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**“Luther and Inter-Religious Relations in Higher Education,” by Darrell Jodock, Augsburg College, November 10, 2011.**

[This paragraph was omitted on 11/10/2011] If footnotes come after, “grace notes” come before. So allow me a “grace note,” not directly related to the topic. For the students in our midst and their mentors, it may be comforting to know that Martin Luther did not have a straight path to his vocation. In college he studied the liberal arts. His father wanted him to study law, and he was on his way to do just that when he abruptly changed directions and headed for a monastery. What occasioned the shift was a pledge he made during a thunder storm, but this event likely just brought to a head something he had been already pondering. So there must have been some deep-seated dissatisfaction with the direction he was headed. Then, after he was in the monastery, his life took another turn when his mentor suggested he study biblical theology. He resisted, but in the end he went. In 1512 (at the age of 29) he finished his doctorate. A good deal of struggle and study occupied the next years, and it was not until 1517, at age 34, that he found his calling to be a reformer. I mention this, because sometimes students receive the impression that they need to have their vocations sorted out by the time they leave college. Yes, it is important to seek and find as much clarity as one can, but the vocational reflection does not end there. Our vocation needs to be examined and re-examined. A couple of years ago, a former student wrote to me, twenty years after he had taken a class on “The Holocaust and Its Impact.” He wrote that for twenty years he had been wrestling with the questions raised in that class, and after twenty years he felt called to change his occupation. The questions had been too deep to be settled in one semester. And, it is likely that your significant questions will not be settled by the time you graduate. (End of “grace note.”)

I once heard the chief Rabbi of Denmark speak. As you may know, the Danes did a magnificent job during the 1940s of saving 97% of their Jews. His father had been the Chief Rabbi in 1943 when the Nazis tried to round up the Jews. There were four children in their family, so the first place they went was problematic. Their hosts were a clergy couple with no children, and the difference of having six extra people--of groceries for eight instead of two--would draw too much attention. The next place they went was to a Lutheran bishop's home. The bishop greeted the rabbi warmly, and then said, “I know tomorrow is Yom Kippur, a special day for you. Are there any special foods that you need?” At that point the mostly Jewish audience burst out laughing, because Yom Kippur is a day of fasting. After the laughter died down, the speaker, one of the four children who accompanied their father, went on to say: I mention this because it seems to me it was a sign of genuine inter-religious respect, being

concerned (even while arranging emergency shelter for a family of six) about providing the right foods for his guests' holy day.

There is a tendency in American society to think that religious tolerance requires lessening one's commitment to one's own religion. If a person is heavily invested, this view assumes, he or she will be intolerant. I disagree with this outlook. I think that the Lutheran tradition allows a person to be both deeply committed to Christianity and deeply respectful of other religions—or, to phrase it slightly differently, to be both deeply committed to Christianity and engaged in serious, challenging inter-religious dialogue. And I think that the task of discovering the way to do this has fallen to the Lutheran Colleges. Here religious diversity can be found within the institution. Congregations can reach out to their neighbors, and I hope they do, but inter-congregational cooperation remains an “external” relation. The issue for colleges is internal—with students, faculty, and staff on campus from different religions. Colleges are in a position to help chart the way forward.

Just to be clear, our topic is not denominational differences—even though that's important too. The word “religion” will here apply to Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, etc., and *not* to Methodist, Roman Catholic, and the like.

When it comes to Luther himself, it is important that we acknowledge a big difficulty—namely, Luther's own record on inter-religious relations. First of all, it was not a topic that concerned him very much. He lived in the midst of Christendom—that is, of a society that expected everyone to be Christian and built all its laws and policies, all its art and culture, all its education and its institutions, around that expectation. The central issues for him were reforming Christianity and reforming Christendom. This gave him more than enough to do. (Yes, on the east, the Turks were threatening to conquer Germanic lands and the Emperor was constantly trying to raise an army to fight them off. But the Muslims were on the other side of a border, not part of European society. One can find a lot of off-the-cuff remarks in Luther about the Muslims, some positive and some not. But, for our purposes, one thing is worthy of note—he opposed a crusade against them.) The only other religious group that lived within Christendom was the Jews. When it was convenient for the rulers, Jews would be invited to live in that ruler's territory, but they could not be citizens. They could hold jobs only in the least desirable occupations and could be expelled whenever the ruler wished. Indeed, several years before Luther's birth they had been expelled from the part of Germany in which he lived, so he had virtually no first-hand experience with Jews. And he and his contemporaries knew nothing of Buddhism, Hinduism, or any of the other major world religions. The first difficult, then, is that inter-religious relations is not a topic to which Luther devoted much theological attention.

Secondly, his record with regard to the Jews is not very exemplary. For a time, it appeared that he was rising above the prejudices of his day. Six years after the Reformation began, he wrote a treatise “That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew,” in which he reminded people that Mary and Jesus were Jewish. And in another treatise he expressed empathy for Jews, saying that if he had been a Jew and been treated as Jews had been by the Church, he too would have been reluctant to accept the Christian faith. But, about twenty years later, shortly before his death, having heard reports of Jews trying to convert people, he wrote a harsh treatise, recommending that the state confiscate Jewish books, prohibit rabbis from teaching, close synagogues, expel Jews from the land, and the like. Though he had advocated freedom of religion for individuals, he accepted the outlook of his day that prohibited people from teaching publicly anything different from Christianity, and this seems to have been the reason for his chilling recommendations. The fortunate thing is that the treatise had no effect on public policy—at least not until the Nazis appealed to it for their program, the foundations of which Luther would never have endorsed. In 1994, about the time the National Holocaust Memorial Museum was opening and Luther’s position would be on public display, at the urging of a pastor from New England who brought the issue to his synod assembly and then to the churchwide assembly, the ELCA issued a statement rejecting Luther’s harsh anti-Judaic statements. It opposed anti-Semitism as “a contradiction and affront to the Gospel,” and pledged the church to live out its faith “with love and respect for the Jewish people.” So, clearly, Luther’s own record cannot be a model for us.

Given this record, where do we start? Whereas only one religion was legally and politically acceptable in Christendom, more than one religion is legally and politically acceptable in a religiously pluralistic society. Living as we do in a religiously diverse and religiously pluralistic society rather than in Christendom, we start with some of Luther’s principles, consider how they apply to today, and see where they lead us.

1. Last night I discussed the theology of the cross and how it suggests caution regarding our claims to know. This applies to inter-religious relations as well. In the one treatise (in addition to the *Small Catechism*) that Luther thought was worthy to be preserved and read after his death, *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther insists that we cannot know the relationship God has with another human being. It is too hidden. Yes, we can sometimes learn about it from the person himself or herself, but another person’s words can hide as much as they reveal. So we need to be very cautious. I assume that he is talking here about his own context—that within Christendom one cannot know what God’s relationship is to another person. But, if it is true within Christendom, it is even more true with regard to people in other religions. And if one cannot know God’s relationship with another person, then how can one know God’s relationship to a whole religion, to a whole group of people? It is important that we be cautious about general statements of any sort about this specific point—whether positive or negative. What is the alternative?

We are invited to dialogue—that is, to explore face to face areas of agreement and disagreement.

2. Another implication of the theology of the cross is that revelation does not answer all our questions. Revelation supplies what we need in order to live in a renewed relationship with God. This includes knowledge of God's character, God's purpose, and God's attitude toward us. But revelation does not satisfy our curiosity. Lots of unanswered questions remain—such as why some people suffer in ways that others do not, or what the future holds for us and others, or why some people believe and others do not. Moreover, God's ways are not our ways, so the very majesty and mystery of even the God who is revealed means that we only glimpse the fullness of God. Luther talked about this in terms of God being both hidden and revealed; God remains hidden even in his self-disclosure. And he objected when anyone claimed to know the inner workings of God. Thus there is no basis in Luther even for believers who are in a close relationship with God to assume that they have a full understanding. One result of all of this is an appreciation for dialogue. Just as dialogue among Christians is a way to expand one's understanding, so dialogue between Christians and others is a way to deeper understanding. If we had all the answers and if we understood God fully, we would not need to dialogue, but our human condition and the nature of grace is such that dialogue is needed.
3. Yet another principle of Luther's thought is that our broken relationship with God is healed by God and that this healing is a free, unmerited gift. The image that seems to work best is adoption. Loving parents choose a child, not because the child has done anything, but simply because of their generosity. The child is brought into a courtroom, and a judge declares the child adopted. This act has enormous consequences for that child's life, but the child may not understand them at the time. Only later will they be evident. The child will then be able to accept or reject his/her adopted parents—parents that the child did not choose. So, Luther's view of God is that God is the active agent, doing the choosing, doing the healing. There are no prerequisites, no tests to take, no feats to perform. On Luther's view, believers are clear that God's generosity is the source of their right relationship with him, but I would add that they have no way of knowing where God's generosity stops. They cannot declare that, if someone else has a different idea, this idea automatically places them beyond the circle of God's generosity. For this reason, too, the appropriate way to encounter others is via dialogue. If a person knew in advance that the other lacked grace, then they could be pigeonholed and assigned a status without dialogue, and if one knew in advance that the other possessed saving grace, then they could be similarly pigeonholed and assigned a status, but without this information, dialogue is the appropriate stance.

4. When I first started to teach a course on Luther's theology, I expected that his thought could be understood like a wheel with spokes, and that the hub of the wheel would be his insight that I have just been discussing--justification by grace (= being made right with God via a free gift from God). After all, it was the key breakthrough that he experienced after years of struggling in the monastery, studying various theologians, and carefully examining the Bible. It brought him great joy to realize that God was giving him righteousness rather than demanding it, that God was setting him free rather than holding him in bondage. But as a teacher I soon discovered that, in order to understand Luther, we needed to start from two core ideas, not just one. (This realization wrecked my image; it's hard to picture a wheel with two hubs!!) That second core idea was God active in the world. That is, instead of God standing above the world, directing and controlling it, for Luther God is down here in our midst, engaged in the struggle, doing everything he can to entice and persuade and assist people to live lives of shalom—of wholeness, justice, and peace--instead of lives of destruction and death. I have come to call this Luther's "incarnational principle." *The Incarnation* is the Word becoming flesh in Jesus in such a way as for him to be fully human and fully divine. In Luther's thought incarnation is not an anomaly but is typical of the way God's works in the world. An incarnate God is at work behind the scenes. An incarnate God is at work in and through creatures and humans in every area of life. This down-to-earth view of God is combined with a lively sense of ongoing creation. God is at work in everything and everywhere. Thus, Luther can say that Muslim children get good gifts from their parents, which are really good gifts from God coming through those parents. And, if they are blessed with good rulers, Muslim families receive good gifts such as security and justice and the like from those rulers, and these too are gifts from God. Therefore, what all humans have in common is that they are gifted by God—with whatever degree of health and security and food and education and family love that they enjoy. Now, Luther himself did not make the following point, but I think it is perfectly appropriate to apply this to inter-religious relations. Whatever we have to say, persons of faith need to begin with the recognition that people on both sides of any religious divide have this in common—they are gifted by God. This is the ultimate basis for their human dignity, the ultimate basis for our call to treat others with respect and with a gracious generosity of concern. It makes an enormous difference if I approach a member of another religion with the assumption that that person is gifted rather than approaching that person with the assumption that he or she lacks the gifts of God.
5. We said last night that Luther understood the purpose of education to be to foster wisdom. By studying the human story, he wrote to the city councils of Germany, young men and young women could discern what went wrong and what worked—to figure out

what made for a healthy society and what undermined that health, so that they could lead their communities and their households and provide wise counsel to others. Wisdom enables us to know how human beings tick and what they need for a full life. It enables us to understand how communities work—all in such a way as to guide our decision-making as we seek to serve our neighbor and the community. Despite important differences among the communities of this world, when it comes to what makes humans tick and how communities work, there is also a great deal of similarity. (I recall an event where a Rabbi friend of mine was talking to Lutheran clergy about the behavior of his congregation, and they were all nodding in recognition of the same things in their congregations.) Given this commonality, it is no accident that the wisdom literature found in the Bible is not distinctively Israelite; it was worked out in concert with other peoples who worshipped other gods. So, if we live in a society and a world of multiple religions, wisdom includes not only learning how to live, but also learning how to live *together*. And if we are to live together, then we need to live together in peace. This we do not learn from formulas or brief explanations of the teachings of another religion, we learn it from exploring our own religious tradition and understanding it more deeply via respectful dialogue with people from other religions in a community of higher learning. We need to be engaged with each other.

It is unfortunate that public perception tends to emphasize the role of religion in conflict. Thankfully, things have improved in Ireland lately, but the conflict there was often labeled a conflict between Catholics and Protestants. I very much doubt that religion was the primary ingredient. The disagreements had much more to do with Irish nationalism and a history of English rule. The disagreements between certain groups in the Middle East and the United States are often discussed in terms of a clash between Muslim culture and Christian culture. I doubt that religion has much to do with it either. I'm not saying that believers always live up to the values of their religion, but the highest value for Islam, Judaism, and Christianity is shalom—wholeness and peace. Transforming any of these religions into an excuse for violence against others is a misuse of that religion.

The task of a Lutheran college is to seek the wisdom that comes from studying societies, past and present, and studying what the Scriptures have to offer. And then to apply this not only for the benefit of one's own community but also for the benefit of peace among religious communities and among peoples and nations.

6. One way I like to talk about a Lutheran college is that it follows a "third path." That is, it is neither sectarian, insisting on religious uniformity nor non-sectarian, which is inclusive but not rooted in a religious tradition. The third path is both rooted and inclusive. Since

this is not what most people expect, it is difficult to explain. For our topic, the difference between being sectarian and following a third path is probably pretty clear. A sectarian institution invites into its midst persons from a single religious tradition; it does not worry about religious pluralism because it is either not present or, if it is present, not acknowledged. The difference between a Lutheran college following the third path and a non-sectarian institution is probably a little less obvious. Most non-sectarian institutions were once religiously affiliated but dropped that affiliation in order to be more inclusive. They followed the outlook I mentioned at the beginning—the one that recommends that tolerance requires a reduced commitment to one’s own tradition. What is different about the third path is that it takes religion seriously---not only the Lutheran Christianity that shapes its identity, but any religion. Therefore both the study of different religions and inter-religious dialogue become important. Religious identity is not to be hidden but explored. Whatever the degree of agreement or disagreement, the focus of these dialogues and this learning should be on serving the larger community. So the focal question is, how can we understand one another and how can we find ways to cooperate that enhance the wholeness, justice, and peace of the society and world in which we live?

Now, I need to add a footnote here. When I am discussing inter-religious dialogue I have in mind the major religions of the world. Christians may not always agree with them, but they are worthy of respect. However, it is not automatic that anything that bears the name religion is worthy of respect. What the major religions of the world have in common is that they aim, in one way or another, to serve the common good. But some white supremacy groups, for example, consider themselves to be a religion. They take biblical teachings such as beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks and turn them on their head, putting a sword on the altar rather than a plowshare. They deny the common-ness of our creation and consider non-whites to be inferior. On their view only some are gifted. They aim to build up one group at the expense of another and to tolerate a good deal of destruction to achieve their aims. These groups do not aim at the common good. We have to be careful not to judge too quickly, but at some point we must part ways with these groups, even if they call themselves a religion. As I say, I am not talking about them.

7. The question I am exploring is how we understand the rootedness of a Lutheran college in such a way that it supports inter-religious inclusion and dialogue. The stumbling block that usually arises is the exclusivity of the claim that Jesus is Lord or Jesus is the Messiah. Must one name this name in order to be right with God? I do not know the answer, and I do not feel that we need to know the answer in order to engage in dialogue. There are three reasons for remaining “agnostic” on this particular topic:

- a. What is most often cited to support an exclusivist position is the statement found in John 14:6 that “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father but through me.” We need to begin by pointing out that, if we take the New Testament as a whole, this verse cannot apply to Jews, because Paul says in Romans 11 regarding the descendants of Abraham, “Has God rejected his people? By no means! ... for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.” Thus the New Testament holds open at least one other way besides belief in Jesus. Paul expects that those Jews who have strayed from God’s covenant with Israel can return to it. My suspicion is that the verse from John’s Gospel has not been used appropriately, that it has more to do with coming to God through the way Jesus showed, the way of the cross, the way of depending on God’s mercy, than it authorizes a new requirement, that naming the name of Jesus is necessary in order to be saved.
  
- b. To return to a topic I have already discussed, Luther was very clear that God’s grace is a completely unmerited gift. There are no prerequisites. If this is true, then how can we know the limits of God’s grace? If we say that one must believe such and such in order to be right with God or that one must have the right theology in order to be right with God, then we have added a prerequisite. I do not think this is what Luther had in mind when he emphasized faith. For him, faith was not a prerequisite but something that develops as we acknowledge that God is already at work in our lives. Faith comes *after* God goes to work, not before. Many years ago, my wife and I went to hear Billy Graham speak at the Minnesota State Fair Grounds. The topic of the night was faith. After about half an hour of preaching, my wife turned to me and said, “I haven’t heard anything yet of faith as I understand it.” I mean no disrespect to Billy Graham to say that she was right. He had been preaching that “you need to take the first step. You need to have faith, and then God will do the rest.” This was making faith into a prerequisite rather than a consequence of God’s grace. And this—that humans were to take the first step and God would do the rest--was precisely the theological outlook as expressed by Gabriel Biel that gave Luther such difficulties in the monastery. He was so honest with himself that he saw he could not take the first step. He was so bound by his own self-centeredness that he could not on his own manufacture faith in God. This left him miserable until he discovered in Romans that God takes the initiative and reaches out to us. So, to return to my point, because God’s grace comes first, I can live without knowing its limits. And that means not knowing whether a specific religious person or any specific group of religious persons is or is not right with God, based only on whether they are willing the name the name of Jesus.

- c. Sharing the good news with others does not require that a person answers this question. If I'm excited about something and want to tell those around me about it, I'll just tell them. The good news is about what God has done in ongoing creation and in Christ, not about determining the limits of God's mercy.

In no sense does my readiness not to know the answer to this question diminish the importance of Jesus. He is for me, as he was for Luther, the clearest and best portrait of God. He is God's gift to us. My suggestion is merely that loyalty to him does not require a person to de-value the spiritual insights of others.

8. Let us look at faith from another direction. I think it is possible to understand faith as an orientation. If repentance is a turning around, a re-orientation of one's life, then faith can be understood as the orientation that results. It is an orientation to the God of the Exodus, the God of Jesus, the God of steadfast love. It is an orientation toward a future shaped by God's promises. It is an orientation toward the neighbor and the community. Doctrines, beliefs, and religious teachings can all be helpful in identifying and clarifying that orientation, but they are not themselves the object of faith. The living, dynamic, engaging God is the object of faith. If it were the case that a certain set of religious teachings formed the core, then there would be a conflict between faith and learning, because they would be operating on the same playing field, and one would seem to have to choose between one set of teachings and another. But faith as orientation and gaining knowledge can be compatible precisely because they are different kinds of activities. Similarly, if Christianity was primarily a set of religious teachings rather than an orientation, inter-religious dialogue would be more difficult. The primary issue would be "do you accept what I say?" One side would be in control of the agenda. But if religious faith is an orientation, then each side has to listen to the other in order to understand its stance toward the divine, toward other humans, and toward the world.

When Martin Luther understood faith as trust--a trust in God's promises and in God's fidelity, he was thinking of faith as an orientation. When he understood the New Testament term, "flesh," as an orientation away from God and "spirit" as an orientation toward God, he was thinking of faith in this way. And when he emphasized that the gospel was a communication event in the sense that the same words could be heard differently (sometimes as law and other times as gospel), he was focusing attention on how the gospel affects a person's orientation. It is precisely this understanding of faith that makes faith and reason work together so well and makes serious, productive inter-religious dialogue possible.

9. One would expect that inter-religious dialogue would be easy in our society, but it remains challenging for a Lutheran college.

--It is challenging because our society tends to regard zealotry and dogmatism as signs of a deep faith commitment, whereas a Lutheran college needs to show how a deep religious commitment supports inter-religious understanding and cooperative peace-making.

--It is challenging because our society expects that a respectful tolerance of other religions comes from a diminished dedication to one's own, whereas a Lutheran college needs to follow a third path—both deeply rooted and dialogical.

--It is challenging because our society expects conflict among religions, whereas a Lutheran college needs to work at fostering peace.

--It is challenging because our society tends to regard faith as private, individual, based on the emotions, and separate from intellectual life, whereas a Lutheran college conducts dialogue in an academic community in such a way as to serve the public good.

--It is challenging because our society tends to assume each person can figure out faith on his/her own without dialogue and without loyalty to a religion (they can be “spiritual without being religious”), whereas a Lutheran college affirms the wealth of resources found in a faith tradition shaped by revelation.

10. To come back to the theology of the cross once more, inter-religious dialogue is self-involving. Though “learning about” is important, theological insight comes not from “learning about” but from engaged encounter, from learning together. By engaging in the struggle to identify where two religious groups agree and where they do not, an individual has a chance to grow. This may be a personal as well as an intellectual struggle and it may be challenging, but in Luther's eyes it is precisely such a struggle that makes a theology transparent to the gospel, a servant of the gospel rather than an impediment to it.

## CONCLUSION

[This paragraph was omitted on 11/10/2011.] I begin with a personal reflection. While teaching at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, PA, with the help of many, many others, I established an Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding. For quite a long time I struggled to find a name. Should it be a center for Jew-Christian *studies*? Should it be a center for Jewish-Christian *relations*? A center for Jewish-Christian *dialogue*? After quite a long list of proposals, one day I brought into the President's office the suggestion that we use the word

“understanding” because it encompassed both personal relations (one group understanding the other group) and theological knowledge (one group learning about the teachings of the other). He said, “That’s it! We’ve found the name!” and so it came to be known as the Institute for Jewish-Christian *Understanding*.” He was right, but I would add that this understanding is not just for one’s own edification, as important as this is. It is also for the sake of the religious communities and ultimately for the sake of the world.

All of this leaves the Lutheran college with a task—to develop an understanding of Christianity that is not only deeply rooted in the Lutheran tradition but is also encouraging of inter-religious dialogue and of inter-religious peacemaking for the sake of the world. It can do so by engaging in this dialogue and by fostering theological reflection on its own campus. As I indicated earlier, a college following the third path is uniquely positioned to do this. Unlike congregations it has religious diversity within. Unlike sectarian colleges it acknowledges this religious diversity. And unlike non-sectarian colleges, it takes religion seriously enough to wrestle with faith and religious diversity.

My conviction is that respectful dialogue will be good not only for the Christians involved but also for those from other religions, because the experience of people in dialogue has been that their appreciation for and understanding of their own tradition grows. In dialogue they discover things about their own religion that they either did not know or did not value. For this growth to happen, participants should not be expected to have only minimal loyalty.

Rabbi Irving Greenberg, an Orthodox Jew, makes the point<sup>1</sup> that God’s project is too great for any one covenant to comprehend or embody it. Therefore, God established covenants with both Christianity and Judaism—in order that the differences of emphasis and the mutual critique would elevate the vision of each and challenge the discipleship of both. He thinks this model also applies to other religions. For me, whether the concept of covenant can be applied to other religions is an open question, but he is right in saying that God is never fully comprehended and that religions all benefit from mutual understanding and mutual critique.

My overall suggestion in this presentation is that in our own day Lutheran principles support inter-religious dialogue, and that Lutheran colleges are called to explore and interpret that dialogue in such a way as to make a contribution to the church and to the peace of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Greenberg’s “Judaism and Christianity: Their Respective Roles in the Strategy of Redemption,” in *Visions of the Other: Jewish and Christian Theologians Assess the Dialogue*, ed by Eugene Fisher (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), pp. 7-27.