

MATTERS of FAITH

REFLECTIONS ON THE PLACE OF

THEOLOGICAL LITERACY

IN THE LIBERAL ARTS.

By L. DEANE LAGERQUIST

“I lost my faith in English class,”
confessed David W. Olson '60, bishop of the Evangelical
Lutheran Church in America's Minneapolis Area Synod
from 1987 to 2001 and a St. Olaf regent. He was on cam-
pus, speaking to St. Olaf students, faculty, and staff during
a daily Boe Chapel service. If loss had been the entire story,
he would not have become first a pastor, then a bishop.

Rather, as he told those assembled that day, his loss of faith was followed by renewed faith; his understanding of Christianity expanded beyond words memorized from Luther's *Small Catechism* or rituals performed “by the book.” He had come to recognize the faith he received in childhood as a gift, he learned to think critically about belief, and he answered a call to take responsibility as a pastor and then a bishop for the tradition and community that had nurtured him.

St. Olaf experiences beyond that English class undoubtedly contributed to Olson's loss, and then to his regaining, of a lively, active faith strengthened by interchange with others and their ideas. Like his contemporaries, he would have taken religion classes, engaged in late-night conversations with other students, perhaps sung in a choir, and taken part in service projects. All of these equipped him to render leadership in his church and helped prepare him and his classmates for their lives as parents and teachers, citizens and government officials, business people and consumers, just as these activities continue to prepare today's Oles for their “lives of worth and service.”

ROOTED IN THE GOSPEL

Cultivating students' responsible engagement in American society and fostering participation in their religious communities have been central purposes of a St. Olaf education since the college opened its doors in 1874. Today's commitment to providing students with a rigorous and comprehensive education in religion grows out of and undergirds these long-term concerns.

In the college's first decades, Luther-

anism and Norwegian ethnic identity intertwined in academic requirements and campus life even as St. Olaf's Norwegian immigrant founders aspired to American ideals for higher education. Early students were prepared to make their way in American society and, at the same time, were expected to maintain their connections with their families and the communities from which they came to Northfield, Minnesota. Like many colleges established in the nineteenth century, St. Olaf adopted a four-year, liberal arts program. Its students, many from immigrant households, were required to study Norwegian language, but English was the language of instruction. Required religion classes and regular worship assumed that students and faculty shared a common Lutheran heritage.

Within the spectrum of nineteenth-century Norwegian-American Lutheranism, St. Olaf was moderate. Among its male students, some were headed to seminary and pastoral ministry, but unlike several other Lutheran schools, St. Olaf was never primarily a pre-seminary college, and it was coeducational from the beginning. St. Olaf's original commitments — to academic excellence, the study of languages and cultures, the

study and practice of religion, and to students' preparation to take active roles in their communities — are still characteristic of a St. Olaf education and its goals.

The courses and programs the college now offers its students grow from these historical commitments and address changes that have occurred over recent decades in the United States and the world, in the religious and ethnic composition of St. Olaf's student body and faculty, and in worldwide Christianity. Students arriving on Manitou Heights now differ from those who arrived in the mid-twentieth century as much as the classes of the 1950s and 1960s differed from those of the late 1800s.

Among current St. Olaf students who identify their religious affiliation, just over 40 percent are Lutheran. Some students are members of other Protestant denominations, some are Orthodox or Roman Catholic, and some come from other faith traditions, among them Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Like their counterparts enrolled in other American colleges, students who claim membership in a Christian church vary in their intensity of involvement and depth of knowledge. Some are well-informed about the Bible, worship regularly, and are faithful in service. Others are casually connected to a congregation and may have only a vague sense of what Christians believe and how that compares to other

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traditions. Students from other faith traditions have a similar variety of knowledge about and involvement in their own traditions and varying degrees of knowledge of Christian teachings.

As the St. Olaf community has grown to include people from different faith traditions, so too the community has grown to include people whose forebears lived in Asia, Africa, or Latin America. In 1874, St. Olaf's students were Norwegian

immigrants or children of Norwegian immigrants. St. Olaf students from today's immigrant households are more likely to have learned an African or Asian language at home than Norwegian.

Diana Eck of Harvard Divinity School has described the United States as both the world's most Christian nation and the most religiously diverse. American Christianity is becoming increasingly "post-denominational"; contemporary American Christians identify less with a particular denomination than with Christianity as a whole. In addition, as historian Philip Jenkins and other observers point out, as the number of Christians in Asia and Africa has grown over the past century, Christianity has become less a religion of Europe and North America and increasingly a religion of the global south.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION

St. Olaf's foundational commitments to cultivate students' engagement in society and foster their participation in religious communities remain strong; at the same time, the college's nineteenth- and twentieth-century programs in pursuit of these goals have adapted to the new global realities of the twenty-first century. St. Olaf students today must develop a new "theological literacy." That is, they must learn the language and skills necessary for living well among and with people who profess different religious faiths — or no religious faith — as citizens of one nation and inhabitants of one world.

This imperative is not limited to students who profess Christianity or to those who major in religion any more than the need for scientific literacy is limited to those who will become physicists, or the need for competence in communication is restricted to future politicians or English majors. Sociologist of religion Nancy Ammerman has suggested that what is needed is rather like bilingualism: the ability to speak both the language of one's own community and a second language shared more widely.

This ideal echoes those articulated in the early twentieth century by St. Olaf faculty member and novelist Ole Rølvaag (a 1905 St. Olaf graduate) and his friend, St. Olaf President Lars Boe; they urged

the descendents of Norwegian immigrants to share the riches of their heritage as they found their way into the mainstream of American culture.

Theological literacy requires accurate knowledge, a respectful attitude, and the ability to engage in generous, discerning conversation about religion — both one's own and others. In early adulthood, St. Olaf students are poised to examine whatever religious identity they were

faithful life. Nonetheless, the urgency for theological literacy was made vivid to me while leading St. Olaf's Global Semester in 2007–08. During our five months of travel in eight countries as we studied "Jesus in Cross-Cultural Perspective," we encountered a rich array of Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist practices. The range of religious commitments, or noncommitments, in the group was narrower than among the American populace,

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MARTIN LUTHER'S GERMAN TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE, CA. 1545.

given as children. Classroom learning and experiences provide opportunities and resources for the ongoing processes of refining, redefining, reaffirming, and rearticulating personal beliefs and practices. Merely making one's own commitments is not enough, however. Self-understanding must be complemented by mutual understanding to strengthen sound judgment and constructive decisions by individuals and groups in various civic and religious arenas.

I have long been convinced that theological literacy is an essential component of both responsible citizenship and

but the differences of belief and intensity among Oles soon became evident.

There was no hiding it when responses to Coptic monasticism or Ramadan practices, a Hindu puja or an Indian Rite Catholic mass, a Chinese holy mountain or Korean Pentecostalism diverged among the students. Following a visit to an Indian primary school, one astonished student reported that a child had forthrightly asked her: "Who is your god?" Once the Ole sputtered her way to claiming Jesus, the child happily pointed to a friend, announcing, "So is his."

Discussions about Jesus in the context



A 7TH CENTURY QUR'AN LEAF IN HIJAZI SCRIPT, FROM THE ARABIAN PENINSULA.

of cultural and religious diversity could have been more troubled in our traveling classroom; relationships were tested but not broken. Encountering differences around the world and within their group forced students to reconsider what they had taken for granted and reflect about how best to profess their beliefs outside familiar, comfortable communities.

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This may have been the most difficult teaching I have ever done. While I'm not sure how to evaluate its success, I am certain that students were deeply engaged and insightful when they wrote final essays on the question: "How can people of differing religions live well together?"

ACADEMIC GROUNDING

St. Olaf's liberal arts curriculum, its grounding in Christianity, and its commitment to a global perspective inform the ways the college fosters students' development of theological literacy.

On the one hand, Christianity has a privileged place in the study of religion within the college's curriculum; on the other hand, a wide range of religious

traditions are also studied, both on and off campus. All St. Olaf students are required to take two religion courses, one focusing on the Bible — considering how it is read in various communities and cultural contexts — and the other on Christian theology. Religion majors study a second faith tradition in addition to Christianity.

Increasingly, professors include attention to matters of religious diversity in their courses and make it central in some, such as the team-taught "Theology of Religions and Interfaith Dialogue" or the ethics course "Religious Pluralism and the Nature of Community." The faculty members' expertise combines knowledge of a particular subject, such as the New Testament or Islamic ethics, with a discipline such as historical study or literary criticism.

Whatever the topic of the course, religion in the classroom is approached with the standard tools of academic study: reading, writing, listening, and discussing. This is an intellectual enterprise in which faculty and students exercise imagination and judgment, practice description and analysis, and engage in argument and reconsideration. Students and faculty

alike are invited to adopt, in turn, the stance of a critic within the community or tradition being studied and the stance of a sympathetic outsider. Everyone is expected to be humble and willing to learn. Religions are always treated with respect and with awareness that belief and practice intertwine in ways that affect members' interactions with one another and with their neighbors.

As with Bishop David Olson in the 1950s, such careful study among St. Olaf students today may stimulate disillusionment and rejection of prior beliefs; it may also contribute to better-informed, reflective, and genuine faith. Opportunities for worship and devotion, sustained discussion and shared celebrations, and

service and compassionate relationships foster students' growth toward maturity in their own religious lives and in their regard for one another.

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

When Martin Luther urged the councilmen of sixteenth-century Germany to establish schools, he assumed the councilmen were themselves Christians. When he encouraged parents to send their children to those schools, he also assumed that both parents and children were baptized believers. Thus he expected an alliance of civic and religious efforts and a homogeneity of belief that does not exist in the United States.

Luther could not have imagined the freedom of religious choice that Americans take for granted. Nonetheless, his admonition that the welfare of the city depended more on well-educated residents than on strong walls still holds. So, too, his teachings about the value of Christian



SCULPTURE OF THE HINDU DEITY GANESH FROM NORTH BENGAL, 11TH CENTURY, ASIAN ART MUSEUM OF BERLIN (DAHLEM).



THE GREAT BUDDHA OF KAMAKURA. A 93-TON BRONZE STATUE CAST IN 1252 AT KOTOKU-IN, A BUDDHIST TEMPLE IN KAMAKURA, JAPAN.

involvement in temporal, even worldly concerns, still informs the work of Lutheran colleges.

The saving work of giving faith is God's work, not humans' work. Even when Christians proclaim the gospel of God's love, it is divine grace that draws people to God. Human work, according to Luther, is to attend to such tasks as tending children and giving aid to the needy, reading books and playing music, governing cities and building roads, administering schools and healing the sick, defending the vulnerable and pursuing peace. These are all worthy occupations for Christians in response to God's calling, but Christian faith is not required to do them. Christian involvement in these activities is both individual — as teachers, doctors, grocers, bankers, and neighbors — and collective, through congregations, associations, and institutions.

Lutheran teaching about human action is lived out in institutions of the church. Congregations have primary responsibility for the early nurturing of children's faith. Seminaries educate pastors to preach and preside at worship and lead the church. Social service agencies carry out works of love such as counseling, providing adoption services, stocking food shelves for the hungry, and giving aid to refugees. Hospitals offer health care on the basis of illness, not belief.

The primary purpose of Lutheran colleges such as St. Olaf is the important, human work of preparing all students for responsible lives in this world through an

excellent liberal arts curriculum and a rich array of additional opportunities, including worship, service, small groups, and the like. As a college of the church associated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, St. Olaf supports the practice of Christianity, gospel proclamation, and weekly celebration of the Eucharist. Many students from Lutheran congregations deepen their childhood faith during their college years and some discern a call to pastoral ministry, but this is not the defining work of a college. Neither is the college's mission to turn students away from whatever religious tradition has nurtured them or to convert them to Lutheran Christianity, though these too might result.

St. Olaf welcomes to campus fervent believers, ardent critics, and serious seekers, encouraging all of them to be as well informed about religions — their own and others' — as about any other subject. The careful distinction between study of religion inside the classroom and practice of religion beyond it resists the reduction of religion either to a matter of subjective personal belief or to an abstraction of no personal significance. It makes space for religious believers to give witness to their faith in respectful discussion, in compassionate service, and in shared celebration.

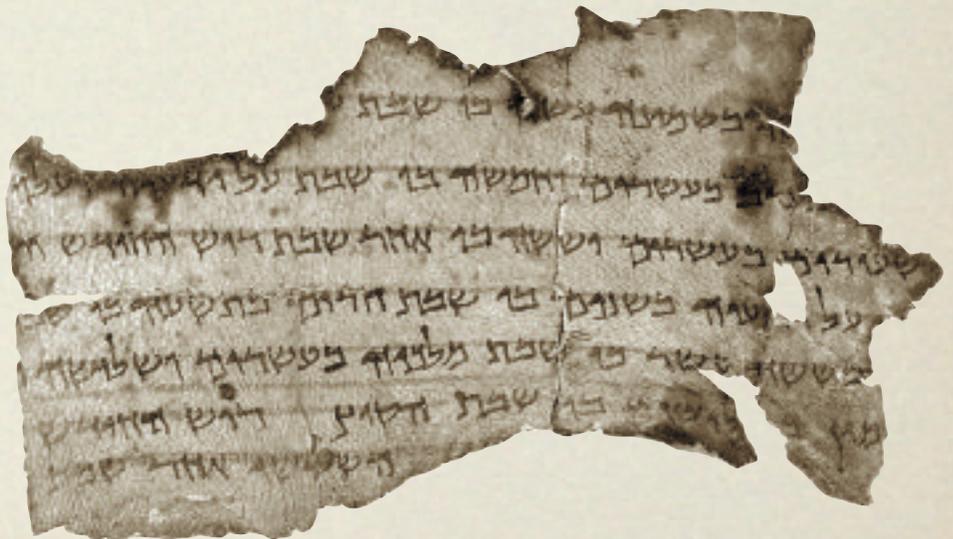
Now more than ever, St. Olaf students are aware of the religious diversity in this nation and the world. The St. Olaf graduates who become clergy in Christian

churches or leaders in other religious traditions have a particular responsibility within those communities. Whatever their belief, wherever they live in the world, whatever their positions of responsibility, all must learn how to participate constructively in this world of many religions.

St. Olaf's commitment to fostering theological literacy continues the founders' concern for the religious life of immigrants by attending to today's students, to their religious traditions, and to the current national and global context. As my experience on Global Semester made vivid to me, this is an iterative, dynamic enterprise that must respond to particular circumstances and in which students, teachers, and others learn from one another.

Today, a measure of graduates' theological literacy is their ability to engage questions such as those my students encountered on Global Semester: "Who is your god?" and "How can people of different faiths live well together?" Responding to these and similar questions continues as St. Olaf graduates assume civic responsibilities, nurture families and friendships, pursue their careers, and participate in communities of faith. Like any sort of literacy, theological literacy is a life-long enterprise. 🙏

L. DEANE LAGERQUIST is a St. Olaf professor of religion. She has written often on Lutheran higher education and will teach a course on Christianity in India this fall.



A FRAGMENT FROM THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS, WRITTEN BY A JEWISH SECT BETWEEN 150 BCE AND 68 CE. THE SCROLLS, WHICH PREDATE CHRISTIANITY BY AT LEAST 100 YEARS, WERE DISCOVERED NEAR JERUSALEM IN 1947 BY A BEDOUIN SHEPHERD.