

## **Silence of the Students: How Free Speech Relates to Contrary Ideologies in a Lutheran University**

**By Senior Editor: Isaiah Mudge**

### **Introduction**

Although it is the position of both this periodical and our nation's constitution that uninhibited speech be held sacrosanct, the issue of free discourse becomes more complex within a private institution. Recently, for instance, at Concordia University Wisconsin some students have begun expressing caution that the University may be becoming too willing to support non-Lutheran ideas. Thus, the specific question is this: How ought non-Lutheran ideas, ideas that may even be antithetical to the Lutheran ideology, be treated in a university system which proclaims itself to be distinctly Lutheran? Furthermore, how does freedom of speech and discourse apply to students who may hold these antithetical beliefs while attending said university? Finally, how ought a Lutheran university relate to its Lutheran students? The purpose of this editorial is to allow a more concise and beneficial conversation regarding these questions, for the furthering of civil discourse in our universities.

### **Concordia's Identity as Lutheran**

To begin, it is necessary to outline the central affiliation of the Concordia System, and most specifically, Concordia University Wisconsin, where these issues seem to have become a focal point. CUW is a *Lutheran* institution. It is a part of a system which is governed by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Its move to its current campus was approved by the LCMS, funded by the LCMS, and its transition to a four-year college was allowed by the LCMS. The President and all senior administration must be LCMS members in good standing, and the same is required for members of the board of regents. All of this is reflected in CUW's mission statement to be a "Lutheran higher education community committed to helping students develop in mind, body, and spirit for service to Christ in the Church and in the world." And on its website CUW advertises its "very reason for existence" to be as "a place of Lutheran Christian higher education. All of the Schools, programs and initiatives

of the University are guided by shared fidelity to this central purpose."

Thus, CUW has a strong, evident, and self-advertised Lutheran identity which it is obligated to uphold, acting as a primary facility for training future LCMS pastors, church workers, and theologians. This is for the dual purpose that it exists due to LCMS influence and because this Lutheran identity is a primary reason why many students attend the university to begin with. To refrain from promoting the Lutheran values which it proclaims to hold dear would be both dishonesty as an institution and a betrayal of the students who attend for those values, which are specifically the teachings of the LCMS.

### **Concordia's Identity as a University**

A second unequivocal fact of CUW is that it is a *university*. Although coupled with the idea of Lutheran identity, CUW does promise "rigorous and diverse" academic programs, with the goal of "campuses, facilities, human and financial resources, and infrastructure" which "support a robust student experience in a welcoming environment that results in the professional, social, academic and spiritual formation of all." While faith is a central focus of CUW, academic prowess is as well. Thus, CUW as an institution, its teachers and its administration, all have a responsibility to ensure the proper academic education of those students attending. To fail in this duty would also be to betray a promise which CUW makes to all students who attend.

### **When Identities Collide**

Concordia has two identities, one as a Lutheran institution and one as a university, and each of these identities denote obligations that must simultaneously be maintained, although they may sometimes be in conflict. For instance, the LCMS takes a strong stance upon supernatural creation as the origin of the universe, but modern biological theory orients towards a purely naturalistic evolutionary origin. With respect to its Lutheran identity, CUW has an obligation to support the biblical account of creation. However, regarding its identity as a university, CUW also has an obligation to ensure that its students are thoroughly educated in modern science, regardless of its relation to LCMS Teachings. To remove evolutionary theory

(LCMS bylaw 3.10.6.7.2). Thus it seems that, at least in this circumstance and circumstances like it, Concordia does have an obligation to allow ideas which are antithetical to Lutheranism to be expressed for the sake of promoting Christian education. In other words, teaching a belief is intrinsic to teaching how it is false.

### **Freedom of Speech within the Student Body of Non-Lutherans**

A similar conflict pertains to non-Christian, or even just non-Lutheran members of the Concordia student body, as their freedom of expression, which ought to be granted in a university atmosphere, may come into conflict with LCMS teaching. Certainly, both must be maintained. To resolve this tension, let us draw a distinction between CUW *allowing expression* and *giving support to it*. When CUW is allowing expression, it is not preventing the expression of thoughts *intellectually* between students or within the classroom, even if these thoughts are antithetical to Lutheranism. This allowance is not a violation of CUW's Lutheran identity so long as CUW does not stray into giving support, that is, actively increasing the power of organizations or other entities which support antithetical ideologies. In other words, CUW's responsibility as a Lutheran organization is to keep the ideas as ideas, and not allow them to be expressed in methods which allow them greater influence beyond the ideological. For instance, the LCMS takes a strong pro-life stance, which is reflected in CUW's statement of principles. According to its Lutheran identity, CUW has an obligation to uphold these principles. As such, while Concordia both may and should allow the expression of pro-choice thought amongst students, CUW would have an obligation to prevent a pro-choice rally, a fund-raising event for an abortion clinic, or any other event which lends power to an antithetical idea beyond the ideological. In this manner, CUW allows for its Lutheran students to engage with antithetical teachings in a manner which is beneficial to their Christian education, while allowing non-Lutheran and non-Christian students to express their thoughts without repression, and without corrupting its identity as a Lutheran institution which supports Lutheran thought.

### **The Responsibility of the Student Body of Lutherans**

Perhaps a clearer method by which to view the role of CUW in the lives of Lutheran students is as a guardian of their rights to express the Lutheran ideas which they believe. It is not in violation of CUW's Lutheran identity for it to allow antithetical ideas to be spoken, so long as the university staff, faculty, and administration champion the rights of Lutheran ideology and treat expression of its teachings as sacrosanct. CUW exists as a haven for Lutheran thought in a world where even other private institutions may have begun abandoning the Christian identity upon which they once made claim. Ingrained in its identity as a Lutheran institution is an obligation to stay that way.

Now, while CUW has a responsibility to ensure the *capacity, safety, and opportunity* for Lutheran students to speak, it is not obligated to make it easy. It may, and almost certainly will, be difficult to respond to non-Lutheran ideas during a seminar class, or to represent Lutheran ideas well in a debate with another student. In these cases, it is the responsibility of Lutheran students to be capable of having these conversations, and not to mistake their own discomfort with antithetical ideology as danger or as a lack of administrative support. So long as representation of Lutheran ideas is upheld with a sanctity that reflects CUW's foundational responsibility, Concordia is upholding its role.

### **When Things Go Wrong**

With all this said, it is certainly the role of the student population to ensure that CUW is upholding the responsibilities which its dual identities endow. This is not synonymous with reprimanding those deemed deserving of punishment. Pecuniary responsibilities are held by the CUW administration, not the students, and punishment ought to be delivered dispassionately and with specific and preordained measures. Aristotle once cautioned that "anybody can become angry[...] but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way." These characteristics require restraint and control to exhibit, and while an

to ensure that CUW maintains an atmosphere protective of Lutheran discourse. Should CUW, its faculty, its staff or its administration fail in these duties, we as students must be hard-headed about how we proceed. It is easy for us to become upset and to feel victimized. It is difficult to construct a cogent and level-headed argument. However, construction of that argument is how we know we are correct. We must not attack CUW for faults against us unless we can provide the exact rule that was broken and evidence of its being broken, according to LCMS bylaws. We must be able to give specific examples and to demonstrate exactly how these examples resulted from CUW lapsing in its responsibilities. Should we be unable to do that, we must ask carefully whether an affront was truly made. Finally, throughout this we must be careful to ensure that non-Lutheran voices do not see our care in protecting our rights to speak as a desire to quell theirs. The cornerstone of free speech is that truth will reveal itself in contest with falsehood. Should the Lutheran beliefs which we hold dear be true, they will hold their own. They simply need the opportunity, and the skill on our part, to be shared.