

Whither Wheaton?

The flagship charts a new course.

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Early next year, the Board of Trustees at Wheaton College will appoint a new president. As the flagship evangelical institution—the “Harvard of the Christian schools,” say the tour guides—Wheaton is closely monitored by other colleges, by pastors and churches around the world, and by observers of Christendom generally.

Next year also marks Wheaton’s sesquicentennial: 150 years since abolitionist Jonathan Blanchard founded the college on land given to him by city father Warren Wheaton. It promises to be a time of looking forward and looking back.

The outgoing president, Duane Litfin, leaves a mixed legacy. During his 17 years in office, the college expanded the physical plant, grew the endowment, added two doctoral degrees, kept tuition costs impressively low, increased admissions selectivity, and weathered financial crises better than many institutions. Long before the attacks of 9/11, Litfin sent the lance-toting “Crusader” mascot into much-deserved retirement. Many excellent hires of younger faculty on Litfin’s watch bode well for the future. Despite the protests of some deep-pocketed older alumni, Litfin revoked the infamous rule against off-campus drinking and dancing. And in marked contrast to many American colleges with religious roots, Wheaton has not strayed from the core commitments on which it was founded.

Still, when one spends time talking with Wheaton faculty, students, and supporters, alongside appreciation one is likely to hear expressions of deep concern about the unusually pro-active roles that Litfin and his provost, Stanton Jones, have assumed as defenders and arbiters of orthodoxy across the college. On the eve of transition to new leadership, this concern needs to be aired—not for the sake of settling scores, not in a spirit of smug judgment, but rather to provide an important perspective as the college and its constituency look to the future. Thus, though it is far too early for a definitive account, perhaps a philosopher can rush in where historians fear to tread.

The goal here is to view Wheaton the way it views itself: as the preeminent Protestant college in the country and the training ground for generations of Christian leaders. To lay claim to such a responsibility, there has to be a willingness—even in a community founded on love of God and neighbor—honestly to evaluate past administrations in the process of appointing new ones.

The Evangelical Mind and the Body Politic

The political backdrop against which Duane Litfin was appointed in 1992-3 was uncannily similar to our own. A war in Iraq was winding down, a massive recession had swept the GOP from power, the United States had replaced a president named Bush with a young Democrat promising “hope” and “change,” health care reform was in the air.

At the local level, however, there were significant differences. At Wheaton in the fall of 1992 (my freshman year), there was intense soul-searching about why God had denied the victory just as change on issues like abortion seemed within reach. The night after the election, students held a massive vigil, heads bowed and leaders



speaking anxiously about the coming liberal onslaught.

At Wheaton in the fall of 2008, by contrast, the predominantly African American Gospel Choir took the chapel stage the morning after Obama’s election and gave a rousing performance of “God Bless America.” That night there was a panel discussion in which Litfin, too, emphasized that future evangelicals “cannot afford to be seen as in the hip pocket of any particular polity or political entity.”

At Wheaton in 1993, the culture wars were hot, with many students (presciently) advocating a hard-right turn as the path to Republican recovery. Political engagement and church/missions work were seen by students as the best ways to live “for Christ and his Kingdom” (Wheaton’s motto). Justice issues were tertiary, and Christian environmentalists were just walking oxymora who had forgotten that the Second Coming would usher in a new heaven and a new earth.

At Wheaton in 2009, party politics are lukewarm, with most students “far more concerned with the relationship between their faith and social justice than with political affiliation,” says Juliana Wilhoit, head of what she characterizes as the most anemic College Democrats organization north of Bob Jones. Lars Skogland, Theology major, agrees: “I don’t feel like [the Democrat/Republican debate] is a big issue on campus—if people do talk about it they talk about it more in small groups.” That’s because “there’s a culture within Wheaton that discourages voting and political participation,” says Wilhoit, “with some powerful voices saying we should care more about the Kingdom than the State.” On the other hand, “everyone has a social justice issue, and though a few people still listen to Rush Limbaugh, almost no one thinks that climate change is a hoax.” Indeed, Litfin himself recently signed the Evangelical Call to Action on Climate Change (christiansandclimate.org).

It’s too early to tell whether this focus on social and environmental justice at the expense of party politics among young evangelicals will stick. Perhaps it is a near-term response to the perceived failures of an

American president who came to office as one of their own. But perhaps it heralds the emergence of a new generation of socially active Protestants who, according to polling data gathered by Wheaton political scientist Amy Black, are “more staunchly pro-life than their elders, but also more liberal on gay marriage, and see a broader spectrum of issues as important than evangelicals have done in the past.”

Interestingly, this apparent drift towards the political center among students occurred during an administration that was initially charged with steering the college toward the right. Many members of the Board of Trustees were apparently alarmed in 1992 when the college newspaper reported that well over half the faculty were voting Democratic, and that membership in mainline Protestant denominations (especially the Episcopal Church) was on the rise. Wary of both Clintonism and Canterbury, these Trustees began to see the college as on a slippery slope towards Oberlin, with the professors supplying most of the lubrication. In response, and without substantive consultation with the faculty, the Board appointed a pastor from Memphis named Duane Litfin over candidates with widespread support and strong academic credentials. Most prominent of these alternates was the then-Provost of Notre Dame, Nathan Hatch, himself a Wheaton alumnus and Trustee who was reportedly being groomed by the outgoing president, J. Richard Chase, to be his successor. (After the Litfin surprise, Hatch resigned from the Board and later went on to become president of Wake Forest.)

“The Trustees made their statement bringing Litfin in,” says Jeffrey Greenberg, Professor of Geology. “It was generally believed that they wanted a doctrinal policeman to keep us from going too liberal.” An administrator who was close to the process and wishes to remain anonymous agreed: “It is best summed up by the then-Chair of the Trustees, who said that ‘a college tends to drift to the left, therefore you choose a president farther right than you want so that the pendulum shift comes to the middle.’ Whether you believe in this theory or not, it was why they chose the current president.”

Magisterial Origins

In his 2004 book *Conceiving the Christian College*, President Litfin characterizes Wheaton as operating on a “Systemic” model, whereby “all of the professors are to be scholars who embody the Christian commitments of the institution, with the expected result that genuinely Christian thinking will permeate the school’s academic and student life programs.”

Schools that operate on the Systemic model are obviously of immense value; institutions like Wheaton, Calvin, and Franciscan bring important diversity to the contemporary academy, and often lead the way in discussions of how best to integrate traditions of faith with excellence in scholarship and teaching.

The Systemic model, however, seems consistent with a wide range of administrative approaches. At the far end is what might be called the *Magisterial* approach: here a select group of administrators specify *which interpretations* of the core doctrines and codes are to be propagated throughout the system. At the other end is what might be called (for lack of a better term) the *Wiggle-room* approach. In this approach, space is made for differing—albeit still reasonable—interpretations of the propositions constituting the systemic core. That doesn’t mean that “anything goes,” of course, or that the core is ever significantly or casually altered. But administrators who adopt the Wiggle-room approach will tend to be more modest and consultative in interpreting that core, and will often “agree to disagree” on issues that can reasonably be deemed ambiguous or adiabatic.

It was clear from the beginning where Litfin would fall on this spectrum. One of his first moves was to declare that Wheaton’s “Statement of Faith” allowed too much wiggle-room on the question of Adam and Eve. Scientists were thus required to clarify whether they (1) “reject the idea that Adam and Eve were created from pre-existing human-like creatures, or hominids”; (2) are neutral or “unsure” on the hominid theory; (3) affirm that “God gave a human spirit to a pair of pre-existing human-like creatures, or

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hominids”; or (4) deny the historicity of Adam and Eve and think of Genesis as a wholly “theological document.” (3) and (4) were deemed inconsistent with ongoing employment. Those who affirmed (2) were given one year to change their view to (1), or else they too would be asked to seek employment elsewhere.

The reaction to this first manifestation of the Magisterial approach was so explosive that a Trustee finally intervened and pointed out that even some members of the Board did not fall into camp (1). Ultimately Litfin agreed to allow people to remain in camp (2) indefinitely. But

the tone had been set. Arthur Holmes, founder of the Philosophy department and a faculty icon since the 1950s, recalls the episode this way: “The present incumbent was appointed arbitrarily by trustees with utterly no consultation with faculty. Morale problem for starters! At first there was no sense of collegiality with other administrators or faculty. Too soon he seemed to inquisition science faculty about human origins, as if he had been sold a bill of goods. People felt they weren’t trusted. He gradually satisfied himself, but it was a case of starting on the wrong foot: he needed educating on the subject first.”

This episode—together with another one that same year in which the chair of the Bible/Theology department resigned in protest after Litfin first approved, then overturned, the department’s vote to appoint a female theologian from Duke—spurred the creation of a new academic provost position. A few years later, Alex Bolyanatz—a tenure-track anthropologist who taught about human origins—decided it would be wise to invite the new provost to sit in on his lectures: “I had no doubt that hearing my version of a Christian view of integrating the evolutionary model with a faith perspective would

make [anyone] say, ‘This guy is just fine; does exactly what we want here.’ I now know, of course, that this was somewhere between stupid and naïve. I invited Provost Stan Jones to attend my class and he did for six sessions. I believed that I was ensuring that I would spend a long and satisfying career there. Wrong! I was, in fact, digging my own professional grave at Wheaton.”

The administration soon sent Bolyanatz a letter stating, “During your term at Wheaton College, you have failed to develop the necessary basic competence in the integration of Faith and Learning, particularly in the classroom setting.” Despite the support of his department and the college-wide Faculty Personnel Committee, and despite the fact that he fully affirmed the Statement of Faith and was explicitly trying to integrate it with his teaching, Bolyanatz was not reappointed. He now teaches at a community college near Wheaton, and has no clear sense of what went wrong. “Provost Stan Jones did at one point, in an effort to clarify things for me, mention that I did not seem to ‘fit’ at Wheaton.”

Lots of things do not seem to fit, of course, when there isn’t any wiggle-room.

Whose Hermeneutic? Which Constituency?

Another casualty of the Magisterial approach was Christina Van Dyke, now tenured in the philosophy department at Calvin. Invited to apply for a job at Wheaton in 1999, Van Dyke signed the Statement of Faith and the Community Covenant (Wheaton’s code of conduct), but inserted a clarification saying that “it isn’t clear to me that the Bible unambiguously condemns monogamous same-sex relationships.” That did *not* entail, Van Dyke notes, “either that I was in favor of them, or that I thought God was. Rather, it was meant as a hermeneutical point.”

The department chair asked Van Dyke whether she would be willing to remove the clarification, since Christianity and homosexuality is the provost’s area of expertise and her reservation was “certain to raise red flags.” But Van Dyke opted to keep the reservation as it was. Sure enough:

I got a call from Stan Jones, asking me a number of questions about my reservations. I kept saying that I was not claiming to have figured this out, but that it was not at all clear to me from my own research and study that the Bible’s position on homosexual behavior was unambiguous. We talked about how I would handle students who came to me to talk about questioning their own sexuality, and I said I would be willing to send them elsewhere. He sent me a whole stack of reading material (much of which he’d written) arguing that the Bible’s position on homosexual behavior was, in fact, clear. I read it all. . . . I didn’t change my mind.

In the end, despite the fact that she had the unanimous support of the Philosophy department, Van Dyke’s clarification meant that “at about 5 pm the day before my interview was scheduled, [the chair] called in tears to tell me that he’d just finished talking to the provost, and that I was

no longer a candidate for their position.”

Some people fear that Wheaton’s tax-exempt status may be taken away because of its hiring practices. But Timothy Larsen, McManis Professor of Christian Thought, doubts that it will come to that. Wealthy older alumni and not the government, he says, are the real concern in policy decisions: “*Thou shalt not unsettle our constituency* is the first principle around here.” The constituency that administrators have in mind is quite conservative and has faithfully supported the college over many years. But shouldn’t a true flagship have a broader constituency than that?

Perhaps it does. Larsen cites a top fundraising administrator as claiming that “Wheaton actually loses more money for being rigidly conservative than it would for being more relaxed.” In other words, even top officials realize what many of us know from personal experience and testimony: that there is a vast group of younger and increasingly wealthy alumni that feel alienated by the current administration, but might rally to Wheaton’s cause if the Systemic model were ever implemented in a less Magisterial way.

Evangelicals and Catholics, Not So Together

In 1994, prominent Wheaton historian Mark Noll endorsed and promoted an ecumenical manifesto titled “Evangelicals and Catholics Together.” With the signing of that document, the once-yawning distance between Wheaton and South Bend seemed to close just a bit. But then, eight years later, an assistant professor named Joshua Hochschild felt called to join the Roman communion. Hochschild dutifully informed the administration and assured them that—as a Catholic—he could still fully endorse the Statement of Faith and the Community Covenant.

Litfin, however, disagreed on the grounds that no Catholic could share Wheaton’s commitment to the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*. Hochschild disputed this in a series of letters and conversations, and his entire department took his side. Ultimately Litfin conceded that there was nothing *explicit* in the Statement of Faith that Hochschild could not affirm; rather, it was Wheaton’s *implicit* interpretation of the *preamble* to the Statement—an interpretation of which Litfin claimed to be both arbiter and mouthpiece—that allowed no wiggle-room for Catholics.

Thus, in an irony that was lost on no one, an administrator laying claim to magisterial interpretive authority fired someone for not being a Protestant. “This is a matter of preserving our heritage,” Litfin said at the time. “Why change the DNA of the institution?” Hochschild was given a year to find a new job, and is now the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Mount St. Mary’s University in Maryland. Soon after the Hochschild affair, Mark Noll himself decamped for Notre Dame. When asked why he left after 27 years, Noll replied that it was more a matter of being drawn toward a new opportunity than of fleeing problems at Wheaton. But he also pointed to his comments in *The Future of Christian Learning: An Evangelical and Catholic Dialogue*, which clearly suggest that evangelical institutions would greatly assist their efforts by employing sympathetic

Catholic faculty like Hochschild.

Litfin, for his part, offered a lengthy defense of the all-Protestant policy in his book, which was published just after Hochschild’s departure. Still, English professor Alan Jacobs hopes that a new president will renew the discussion: “I think it obviously true that there are many, many Catholic and Orthodox scholars out there who are more deeply sympathetic to Wheaton’s historic academic—and theological!—mission than is the average evangelical Protestant. Granted that incorporating such scholars into our community would be a complex task, does it make sense for us to deprive ourselves of those resources?”

Hoping for Wiggle-room

Each of the forty or so people consulted for this article—including Bolyanatz, Van Dyke, and Hochschild—expressed renewed hope and goodwill for Wheaton as it heads into its next 150 years. These are not embittered grumblers.

And there are plenty of reasons for hope. Greenberg, the geologist, reports that the Trustees have “consulted with multiple people this time, often getting candid information concerning the current administrative situation. One hopes that an important lesson has been learned: legalism never works.” Bud Williams, beloved professor of Applied Health Sciences through four presidencies, concurs: “We as faculty did have significant input with the Trustees in preparing a profile of the type of president we feel would best fit the college at this point in time.”

What sort of president do they hope for? “A theologically orthodox person, yes, but also a relational person,” says Greenberg. “Relational people facilitate collegiality from the top all the way down.” There is also a widespread sense that the new president must revive a culture of open discussion and disagreement, even while retaining the Systemic commitments of the school. Indeed, many professors consulted for this article lamented that there hasn’t been a substantive faculty meeting in years, though they also declined to say that on the record.

Informed of this, Ashley Woodiwiss, a political scientist who recently departed Wheaton after 18 years, mused: “The fact that at a liberal arts college tenured faculty are unwilling and/or uneasy to speak on the record . . . now that might be telling in its own right, no? What is it about the culture at ‘the flagship evangelical institution of higher education’ that would close the mouths of such lions?”

Greenberg answers this question obliquely: “Faculty governance at Wheaton probably needs some reconsideration with the advent of a new administration.” One of his colleagues in the science division is more direct: “It is my hope that a new administration can join, foster, and enjoy a worshipping community of believers who wrestle with the questions of our age, including our *own* philosophies.”

A college is not a church. Even within the Systemic model of an academic community, there has to be room for creative thinking, loving disagreement, and emphatic debate about the interpretation of the heritage. In other words, room to wiggle.

Professor Holmes sums up the vision: “We need a person of evangelical conviction and practice, who understands and respects the *diversity* within the evangelical movement. We need one who understands the distinctives, the promise, and the problems of Christian higher education, an optimistic and creative leader who

will support and encourage faculty in their multifaceted callings. We need someone who understands and inspires undergraduate students in their struggles and their problems, someone in whom they might find a model of wisdom and caring.”

It could hardly be better put. May God speed the flagship.

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