Church Connections and Diversity:

In Search of a Welcomed Anxiety: A Response

"In order for the wheel to turn, for life to be lived, impurities are needed. Dissent, diversity . . . are needed."
PRIMO LEVI, The Periodic Table.

Yes. We all belong to Augsburg because we have chosen to do so.

When I first came to Augsburg for my on-campus interview in the early Spring of 1993, I was quite anxious. I had learned about the college beforehand, I had carefully prepared my demonstration class, I had reflected on my philosophy of teaching, and I had tried to anticipate the possible questions that could come up during the interview. I wanted to be able to give intelligent and honest answers. I wanted to give a good impression. I wanted the search committee and the Dean to feel both that I could appropriately carry out my academic duties and that I could fit in the general culture of the college. In short, I wanted to get an offer.

Equally important, however, I was anxious because I wanted the college to make a good impression on me. I was not looking for an in-between jobs position. I was looking for a community I could be happy and proud to belong to. I was looking for an institution in which I could become a full member without reservations. I had learned about Augsburg's connection to the Lutheran Church, so I felt morally — and pragmatically — compelled to bring up the subject: I am not a Lutheran, I am not a Christian. I observe Jewish holidays, rites, values, and traditions.

Augsburg's mission statement is open to a variety and sometimes, contradictory, interpretations. We wouldn't need a task force, several committees and a series of colloquiums, to understand and project it, if the contrary were the case. This is positive. Unless we live under a dictatorship, tensions and conflicts by necessity generate an exchange of ideas and dialogue. Healthy living communities are constantly reflecting about themselves in search of new ways to create, modify and maintain identities which are never uniform but varied and plural. Identities are only
possible to be reached in contrast with others. The self is unthinkable without considering the Other's presence, influence, and power.

How can I be an Auggie without being a Christian?

The fact is that until now I hadn't felt the need to ask myself such a question. Through my classes, my attendance at faculty meetings, my conversations with colleagues and students at Murphy's, my participation in committees, and —yes—through my participation at Baccalaureate services in the Chapel, my Augginess, came to me naturally. Very soon after I arrived to Augsburg, I experienced a strong feeling of belonging. Fine, I confess. I have attended Baccalaureate services, but I have stood in silence. I have sung some of the hymns and songs, but I have not read the Creed.

I haven't pretended I have been reading it either. There is no need for that. Augsburg's mission also embraces an "intentionally diverse campus community". Diversity. A casual perusal through the different papers —on Church connections and / or diversity— now in front of us, would attest that the word and the concept are highly conflictive, problematic, and the source of a good deal of anxiety. We look forward to reaching a comfortable level of diversity, but we also want to take a few steps back to see how we are doing. We struggle to define the kind of diversity that is desirable in our campus while keeping an eye on a vaguely defined balance. We want diversity without losing our identity. This is not so much a difficult task to reach, as it is to define it. It is difficult not only because our identity will be defined in contrast with the Other, but also because the diversity we have allowed within our borders is already a part of our identity. Diversity is no longer our relationship with them, it is the relationship among us. As a non Lutheran, a non Christian, a non American, a non Scandinavian, a non Norwegian, a non native-English-speaker, I am obviously part of the diversity, but I also want to remain a part of the identity.

The tensions and conflicts between sameness and diversity, between pure and impure, are exacerbated when conceived and experienced through a bipolar system. Such a system, capable of holding just one unique center, necessarily leads to antagonism, distrust, fear, and the urge for dominance and suppression. Differences in presence and in power are the source of different levels of legitimacy responsible, in their turn, for further misunderstandings and misappropriations, exodus and
expulsions. In a bipolar system, centers either seek the absorption of the Other or their effacement from periphery to marginality. In a bipolar system, centers are compelled to eradicate the Other stressing their exclusionary forces.

In contrast, the tensions and conflicts between our seemingly contradictory goals set in our mission statement are integrative ones. Far from pulling us away from our goals, our tensions and conflicts are the means for their accomplishment. We stress—we want to stress—Augsburg's unique Christian character while embracing its diversity. Thus, conflict and tension become the locus of our anxiety. Our challenge is to transform it into a welcomed anxiety. Without suppressing it, we must strive to experience it as a constructive anxiety since it is, perhaps, the only way to accomplish our conflictive nature and mission: a small urban liberal arts college aiming to form future leaders for service, shaped by the faith of the Christian Church, integrated in an intentionally diverse community.

I believe that the Augsburg community is much better described not through the framework of a bipolar system—here the sameness, there the diversity—but through the framework of a polisystems theory. In contrast to the fundamental antagonism enmeshed in a bipolar approach necessarily focused on insurmountable and irreconcilable differences, the purpose of a polisystems approach is to make "explicit the conception of a system as dynamic and heterogeneous... It thus emphasizes the multiplicity of intersections..." Polisystems theory allows for the perception of a realm composed not by one single center surrounded by one single periphery, but as a complex conglomerate of various centers connected to a plurality of peripheries, centers in their turn, of a multiplicity of other peripheries.

Connections in a system thus conceived are no longer linear and one-sided, but rhizomatic. They respond to a plurality of forces in which each point is connected to any other point ceaselessly establishing heterogeneous links between different organizations, departments, disciplines, and affiliations. They establish a variety of reversible links between committees, calendars, programs, accreditations, desires, handbooks, perspectives, policies, administrations, rituals, grade inflation; centers of power and of exchange of information; budgets; means and modes of communication: memos, e.mail, faculty meetings, and papers. They push forward biases; social, ethical and moral concerns; guidelines, different philosophies of teaching, of research and of discussion. They bring together a variety of views, attitudes and persuasions.
And yes, through different mechanisms of selection they may become the means to reach goals and purposes.

In the natural world, if left to its own internal devices without outside intervention, a rhizomatic structure can only become what is already inscribed in its genetic code: a bulb will become another bulb. The complexity of forces engaged in a social rhizomatic structure, on the other hand, are often modulated by regulatory forces that give the rhizome directions, paths and somewhat preestablished—although never definite—borders. In short, social rhizomatic organizations—such as a college—strive to define their purposes; they are characterized by their intentionality. What I would like to argue is that we must find the means of achieving our college mission without resource to a bipolar, antagonistic framework.

This is not a legal issue. A college of the Church—as any other private institution—may very well be entitled to restrict its hiring policies to accommodate its educational, vocational and pastoral purposes. In fact, it may have the duty to do so. In this regard, different institutions will design different guidelines and restrictions for the selection of their prospective members. What troubles me is that Bruce's proposal addresses only one aspect of Augsburg's mission and nature: education shaped by the Faith and Values of the Christian Church. While Christianity is indeed a most central component in Augsburg's mission, so is its urban setting—close to the community it serves— and so is its diversity—with a variety of views that do not function just as "ventilation," but also as central components of its identity.

Issues of religion may have a part in the hiring process; but I reject the idea that faculty members should be judged on the basis of their ability to a "commitment to conducting education from the perspective of Christian faith and values" (my emphasis). In an authentically diverse college, that can be encouraged—as all of us should be encouraged to place ourselves in the classrooms, committees and meetings with all of our beliefs, biases, and uncertainties. But it can not be expected. No matter good intentions and respect, the former attitude would inevitably lead to inequality and to a diverse legitimacy. There would be faculty members viewed as less Augsburgian than others. There would be full fledged Augsburgians and a group of—perhaps—welcome Resident Aliens.
I believe this is not and has not been the nature of Augsburg College. Non-Christian faculty members should have the right to call themselves Auggies. As a non-Christian faculty member committed to the goals of the college, I need more than respect; I need to be acknowledged as an equal, not just as a removable player. If diversity is not an incidental but a central aspect of our college, then we need to find a common ground able to encompass both Christianity and diversity. Both are part of our identity.

The questions of how a Christian College can be diverse can easily be transformed into questions of how a Christian College can remain Christian in the face of so much diversity. I believe the former is a legitimate question. I think the latter is the product of an anguished anxiety. There is one easy way to get rid of our conflicts and tensions: let’s eradicate one side of the bipolar system. Let’s eliminate either Christianity or diversity. But I doubt that any of us would really want to do that. After all, before coming to Augsburg, we had learned about its traditions and values. By embracing a commitment to both Christianity and diversity, we have no other option but to face tension and uncertainty. Inevitably, this will be the source of a perennial anxiety, but knowing that it is through our tensions and conflicts that we accomplish our multidirectional mission, it could be a welcomed anxiety.

We feel anxious when we don’t have the certainty of wholeness. But it is up to us to experience that uncertainty joyfully. Most of us have chosen to become researchers and educators because we want to have an impact, we want to make a difference. In approaching this aim, we may want to think according to the concept of tikkun, to mend, repair and transform the world. I am not sure, if that is naïve or if it is possible, but I find joy and purpose in believing that it is possible. The same for our conflictive and contradictory mission.

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