituted in engagement with, not separation from, the world.

Friars took the gospel on the road and formed universities by walking from the monastery toward the city. At their best, they took their orders with them as they plunged into unruly crowds and initiated a process in which the rigid distinction between "sacred" and "secular" was obliterated. Out of the grandstand, as Luther suggested, into the arena.

5. **As a result**, **Lutheran community is not** "**secular**" **in the traditional sense so much as it is *incognito* in the way Kierkegaard deployed the term.** As God disappears into humanity, the Lutheran community disappears into the world, not by abandoning faith but by practicing it. To be set apart would require abandoning faith in favor of religiosity, replacing a theology of the cross with a theology of glory. Jesus, you will recall, did not come down and save himself when invited to do so.

III. Here Comes Everybody

To disappear into the world by practicing faith rather than losing it is to relinquish control, not discipline. To illustrate, I direct your attention to compositional/performative processes identified with John Cage's musicircus.

Responding to a proposal by the Stanford Humanities Center to sponsor a performance of his music, Cage suggested a musicircus along lines defined in many performances since the first such performance at the University of Illinois in 1967. In this case, he described the musicircus as "as much music as can be played by all those who are willing to perform without being paid. No entrance ticket or payments. Loud and soft. Serious and popular. Young and old. Student recitals. Church choirs. Athletics or dance..." (Junkerman, 40). In his discussion of the musicircus, Charles Junkerman follows Cage's lead and takes it up as a model of "nEw/ foRms of living together." As Junkerman describes the Stanford performance, all the space in the large building where it was staged was used. Neither beginning nor ending was marked, except by a three-hour time limit imposed at Cage's suggestion, based on his wish to perform a piece called *Muoyce*, which is about two hours long, during the circus. Referring to the particular performance in question (but, more generally, to the genre as a whole), Junkerman notes that "the Musicircus was... a work of art collectively performed according to broadly acknowledged, if unobtrusive, formal and generic rules; everyone who came knew how to behave to achieve the desired effect of formlessness" (41). Junkerman's point, and my reason for directing your attention to

his commentary and description, is that rules function in this performance as a "*via negativa*" and "take us into unexplored territory, into that experiential space where Cage believes we find 'new forms of living together'" (42)—something that we do not already know and that we do not understand.

Most generally, only two rules are imposed: the performance takes place in a space that is artificially delimited, and there is a time limit. Flyers advertising the event described it as filling the space (with "wall-to-wall music" and "ceiling-to-floor sound") and as being continuous—but the invitation is to come (and presumably to go) "when you like." Though the whole performance takes place within a defined space and time, individual audience members determine when to show up, as well as when and where to go. That Cage himself was performing "during" the circus created a "center" of sorts that Norman O. Brown criticized as a "star performance," a celebration of decenteredness "on what is fundamentally a very centered occasion" (Junkerman, 51). Cage delighted in paradox, so a centered occasion for celebration of decenteredness is not such a surprising thing. Isn't that one way to think of a performance—or a class? But those who showed up to hear Cage hardly "knew how to behave to achieve the desired effect of formlessness." They did not have to, and that is the beauty of Cage's circus. If the rules work, the effect is achieved whether participants are conscious of them or not—and without a single center of control. A single center of control, in fact, would positively subvert the performance (hence Brown's criticism, which would not be a criticism otherwise). Junkerman understands the centered celebration of decenteredness as a kind of *koan*, and he notes the blend of confusion, rapt attention, and enlightenment that is typical of audience response to performance of Cage's compositions. Where a center forms or threatens to form, one function of the performer is to shatter it.

For my purposes here, it is most important to note that the delimitation of space and time, and the gathering of diverse participants into delimited space and time, function as disciplines, even without the imposition of further rules.

"We need a plan," Cage suggested in a symposium on biology and the history of the future, "that will leave us free to do what we are capable of doing." In his life's work, this led to relentless experimentation with disciplines to assist him in getting his ego out of the way so that he could participate in

a set larger than the one he alone comprised. As he put it more than once, what interested him in music was something that he did not understand. That interest drove him to shatter boundaries presumed to exist between performer and audience, composer and performer, composer and audience. His work enlisted—even, paradoxically, conscripted—audiences and bystanders into processes of performance and composition (more famously, perhaps, in a piece like 4'33", than in the musicircus).

Cage developed a sort of music that could not be interrupted, and that is an intriguing theological/pedagogical model of inclusion.

Cage's aesthetic was informed by Buddhism, not Lutheranism. But there is a common kenotic center formed by the insistence that neither our will nor our work alone is free, and there is a common attention to the hard discipline of shattering the confidence with which we seek to make them so. Luther's crucified God is not the nothing of Zen, nor is Paul's *kenosis*; but Cage's confidence in the music of the world and his construction of disciplines with which to let it sing are instructive if we would understand how a crucified God might inform practices of liberal education. Liberal education is education for freedom, and the "arts" with which it has come to be associated are disciplines that empower us to practice freedom where grasping after it has rendered it unrecognizable. Cage was criticized by some activists when, at the height of the anti-Vietnam War movement, he said, "Don't try to change the world: you'll only make it worse." Significantly, Thich Nhat Hanh, widely recognized as a leader of the peace movement in Vietnam, was saying something remarkably similar at the time. Luther's intellectual offspring have struggled continuously with quietism and accusations of quietism as they have sought to implement an ethic that denies the power of work to save while it insists on the absolute necessity of a faith that works.

IV. Nothing at the Core

The conversation about centered occasions for the celebration of decenteredness is most relevant to the ongoing discussion of "core" requirements and "general" education at liberal arts institutions, including Lutheran ones. We make a wrong turn in our quest for "new forms of living together" when we seek to center educational practice on a core defined by generality or content—or both. The question is not what every liberally educated graduate should know, but whether we can find the *via negativa* that will enable

us not to.

Long before Luther and the Reformation, Scholastic theologians began appending the formula "with the understanding that it could be otherwise" to their academic pronouncements. At its best, this was not an expression of uncertainty but an affirmation of possibility. At its worst, scholastic education silenced the formula, followed a script, and pronounced one sentence after another. To the extent that Luther's reform flowed out of renaissance humanism, it responded to the resulting dogmatism. For those confronted with sentences uttered as though they could not be otherwise, the university provided a (not always comfortable) place in which to insist with confidence that they could.

My intention is not to obscure the extent to which European universities functioned as vocational schools. They prepared priests (and, to a lesser extent, doctors and attorneys), and they did this by ensuring that sentences were pronounced in unison by teachers and graduates. There are spectacular examples of critical teachers and students who paid a price for suggesting otherwise—Heloise comes to mind, and, with her, Abelard. There is overwhelming evidence that universities have functioned efficiently as enforcers of orthodoxy in a remarkable variety of times and places.

Nor is my intention to suggest that Luther or Lutherans have been exemplars of liberal-mindedness. That we have been otherwise with appalling consistency is one of the most important arguments for a characteristically Lutheran contribution to the broad stream of humanist education. That contribution can be formulated as a modification of the Scholastic formula cited above. Not only might it be otherwise, it must be. This is also a paraphrase of Luther's description of the paradoxical freedom of the Christian. The "must" affirms our human fallenness. We are always, as Kierkegaard noted, in the wrong vis-à-vis God. The "might" affirms our human possibility, by a gift of God's grace, we are (also) always in the right.

The "Lutheran" challenge for liberal education is to locate education for liberation right in the middle of the sentence. If education for freedom happens, it happens in an unfree context where containment, not liberation, is the order of the day.

And this is why I look for a university that is a variation on Cage's circus—a house full of music that lets us hear the world sing.

That may seem like an overly exuberant background for recapitulation

of liberal arts formulated in large part more than two thousand years ago. But these arts contain possibility, and it would be a shame to abandon them. Cage's compositions routinely employ facilitators to keep performers moving through densely complex scores. The liberal arts play a similar role in even more densely complex worlds that have not been scored.

In the formulation that was traditional by Luther's time, there were seven liberal arts, divided into a group of three and a group of four. The group of three (*trivium*) was foundational: grammar, logic, rhetoric. The group of four (*quadrivium*) was erected on their foundation: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. The foundational *trivium* most clearly identifies "arts" that are put into play in what, to modern eyes, look (with the exception of music) like the "sciences" of the *quadrivium*. The arts of the *trivium* are concerned with language and communication, while the sciences of the *quadrivium* take up the matter of structure and organization—or, more properly, the construction of matter in motion—in the physical worlds we inhabit. Together, these arts equip us to find our ways in linguistic/symbolic worlds on the one hand and physical worlds on the other. It is worth noting the fine line between finding our ways and knowing our place. That line marks a critical difference between education for freedom and education as a mechanism of control. Being able to find our way is essential if we are to resist simply being put in our place.

Being able to find our ways in the places where we find ourselves is a worthy goal for liberal education, a goal in which nothing is distinctively Lutheran.

Which means, in the end, that we have nothing to say and we are saying it. And that, if we say it clearly, is Lutheran.

Steven Schroeder *is a poet and philosopher who teaches and writes in Chicago and Shenzhen*, *China.*

Works Cited

Biology and the History of the Future. An IUBS/UNESCO Symposium with John Cage, Carl-Goeran Heden, Margaret Mead, John Papaioannou, John Platt, Ruth Sager, and Gunther Stent. Presented by C. H.

Waddington. Edinburgh University Press, 1972.

Heller, Agnes. *Everyday Life*. G. L. Campbell, trans. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984. [Originally appeared in Hungarian in 1970 under the title *A mindennapi elet*. This English translation is a shortened version of the Hungarian original prepared by Heller in 1984.]

Junkerman, Charles. "nEw / foRms of living together": The Model of the Musicircus. In *John Cage: Composed in America*. Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, pp. 39-64.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard's Writings, Volume VI. *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*. E. H. Hong and H. V. Hong, eds and trans. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

Sheehan, Thomas. *The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God Became Christianity*. New York: Random House, 1986.

Zappa, Frank and the Mothers of Invention. "Mother People." On *We're Only In It For The Money*, 1968. [Reissued by Rykodisc in 1987 and 1995.]

Copyright © 2007 Valparaiso University Press