

CRAIG WENTLAND

## *Augustana at 100: More Lutheran than Ever?*

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*A revised text of a lecture given in conjunction with Augustana's centennial celebrations.*

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AUGUSTANA CHAPLAIN

In the fall of 1983, a young man left New Sarepta in a green, two-tone, 1976 slant-six Plymouth Valiant, loaded to the gunnels with his clothes, personal possessions, and some of his mom's cookies, on his way to Camrose to attend Camrose Lutheran College. From the time he set foot on campus, he had the sense that CLC was a different place.

In his first week, he attended an event called the Viking Rodeo, a highly competitive, highly physical, intramural games night. Before the evening began, the students were expected to go out and kidnap various faculty members to participate in the rodeo. (Those were the days before risk management paranoia; the occasional ambulance call or emergency room visits were considered just a normal part of a day's activities.) His group was assigned the task of kidnapping the political science professor, Dr. Bayard Reesor. As they drove up to his house, they found him in the back yard harvesting beets. Upon seeing the students, he fled, but they managed to corner him against the fence. Dr. Reesor put up a noble but futile struggle as the students man-handled him into their car. As they stopped at a red light, he surprised them by trying to jump out of the vehicle, but they foiled those plans as well.

In one sense the Viking Rodeo could hardly be considered a part of academic life, but in another, it serves as a very real introduction to a particular understanding of what this university is all about. And there is something very Lutheran about this understanding.

In tracing Augustana's Lutheran identity, there are a couple of paths to follow. One is how Norwegian Haugean pietism, a particular manifestation of Lutheranism, shaped and continues to shape Augustana; and the second path is how theological themes from Luther himself can and still do contribute to CLC/Augustana's identity.

Norwegian Haugean pietism is but one particular expression of the Lutheran tradition.<sup>1</sup> My own Lutheran roots run pretty deep. (When Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to that church door in Wittenberg, he borrowed the hammer from one of my ancestors; I am not sure if Luther ever returned it.) Despite my deeply embedded Lutheranness, when I first came to CLC, I had no idea what hit me when I encountered Norwegian Lutheran piety.

Haugean pietism was a radical liberation movement. Hans Nielsen Hauge lived in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At that time a minor ice age was still affecting Europe, which resulted in a great deal of hardship and adversity for the peasant farmers, the *bønder* of Norway. The state Lutheran Church compounded their misery by taking advantage of opportunities to add to their land holdings. Whenever new laws were introduced or new taxes imposed, the Church knew on which side its bread was buttered and gave its support to the government and aristocracy, and in exchange was rewarded with land. The Church also loaned money to the *bønder* and then foreclosed on their farms when they were unable to repay their debt.

By the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, almost 75% of the land in Norway was held by the aristocracy and the Church. To discourage the *bønder* from organizing protests, laws were passed that prevented illegal gatherings of people, known as conventicles. In such a climate, the *bønder* saw their plight in life as God's judgment upon them. They believed they were of no value and incapable of changing their lot in life.

After undergoing a profound religious experience, a young Hans Nielsen Hauge began traveling throughout Norway, gathering people together for Bible studies, and sharing with them the great love and grace of God. Hauge proclaimed to the peasants that they indeed had value because of God's grace and were commanded by God to love their neighbours. Although Haugean pietism was based first in spiritual liberation, it was accompanied with a very strong sense that an experience of God's grace led to personal and social transformation. The very structure of Hauge's small group meetings or conventicles

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Cam Harder of Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon for his analysis of Hans Neilsen Hauge and the social effects of pietism in Norway. The following section on pietism in Norway is a summary of a talk he provided at a Chester Ronning Centre Study Circle entitled *Pietism and the Social Transformation of Norway* in January 2010.

provided the *bønder* with the skills needed to become socially and politically active. For example, many *bønder* were taught how to read so that they could read the Bible for themselves. The *bønder*, however, did not limit their reading to the Bible and soon began to read other things like newspapers. During these meetings the *bønder* learned invaluable communication and organizational skills.

Hauge was also a skilled businessman who believed that faith was more than a private belief; it needed to be acted out in life. In response to the plight of the *bønder*, he established a sort of cooperative paper mill, whose profits supported not only workers and their families, but also the weak, the elderly, and other vulnerable members of the community. The economic activity of the mill was seen as an expression of faith.

Both the Church and the state felt threatened by Hauge's religious and economic activities. His gatherings were not condoned by the parish pastors and became regarded as illegal conventicles. He was eventually imprisoned under the Conventicles Act and spent eight years in prison, followed by two years of hard labour. His imprisonment, however, came too late because the movement he had initiated had empowered his followers to believe they indeed had value in the eyes of God and were called by God to resist injustice and improve the lot of their communities. They had become transformed into a people who were prepared to question authority and engage in the hard and challenging work of building community.

By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century the intense land squeeze in Norway led many of the *bønder* to immigrate to the United States, many settling in the Midwest. A half century later, when the Canadian prairies were being opened for settlement, many of these Norwegian American immigrants moved north in search of cheap land and new opportunity. They were joined by other immigrants directly from Norway.

The Haugeans who came to the Canadian prairies maintained their strong tradition of working together to create institutions that would serve the betterment of the community. One of these institutions was a residential high school, Camrose Lutheran College. When I reflect on it, I am absolutely humbled by the industry and the vision of those early immigrants. In 1912 Old Main must have seemed like an absolute mansion compared to the modest homes in which these immigrant people lived. And to think that at least one family mortgaged their farm to make this happen is quite amazing.

Over the last century, this collective can-do determination, everybody-pitch-in-and-go-the-extra-mile kind of spirit would continue to sustain CLC even when confronted by incredible financial austerity. For most of its ninety-four years of church ownership, CLC ran on the most meager of shoestring budgets. There were a few flush years, but they were outnumbered by the slim ones. Both faculty and staff had to pitch in in order to make CLC work, as evidenced by the history of faculty building bridges, and staff welding frames for couches to furnish the residences. CLC survived both on home grown potatoes and home grown computer software. During the last lean spell just ten years ago, some faculty survived by re-shingling the roofs of each other's houses. I do not wish to romanticize the reality of this austerity and the sense of community that emerged from it, but I will note that CLC did not remain a small residential high school. It had an expansionary vision. One hundred years later Augustana continues to exist, when by all reasonable accounts, the place should have been shut down at least a dozen times.

An expansionary vision remains one of Augustana's hallmarks in its centennial year. It continues to dream dreams and the community pursues those visions by creating partnerships and cobbling together resources. Both academic and non-academic staff often exceed the bounds of a 40-hour work week and their job descriptions in order to pursue those dreams. Even under the more flush patronage of the University of Alberta, nothing is handed to Augustana on a platter. The Haugean culture of resourcefulness and determination is still very much evident at Augustana today.

Like all immigrant peoples, the Norwegians had aspirations to preserve and pass down their language, culture, and religion to their children. At its founding, there was a sense that CLC would be a college by Norwegian Lutherans primarily for Norwegian Lutherans. While that influence would remain, even by the 1920s and 30s, half the students were no longer Norwegian Lutherans;<sup>2</sup> young people who had never before experienced the joys of lutefisk came to call CLC home.

In response to the growing ethnic and denominational diversity in the student population, the Lutheran nature of CLC had to be rearticulated. The man of the hour was Chester Ronning, and it was he who lifted up and brought to the fore language that had existed since

the founding of CLC, namely the development of the whole person. Influenced in part by the Scandinavian folk school movement, education at Camrose Lutheran College was valued not simply as a means to obtain a high school diploma, receive job training, or gain university entrance, but as preparation for a fulfilling life.

In his 1942 master's dissertation on CLC,<sup>3</sup> Ronning talks about an institution that out of its Lutheran Christian values was attentive to the needs and the possibilities of individual students. The goal was not to produce uniform, cookie-cutter graduates, but whole people. Ronning also described a school where education occurs in relationships and in community. Living in residence in close quarters with others, doing chores, rubbing shoulders with faculty and staff, being a member of the hockey team, the choir, or the Lutheran Daughters of the Reformation, all this was as much a part of an education as what happened in the class room. Ronning described an institution that believed education involved the whole person, not only filling the mind with ideas, but also educating the heart.

In addition to the spiritual and political empowerment of lay people, another feature of Norwegian pietism came to be its prohibitions against activities that were deemed to be sinful, like drinking, smoking, and dancing. Such prohibitions were intended to have both a spiritual and a public dimension. As spiritual disciplines, they helped believers to focus their attention on God and resist the distractions of the world. These prohibitions also allowed pietistic communities to channel their energies into building up their communities. And as Gary Gibson, the newly hired athletics director in the 1960s noted, because the kids could not smoke, drink, or dance, they became awesome athletes. It's true. Little Camrose Lutheran College had some amazingly competitive sports teams.

Given human nature, these prohibitions sometimes gave way to legalism and what Cam Harder has described as *cheap holiness*.<sup>4</sup> Cheap holiness refers to the tendency in Haugean pietism to reduce the Christian life to a limited set of personal behaviours. The history and spirit of pietism, however, acknowledged that loving your neighbour is actually hard work, and requires competence, creativity, and discernment. Love cannot be reduced to a simple list of moral prohibitions.

<sup>2</sup> Chester A. Ronning, *A Study of an Alberta Protestant High School: The Camrose Lutheran College: A residential High School* (M.A. Thesis, University of Alberta, 1942).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Harder, *Pietism and Social Transformation in Norway*.

I am not exactly sure what happened, but I suspect that while some of these moral prohibitions made sense in what was primarily a residential high school, by the time the Junior College program was launched in the radical 1960s, and some newfangled professors were being hired, the Board of Regents agreed it was time to revisit existing policies. The decision to allow dancing on campus was a flash point of controversy. The elimination of mandatory chapel attendance soon followed. For those who believed the identity of CLC was closely bound to prohibitions, the liberalization of the rules at CLC caused some of them to question the Lutheran nature of CLC.

Liberalization, however, does not always signify a loss of institutional identity. It can also represent attempts to articulate what is essential to institutional identity. As previously stated, the empowerment of individuals, the spirit of collective endeavour, the development of education that occurs in relationships and involves the whole person are some of the gifts of Haugean Lutheran pietism to this place.

In addition to the particular influence of Haugean pietism, Lutheran theology shaped and continues to shape Augustana. Martin Luther was a German monk who lived during the sixteenth century, a time in which the cutting edge of science was grounded in Aristotelian thought. According to the philosophy of Aristotle, reason through an investigation of the physical and sensory world can determine the existence of God.<sup>5</sup> Human reason may not determine the nature of God—that is important—but reason can know that there is a God. So in the late Middle Ages, faith and reason (i.e., faith and science) were thought to be mutually supportive. Reason was faithful. In other words, reason could not assert anything which contradicted the teachings of the Church. This relationship also required that faith be reasonable. It was important to use the language of reason or science to support the teachings of the Church.

Luther's time also witnessed the beginning of what would become a significant shift in the role of science. Aristotle was still the powerhouse, but a new school of thought called Nominalism was beginning to arise. Nominalism asserted that by looking at the particulars of life, by examining the world and creation, you could not reason your way to God.<sup>6</sup> You could not, for example, determine the

divine blueprint for creation by studying what we would now call biology or physics. As Nominalism later came to assert, you cannot go from creation to the Creator because there is **no** divine blueprint. Nominalists still believed in God but they asserted that God created the world in freedom and not in some mechanistic, causal way. As a result of this new way of thinking, faith and reason began to drift apart.

Luther was influenced by Nominalism and supported it for several reasons.<sup>7</sup> First, in the Middle Ages, not everyone respected the limits of reason/science, that reason or science could prove that God exists but not what God is like. Luther noted that when the philosophers/scientists described God, God tended to sound suspiciously like the best characteristics of the philosophers or scientists. Through reason, philosophers and scientists were creating God in their own image.

Luther was also a biblical scholar. In the biblical tradition he noted that the depth of God's nature was not revealed through reason, by what was most rational, or by looking at the best of the created world. Luther saw that the depth of God's nature was revealed most fully in the least likely and the **most irrational** place, and that was on the cross. By the cross, Luther meant not just the death of Jesus of Nazareth but the incarnation, life, teachings, ministry, and death of Jesus.

This combination of biblical scholarship and new philosophy gave Luther several new insights into the relationship between reason and faith:

- It meant, for Luther, that human reason or science could **neither** prove nor disprove the existence and nature of God. A free God could not ultimately be explained and captured by human reason.
- It made Luther sympathetic to the emerging, modern way of understanding reason and science. Reason and science were free to explore the world and were not expected to provide evidence in support of faith.
- Although reason and science were free to explore the world, Luther remained critically skeptical of them. He understood the human tendency to take good but finite and limited human tools and try to make them into absolutes. As human beings we have a tendency to idolatry and, in academic settings, to ideology, making our ideas

<sup>5</sup> Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967) 184.

<sup>6</sup> Heiko Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986) 25-30.

<sup>7</sup> See Bengt Haeggglund, *Was Luther a Nominalist?* (Concordia Theological Monthly, 28, 1957) 441-452.

into gods. It is the job of faith to remind us that our ideas are always finite and limited. We cannot be saved through reason.

What Luther's theological heritage means is that Lutheran institutions can support and encourage the freedom of academic inquiry. In terms of Augustana's history as a faith-based institution, it meant that Augustana had a way to be a modern university.

In keeping with this singular theological heritage, scholars in a Lutheran tradition do not need to espouse a single worldview, unlike, for example, the tradition in certain Roman Catholic universities where everyone is required to take a course on Aquinas.<sup>8</sup> In the same way, a Lutheran university, unlike certain movements within the Calvinist traditions, should not expect scholars to bring certain faith presuppositions to their disciplines. There exists within Reformed epistemology a movement that argues Christians ought to make their epistemologies conform to their faith; tenets of their faith should function as premises to be argued *from* rather than ideas that needed to be argued *for*.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, in the Reform tradition it is possible to argue for a Christian approach to disciplines such as Christian psychology, Christian history, or Christian economics in the same way that a socialist, a feminist, or a Marxist might theorize out of their assumptions. If you are a Calvinist, this is arguably a consistent way to think, although obviously not all Calvinists think this way.

Lutherans do **not** believe that there is a Lutheran approach to biology. Faith and reason do not relate to one another in that way. A Lutheran university can celebrate academic pursuit and academic freedom. In its history CLC described the relationship of faith and learning as being held in tension.<sup>10</sup> The tension exists because faith and learning are not regulated to separate spheres. It is not as if faith is limited to a separate spiritual and religious dimension while learning gets the rest of life. Faith and learning are actually two different ways of approaching the one reality of human existence, God's creation, from the perspective of faith. How one lives in the world given this tension requires discernment and creativity. The tension is real and living. At a basic level, Luther's approach to faith and reason means that the Lutheran

<sup>8</sup> Tom Christenson, *The Gift and Task of Lutheran Higher Education* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004) 97.

<sup>9</sup> See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1976).

<sup>10</sup> This language of faith and learning being held in tension was prominent during Augustana's time as a degree granting university college.

heritage and the mission of the modern university are at least compatible. But beyond the basics, Luther championed learning because he believed all people need to be educated in order to fulfill their high callings to love and service, their vocations.

Luther's idea that participation in creation and civic affairs is an intrinsic part of the Christian life represented a radical departure from many forms of medieval piety. A dominant attitude of Luther's time was that one's personal holiness was directly related to the degree to which one was removed from unholy physical activity. Indeed, a cloistered life in which there was an absence of earthly work, worldly pleasure, and physical comfort was considered to be the height of true spirituality. Luther argued, in opposition, that God's grace should lead one into greater activity with God's creation.<sup>11</sup> For Luther, grace brought him out of the monastery and into a life in the world, assuming responsibility in both the natural and social world, which Luther understood to be God's creation. He married, had children, held down a job, took in students, and was very much involved in political life.

Luther believed that people needed to be educated in order to fulfill their callings to love and serve their neighbours and to be stewards and caretakers of creation. In terms of Augustana's history, there has always been an emphasis that education is not merely an individualistic pursuit, but leads to a fuller life in the community.

There is one final way in which I believe that Augustana at 100 is more Lutheran than ever. While Luther was supportive of reason and of critical inquiry, he also understood that in order to achieve human wholeness, reason is not enough. It is not enough simply to fill heads with ideas or train students in various disciplines and critical thinking. From a faith perspective the most important dimension of a human being is the heart. And what makes a heart good is trust. We need to trust that the power behind all life intends good for us; we need to trust that it is okay to be human, finite creatures, with great gifts and real limitations; and we need to trust that the many callings that come to us in life to love and service are indeed good for us. From a Christian perspective the ultimate source of that trust is found in Christ; in Christ's incarnation, we encounter both the incredible love of God and the dignity of human existence in creation.

<sup>11</sup> Hans-Dittmar Muendel, *Understanding and Communicating the Word of Grace* (Consensus, 9, 1983) 10.

In order to be a whole persons, to live fully, to serve fully, to be competent, learning is necessary; but one also needs a heart with capacity for a sense of awe and gratitude at the sheer mystery and giftedness of life, for passion and compassion for others, for justice, humility, and hope, and a capacity for confession and forgiveness. Most of all one needs a heart that is capable of trust and courage to enter into life, as beautiful and as messy as life tends to be.

To mark Augustana's centennial, I taught a class entitled *The Augustana Spirit* in which the students were asked to have conversations with alumni and staff about their understanding of CLC. As part of this class, I also asked the students themselves to share stories about their particular experiences of Augustana. It is worthy of note that the students did not tell many stories about the formulas or theories that they have learned in the classroom but they did share abundant stories about relationships—relationships first with fellow students who were supporting them, cheering them on, learning with them, and maybe getting into a little bit of trouble with them. They also told fond stories about encounters with professors whom they described as acting like **genuine human beings!** These professors are attentive to who their students are, they show compassion, and they care enough to challenge their students because they see what they do not just as a job but as a calling. The students talked about professors who, on good days, teach not just from their heads but from their hearts, with passion for their discipline, for justice, for life, and at times even sharing their doubts, uncertainties, and growing edges. My students say they highly value this way of being a university, a university that educates not only the head but the heart.

These stories did not take me by surprise. In his 1942 thesis Chester Ronning described how the heart is educated and formed through relationships and community. It was part of my experience too in that Viking Rodeo when I helped kidnap Bayard Reesor. I believe the quality of educating the heart that has run through Augustana's 100 years is here by design. It has grown out of a particular faith understanding and the experience of a particular people.

Is this way of being a university unique to Lutherans? Hardly. Others do it too, but it is rare in Canada. Is this way of being a university universally supported here at Augustana? Probably not. Faculty come here from many different university models, and not all of our students value or embrace the possibilities that are here. Do you have to be

Lutheran to take part in this way of being a university? No, but in our case this orientation has grown out of a particular faith understanding; educating the heart in relationship is, by its very nature, hospitable and inclusive of those beyond that faith understanding.

At the time of our transfer to the University of Alberta, Augustana was again at a crossroads in terms of what path we were going to follow as a campus and a faculty of the U of A. Would we continue to honour this heritage of educating the whole person, of education that occurs in relationship, of education that shapes the heart?

For the most part, I believe decisions have been made to develop and expand on that tradition. When I think of the growth of International and Outdoor Education programs and the rapid expansion of the Community Service Learning program, when I think of the increase in the use of undergraduate student research assistants and the incredible mentoring relationships that flow from that, when I think of the development of the Aboriginal Student Office and the appointment of an International Student Advisor, and when I think of the way the university has embraced a partnership with the Church in creating a new and vibrant chaplaincy program and establishing the Chester Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life, all these things suggest to me that Augustana has continued to embrace not only a sound education of the head but also an education of the heart that occurs in relationship.

Fancy structures, of course, cannot by themselves bring about fulfilling relationships, the essential ingredients of which require time, space, and a willingness to be, well, human. In his 1942 thesis Chester Ronning described how the heart and mind are best formed through relationship. Because Augustana has embraced the tradition of educating the whole person in community, I boldly assert that Augustana at 100 is more Lutheran than ever.

## *Augustana Chaplaincy*

Rooted in the Lutheran tradition, Augustana Chaplaincy is ecumenical in scope and an integral partner in Augustana's mission of developing personal wholeness through a liberal education and equipping students for leadership and service. Embracing the partnership, Augustana Chaplaincy values being an academically credible resource for the entire campus, accompanying all students as they struggle with questions of meaning and purpose, developing leaders for church and society and contributing to the work of building justice and peace. Welcoming all people, the chaplaincy community enacts the Gospel by providing opportunities for worship, learning, community building, pastoral care and service.

For more information on Augustana Chaplaincy or to receive additional copies of this publication please contact us in the following ways:

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