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Social and Religious Attitudes Among Lutheran Students

Kenneth L. Frerking

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College students have probably been "investigated" more than any other single category of people. They have certainly been the subject of many articles and essays in recent years. However, much of what has been written has either been without empirical basis altogether, or else the empirical research has focused on only a small minority of the campus population. Leo Cherne, executive director of the Research Institute of America, summed up the situation quite succinctly when he wrote:

Never before has any group been so publicly and widely studied, analyzed, reported, and "explained" as today's youth. And never before has so much fiction been spun out of so little fact.

With the hope of reducing the fiction and increasing the fact, I made a study of the social and religious attitudes among Lutheran students enrolled on the campuses of the University of Missouri and Stephens College in Columbia, Mo., during the fall semester of 1968. The purpose of the study was to determine the attitudes of a cross section of Lutheran students on selected social, political, religious, and ethical issues. The sociopolitical attitudes selected were those related to race, war, and poverty; while the religioethical attitudes concentrated on the individual's evaluation of the Christian faith, the institutional church, and the new morality. Political anomie (that is, feelings of helplessness or apathy toward the political process) was also introduced as an attitude variable.

A four-page questionnaire was constructed to gather the desired information. This questionnaire was mailed to the 850 Lutheran students enrolled on the campuses of the University of Missouri and Stephens College. The total number of completed questionnaires returned was 680, an 80.0 percent return. The data were then processed and tested for significant relationships.

The attitude variables were related to a series of background factors including the demographic characteristics of sex, marital status, and size of home community; family influences such as father's occupation and parents' political orientation; religious factors such as worship attendance, parochial education, and synodical affiliation; and college factors such as class rank, academic major, place of residence while at college, and the campus of enrollment. All the attitudinal differences reported in this study were statistically significant at the .05 level or better.

SEX DIFFERENCES

The difference in attitudes between male and female students was quite pronounced. Female students show a greater personal valuation of the Christian faith and more favorable attitudes toward the institutional church than do the males. They are also more pacifistic than males and show more favorable attitudes toward Negroes and welfare programs than do males.

Interestingly enough, there were no pronounced differences between male and female students on the new

morality. As a matter of fact, their attitude responses were almost identical. This similarity is reflected in a compilation of comments volunteered by the respondents. One item on the new morality scale read: "If people do not believe it is wrong to have sex relations outside of marriage, it isn't, unless they hurt themselves, their partners, or others." This statement was a direct quotation from Joseph Fletcher's book, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*.

A female junior divided the "outside of marriage" phrase into two parts when she commented: "Agree Before Marriage. Disagree After Marriage." A male sophomore made a similar distinction when he commented: "I agree if you mean fornication; in the case of marriage I tend to disagree."

A female freshman made a distinction between her attitude "as a human" and her attitude "as a Christian." In the former instance she "Strongly Agreed"; in the latter, she "Strongly Disagreed." A male junior in pre-medicine made a similar distinction: "Do you mean what is right to us or what is right in a Christian sense? Reality and Ideality [sic] are two different things. We're only human."

For the total group of respondents the same percent (35) of both males and females voiced agreement with the statement from Fletcher's book. Forty-five percent of the males and 48 percent of the females voiced disagreement. The remainder in each category were "not sure."

The general atmosphere of campus morality seems to be one of permissiveness. Morality becomes a very private affair; what is right for one person may be wrong for another, but no one condemns the other for holding a different point of view.

MARITAL STATUS

The only pronounced differences in attitude between married and unmarried students revolved around

political anomie and the new morality. Married students were found to be less anomic in their political outlook than were unmarried students. They were also found to show less favorable attitudes toward the new morality. In response to the Fletcher statement noted above, many married students rejected the premise that such relations could be had without hurting someone.

HOME COMMUNITY

The difference in attitude between urban and rural students was pronounced. Rural-oriented students show more favorable attitudes toward the Christian faith, the institutional church, and traditional morality (as opposed to the new morality) than do their urban counterparts. Urban students are more pacifistic than rural students and show somewhat less prejudice toward Negroes.

FATHER'S OCCUPATION

The inclusion of "father's occupation" as a factor related to the respondent's attitudes was based on the premise that the respondent's attitude would be conditioned by the attitudes of the home and that there would be differences of attitude within the occupational structures. This assumption has been validated in a number of studies.

The occupational group showing the most pronounced attitude valence was that of farmer: Students from farm homes showed the conservative rural-oriented attitudes indicated above. Others showing a similar pattern of response were students whose fathers' occupations fell in the "factory and unskilled labor" category.

The "professional" category showed comparatively less favorable attitudes toward the Christian faith and traditional morality but more favorable attitudes toward Negroes. It showed highly conservative tendencies on pacifism and even more so on welfare.

The category included a large percentage of medical doctors and clergymen.

PARENTS' POLITICAL ORIENTATION

The questionnaire solicited the political orientation of father and mother respectively. The results were remarkably similar despite the fact that a large number (105) of the families were "politically split." In both the case of the mother and the father, Republican orientation outnumbered Democratic orientation about three to one. This would lend some credence to a familiar saw in Lutheran circles that "the Lutheran Church is the Republican party at prayer."

The greatest differences in attitude, as might be expected, were those involving social and political issues. Students from a Democratic background were noticeably more pacifistic, pro-Negro, and pro-welfare than their Republican counterparts.

Lest it be assumed from the above comments that student attitudes are generally anti-Negro, it should be pointed out that the scores on the anti-Negro scale were highly skewed toward the low end of the continuum. This may indicate that, despite the pronounced differences between those coming from families of diverse political orientation, students generally score low in anti-Negro attitudes. There may even be reason to believe that the attitudes of students are considerably less anti-Negro than that of their parents. Attitudes that were quite common in the parents' generation—or at least more common than they are in the current student generation—were overwhelmingly rejected by students in their responses. This would include such attitudes as "keeping them [Negroes] in their own districts and schools" while granting that they "should have equal rights"—the familiar "separate but equal" idea that persisted in this country, with Supreme Court endorsement, until

the mid-20th century. So likewise the idea that "most Negroes would become overbearing if not kept in their place" was overwhelmingly rejected by the students, as was also the statement: "Negroes will always have lower morals than whites." The relatively high reliability of the Anti-Negro Scale (.86), together with a minimum of responses in the "Not Sure" category, indicated that this is an area in which students have arrived at some specific conclusions.

CLASS RANK

Class rank was not found to be an important variable in explaining attitude differences among students. There was an obvious trend toward more liberal attitudes in the lower ranked classes, but it was not statistically significant. With the exception of attitudes toward the new morality and political anomie, attitudes were remarkably similar between the classes.

Since the new morality represents a less structured form of morality and since it has been generally assumed that student attitudes and values become more flexible as students go through college, it would seem to follow that freshmen would be less favorable to the new morality than seniors and graduates. The findings in this study indicated the exact opposite. The new morality is endorsed more by the lower ranked classes than the upper ranked.

This finding may simply be a reflection of the progressive acceptance of the new morality over the last few years, with older students showing less acceptance than the younger ones. On the other hand, it may indicate a deeper understanding of the nature of interpersonal relationships on the part of the older students who have, through experience, found that the basic premises of the new morality as *popularly conceived* are untenable.

As to political anomie, the data would seem to indicate a growing

awareness of political efficacy (that is, low anomie) during the college years. Freshmen are noticeably high in political anomie while graduates are quite low, with a progressive change in between.

ACADEMIC MAJOR

Students in nursing, social work, education, agriculture, and home economics show the most favorable attitudes toward the Christian faith and the institutional church. However, while nursing and social work majors show favorable attitudes toward pacifism, Negroes, and welfare, the agriculture and home economics complex assumed less favorable attitudes toward these same issues.

Social science majors show mediating tendencies on the religioethical scales but tend to be liberal in their attitudes on the sociopolitical scales of pacifism, race, and welfare. This pattern is followed in a general way by journalism majors.

Natural science majors assume a mediating position on the religious scales and a conservative position on the new morality and sociopolitical scales. Engineering and math majors follow the same general pattern.

Business and administration majors are low on the religious scales, high on the new morality scale, and generally in the center of the rankings on sociopolitical issues.

PLACE OF RESIDENCE

The student's place of residence was included in this study on the assumption that different types of living situations would provide different types of interaction with people which might have an influence on their attitudes. Although there was some indication that this may be so, the major conclusion from this part of the study was that the factor of the respondent's sex may be the determining factor in the differences found between the various

types of residence. Where female students predominated in a given type of residence, the pattern followed that of female respondents. The same held true, of course, for male students.

The one exception to this pattern was that of attitudes toward Negroes. Here there was found to be a progression in more favorable attitudes toward Negroes as one moves from the more isolated types of housing (for example, mobile homes and Greek organizations) to the more integrated or "cosmopolitan" residences (for example, dormitories and apartment houses).

CAMPUS OF ENROLLMENT

There were two campuses represented in this study, the University of Missouri and Stephens College. The University of Missouri has an enrollment of some 20,000 and attracts students from throughout the state of Missouri as well as from out-of-state. It is a coed, state-supported institution.

By contrast, Stephens College is a private college for women with an enrollment of about 2000. It draws heavily from out-of-state, particularly from California, Illinois, Ohio, and Texas. Less than 10 percent of the enrollment is from the state of Missouri. This makes for a more diversified group as far as geographical origin and synodical affiliation, as compared with the University of Missouri.

To keep the sex factor constant, the Stephens College respondents were compared only with the coeds from the University of Missouri. There were some pronounced differences in attitude between the two groups. University of Missouri coeds are more favorably inclined toward the Christian faith, the institutional church, Negroes, welfare programs, and traditional morality than are their Stephens' counterparts.

ATTENDANCE AT WORSHIP

Attendance at worship was found to

be highly and positively correlated with favorable attitudes toward the Christian faith, the institutional church, and traditional morality. It was negatively correlated with pacifism; that is, the more frequently a person attended worship, the less pacifistic were his or her views.

PAROCHIAL EDUCATION

It might be assumed that those with a parochial education would attach a greater importance to the Christian faith than those without it. The findings for those with an elementary parochial education (about 40 percent of the total) did not bear out this assumption. There was no pronounced difference between those with parochial elementary education and those without it.

Those respondents who attended a Lutheran high school (about 14 percent of the total) did show a pronounced difference, but it was in a direction opposite from that which might be expected. Lutheran high school graduates scored lower on the "Importance of the Christian Faith" scale than did those without a Lutheran high school education.

Students who attended Lutheran elementary schools were found to be significantly high in political anomie (powerlessness), a trend that became even more pronounced with those who attended Lutheran high schools.

On the sociopolitical scales there were no pronounced differences between those with and those without parochial education, with the exception of attitudes toward welfare. Here it was found that respondents with Lutheran elementary schooling were more prone to antiwelfare attitudes than were those without such schooling.

A slight inverse relationship was detected between amount of elementary parochial education and favorable attitudes toward the institutional church. This inverse relationship be-

came more pronounced among those with a Lutheran high school education.

This disillusionment with the institutional church on the part of many respondents with a parochial education became evident in some of the comments made by them on the questionnaire. At least one, a graduate student in law, associated this disillusionment directly with his parochial education when he commented on statement "a" of the Institutional Church scale. The statement read: "The church helps a person to develop the social attitudes of understanding, sympathy, and cooperation." The comment of this student with 12 years of parochial schooling was as follows: "In the opinion of many who graduated [from] Lutheran High School—in St. Louis in 196-, and in my opinion, the contrary is true." [The location of this school and the exact year of graduation have been deleted in this report to avoid any chance identification.]

It would appear, therefore, that Lutheran high school education—at least among the respondents in this study—has shown itself to be dysfunctional for the church. Perhaps of even greater significance, it has shown itself to be dysfunctional for a person's evaluation of the Christian faith.

One graduate of a Lutheran high school, when questioned about this apparent dysfunction of parochial education for the church and its ministry, suggested that many of the church-oriented graduates of Lutheran high schools went on to Lutheran colleges and universities. As a result, a state university like the University of Missouri would be the recipient of many of the least church-oriented graduates of Lutheran high schools.

Another Lutheran high school graduate spoke of the disillusionment that many graduates experienced when they came to the university and discovered that other students had received a comparable or even superior

education to what they had received in their denominational school. Apparently, the Lutheran high school from which he had graduated placed a great emphasis on the "superior" education that its students were receiving. Along with this complaint was the intimation that homogeneity of contacts in a denominational school did not prepare the student for the "cultural shock" he received upon entering the university. This too led to resentment.

The old proverb that "familiarity breeds contempt" also suggests itself here. Perhaps the Lutheran high school graduate, being more familiar with the failures of the institutional church, is also more critical of it. However, this still would not account for the lower value placed on the Christian faith by these respondents, unless it is simply a matter of "guilt by association."

A marked relationship between parochial education and the new morality was found for both the elementary and high school levels. However, the differences were in an opposite direction. Students with Lutheran elementary education showed a negative relationship to the new morality, while students with a Lutheran high school education showed a positive relationship to the same attitude variable.

These findings are open to several interpretations. It might be suggested that the antipathy toward the new morality by Lutheran elementary students is a reflection of their more "parochial" approach to problems of morality, an approach that is more structured than that of situation ethics. By contrast, then, the acceptance of the new morality by students with Lutheran high school education would indicate a greater degree of "sophistication" on moral issues and decision-making.

Another explanation, however, might suggest that the relationship is simply a part of the larger pattern of

disillusionment with the Christian faith, the institutional church, and traditional morality portrayed by students with Lutheran high school education.

CHURCH AFFILIATION

An attempt was made to discover any possible differences in attitude between students from the three major Lutheran bodies in the United States: the Lutheran Church in America, The American Lutheran Church, and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Because of the heavy concentration of Missouri Synod churches in Missouri, students of this body were highly over-represented in the study, composing about 84 percent of the total. The remaining 16 percent was divided equally between the other two Lutheran bodies.

No differences in attitude were found among students of the three Lutheran bodies with the exception of attitudes toward the new morality. Here members of The American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America were considerably more favorable toward the new morality than were members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

One of the major topics for debate within American churches in recent years revolves around the question of the church's involvement in social and political issues. There are those who argue that the church is overinvolved in such issues and should de-escalate such involvement, while others argue just as forcefully that the church is underinvolved and should escalate its involvement.

In order to provide some empirical data for these obviously contradictory points of view, several items were included in this study to determine the respondent's attitude on this particular question. One item on the Institutional

Church scale read: "I believe the church should stick to spiritual matters and leave social matters to other institutions." Some 85 percent of the respondents disagreed with the statement.

This item was immediately followed by two additional statements formulated in such a way as to determine how the respondent regarded the social and political involvement of his own denomination: Too Much—Too Little—About Right. The findings provided overwhelming evidence that Lutheran college students see the problem as one of underinvolvement in social and political issues rather than overinvolvement. Only 3.4 percent of the respondents felt their denomination was "too much" involved in social issues, and only 5.7 percent felt their denomination was "too much" involved in political issues. By contrast, 45.0 percent felt their denomination was "too little" involved in social issues, and 28.2 percent felt their denomination was "too little" involved in political issues. The remaining respondents on each of the two statements either indicated "about right" or else gave no answer.

There is some reason to believe that at least a few of those in the "about right" category were opposed to social and, more especially, political involvement. This may be assumed from such comments as "none," or "not at all," or "which is none, which is the way it should be," following the "about right" choice of answers.

It would appear, then, that for every respondent who felt that his denomination was "too much" involved in *social* issues, there were 11 who felt that it was "too little" involved. And for every respondent who felt his denomination was "too much" involved in *political* issues, there were five who felt it was "too little" involved. When the three Lutheran church bodies were analyzed in terms of perceived social and political involvement, it was found

that the differences are virtually nonexistent.

When the involvement question was raised in relation to the sociopolitical attitudes of pacifism, race, and welfare, the results were uniform throughout. Those who felt the church was "too much" involved in social and political issues were low in pacifism and high in both anti-Negro and anti-welfare attitudes. Those who felt the church was "too little" involved in these issues were high in pacifism and low in both anti-Negro and anti-welfare attitudes.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

1. A strong positive correlation exists between a person's valuation of the Christian faith and his attitude toward the institutional church. The dichotomizing between the faith and the institution, which has been alleged to go on in the minds of many people, was *not* supported by this study.

2. Frequency of attendance at worship services provides a valid index of both a person's valuation of the Christian faith and his attitude toward the institutional church.

3. A general *inverse* relationship tends to exist between favorable attitudes toward the Christian faith and the institutional church on the one hand, and favorable attitudes toward pacifism, Negroes, and welfare on the other.

4. Progression through the college years seems to indicate *more* favorable attitudes toward the Christian faith, the institutional church, and traditional morality.

SOME IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the present study would seem to carry a number of important implications for the future. First of all, the generally low political anomie among the vast majority of respondents, plus the widespread opinion that the church is underinvolved in social and political issues, may imply a greater involvement in

these areas by the Lutheran Church in the future.

A second implication of the present study is that the church may need to address itself more definitively toward the question of war and the Christian's responsibility with regard to war. This was indicated by the ambiguity of responses on the questionnaire. It should be noted that the scale used in the present study, though called a Pacifism scale, was not oriented toward the classic pacifist position of nonresistance and refusal to bear arms. Only one item on the scale touched on this particular position. The scale rather dealt with the question of war as an instrument of national policy. In other words, it sought to determine whether or not the respon-

dent felt that in the new context of potential nuclear warfare every possible alternative short of war must be explored. If this is a viable stance for a Christian in today's world, it should perhaps be given more definitive expression by the church.

A third and final implication is that the church will need to recognize and somehow reduce the gap between its official teachings and positions and the actual attitude and behavior of its members. This would seem to be particularly true on such issues as open housing and the new morality. This would not necessarily imply a change in "official positions" but rather a more definitive interpretation of those positions from a Christian perspective.

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