

MINNESOTA NICE: A CULTURAL ASSESMENT

A Paper

Presented to

Dr. Brian Bain

Dallas Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Course

WM205 Cultural Dynamics

by

Kimberly Dvorak and Rettland Dvorak

December 2019

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Introduction

Both the authors have spent considerable time living in Minnesota and enjoy analyzing the culture, one from more of an insider perspective, the other from a bit of an outsider perspective. For this paper, we use our experiences to discuss how aspects of religion and culture play out for the everyday Minnesotan, in an attempt to help both the authors and the reader understand this cultural segment of America a little better. Much of this paper is written with everyday experiences and language in mind, so some of the language and metaphors used in this paper is chosen to truly portray the way an ordinary Minnesotan would understand some of these concepts and ideas. In addition, a number of secular symbols and rituals are used in the place of certain religious ideas, as often times Minnesotans use more secular practices, alongside their practice of Christianity, to fill needs that may be filled by sacred spaces in other cultures. Overall our hope is that the paper reflects ordinary Minnesotan life well, and shines a light on areas of culture that may need a thoughtful Christian response

The Meaning of Life

Who We Are

Minnesota is a largely Protestant, specifically Lutheran culture. Though there are many subcultures that divert from this, the authors backgrounds are Protestant, and feel that the larger culture of Minnesota fits within this religious framework. Many would say that the meaning of life is to serve God, though most live out their lives as if the meaning of life is to work well, and

enjoy the fruits of their labor. Most believe that each human is “fearfully and wonderfully made” by God, though most do not have a view of themselves as fully being “imagers” of God. People believe that God thinks each individual is special and loves them, but do not see themselves as God’s “ambassadors.”

This belief in being “fearfully and wonderfully made” seems to have a great impact on the way many Minnesotans view conception and birth. The moment a woman finds out she is pregnant is held as a very important event. How the woman tells her husband, and then extended circle of family and friends is often done in a way that marks the occasion as special. The unborn child, and even the idea of the unborn child is held in such high regard that sometimes even false pregnancies are mourned as children who have died, and are believed to be in heaven. It is traditional for families and friends to host baby showers, sometimes even gender reveal parties, and to mail out announcements after the birth of the child. None of these traditions must be done in a specific way, though it is most common for the parents to have full control over how they celebrate their new child, the name of the child, and how the child is brought into the world. Direct criticism of the parents’ decisions is considered almost taboo, though an indirect “Oh, what an *interesting* name choice” would be acceptable.

From the time a child is born until they become an adult, it is up to the parents to be in control of the child’s development. The methods of parenting, schooling, and raising the child are less important than the good intention and full devotion of the parents. However, if a child is not well-behaved it is often assumed that the parents are neglectful, which can be a source of hidden shame for devoted parents whose children struggle to behave well in public.

Adulthood, in Minnesota, comes in stages rather than through one initiation rite. The first stage occurs around the age of 12, when children can stay home by themselves for a time, and

possibly even take care of their siblings. A possible initiation rite is the attending of a “babysitting class” that teaches first-aid among other child-care skills, and marks the attendee as officially “ready for babysitting.” The next stage in adulthood begins around 15, when teens gain more status through learning how to drive, and eventually independence through being able to drive by themselves. Delaying or rejecting the “rite” of getting one’s driver’s license can lock the person in a sort of pseudo-adult status, where other’s question the person’s ability to live independently. A person can avoid this stigma by becoming an avid bike rider, or using the local public transportation system with skill.

Getting a driver’s license opens up the path to the next rite of getting a job. Because independence and work and ethic are highly valued in adults, getting a job is a vital step to adulthood. Teens who do not get jobs may be considered spoiled, immature, or lazy. Being very involved in sports, church, academic activities, or traditional handicrafts, can erase the shame of failing to work, though it is expected that the teen will use the pursuit to make money, earn a scholarship, or gain experience for their future career.

Graduation from high school is a major rite in the coming of adulthood. When teens turn 18 they are considered newly-hatched-adults, a status conferred through the ceremony of graduating high school and finally realized through moving out of one’s parent’s house. Graduation is also celebrated with a graduation party, to which are invited all of the parent’s friends and family, who are expected to give money to the graduate in accordance with their wealth. Living independently is the most important, though least celebrated, part of this transition. If a graduate continues to remain at home with their parents long after graduation, their status can begin to degrade, back to the point of pseudo-adult.

After high school, those who go on to pursue work are often treated as fully-independent adults, while those who go onto Technical College, University, or Basic Training are considered to be on the pathway to more successful adulthood, but not quite an independent adult yet. Graduating from these institutions is well celebrated, but the important next step of attaining employment is crucial. Any young adult who returns to live with their parents may have their “adult” status questioned, with the only remedy being to move out (again) or act as a care-giver for one’s parents.

The main takeaway from this discussion of the steps to adulthood in Minnesota, is that adult status is never guaranteed, but always based on meaningful contribution to society (career or stay-at-home parent). Independence is key to being considered an adult, and dependence (including dependence on the government) always brings a threat of shame lurking in the background. In some ways this even affects elderly people, though if they have proven themselves to have been contributing adults in the past, this good status often follows them to death. Because of this dynamic, retirement is not very celebrated (though it is often looked forward to), and sometimes even delayed for many years. Retired people are often expected to be either sickly, or extensively involve themselves in a hobby in order to avoid any hint of “not contributing” to the community.

Marriage is a rite that is connected somewhat to adulthood in Minnesota. One can be an adult without being married, but one should not consider marriage until one attains the status of “independent adult.” The requirement of independence proceeding marriage often results in the formation of an intermediate step of “cohabitation.” Protestant, God-fearing parents may frequently suggest co-habitation as an acceptable evil, when their child is considering marriage,

but has not yet attained independence.¹ Marriage is often expected when two people are living independently and have been in a romantic relationship for a number of years.

The actual ceremony of wedding is largely up to the interests of the couple, though it is expected that many friends and family will be invited. Most weddings occur in a church or outside, and some symbol of combining two families into one is common. The ceremony itself is often very traditional and composed, while the reception is often treated as an after-party, complete with heavy drinking and secular music, even for religiously conservative families. Everyone invited is expected to give money or a gift that the couple has asked for via a “gift registry,” and often the gift is expected to be in proportion to the wealth of the giver and their relationship to the couple.

Marriages are seen as a prerequisite for the raising of children. Many consider cohabitating and sexual relationships outside of marriage to be acceptable, but raising children outside of marriage is frowned upon. This has much to do with the connection between marriage and the formation and extension of families. While a cohabitating couple may not be expected to attend extended family functions, a married couple is often expected to attend. Likewise, divorce is viewed as the breaking of a family unit, and is frowned upon due to the relational tension it will create between extended families. Often the reputation of the less-known spouse is maligned in order to label them as unfit for incorporation into the family. Their absence is viewed as sad, but unavoidable for the peace of the community.²

¹ Either due to extended education, difficulty finding a suitable job, or still living with the parents. This is a significant issue of split-level Christianity that should be addressed in Minnesota culture.

² In this way, divorce is not considered through a biblical lens. Instead, the peace of all involved is often considered more sacred than the marriage relationship. To be open about having a rocky marital relationship, is almost taboo, though often spoken of during moments of vulnerability.

Funerals in Minnesota, are a largely communal affair, where anyone who knew the person is invited to pay their final respects to the person who died. Sometimes the person who has died is embalmed, though cremations are becoming more common. Often a happy picture of the person in life is preferred to having an open casket. Funerals for the chronically ill and elderly are usually smaller, family affairs, which focus on remembering the contributions of the person to the family, and celebrate the person's departure to heaven. Unexpected funerals, and funerals for younger people who struggled with a more acute illness, are often community events where mourners gather to grieve and remember the contributions of the person to the community. Though many attempts are made to cheer the mourners, including reminding everyone that the person is happy to be with Jesus, grief is expected to prevail. As life moves forward, unexpected deaths are often remembered on an annual basis, and clothing or jewelry is sometimes made to commemorate the person. More expected deaths are less remembered in the future, though the people left behind may retain pictures of the person, to remember that they will meet them again in heaven. Any duties of the deceased person do not follow a natural line of succession, and confusion over who is to assume their role is common.

Overall Minnesota values personal independence greatly, though they view the individual as an important part of the extended family, workplace, church, and community. As such the person is viewed as "linked" within many different relationships, though the parent to child relationship (not the child to parent relationship) is often viewed as supreme. The individual's role in the broader community is very important for conveying status and regulating the behavior of others, even if a direct link is not seen between the community and the individual. Personal behavior is regulated by both the threat of being excluded from the group, and the threat of being spoken poorly of within the group. Anyone who behaves poorly is likely to be excluded from the

community, and anyone who refuses to participate in the community regularly is likely to be excluded from the group when they desire inclusion.³ Surprisingly, the natural environment is in some ways considered an extension of the community. If one does not care for nature respectfully, it is likely to in some way “reject” you. Minnesotans care deeply about preserving the health of their environment in order to be able to enjoy the benefit of these resources for generations to come. This connection to nature is not viewed as spiritual, but entirely physical. However, nature is expected to get revenge for being treated poorly through timely and irreversible natural consequences.

For Minnesotans, their state and its resources make up their broader concept of “Home.” Nationalism exists, though there are far more people who would die for Minnesota, than would die for America. Outdoor spaces are often considered property of the community, though the land a person lives on is considered owned by them, to the extent that the way they treat their land doesn’t impact their neighbor. Towns and cities in Minnesota are an important segment of self-governance. People value being able to have a say over their local public schools, environmental resources, infrastructure, and laws. Sometimes cities and counties will get into arguments with the state government over who has the authority to make laws governing the local area. The rural area around a more metropolitan area is often considered an extension of the community of the more populated area. Cities in some ways may be seen as a kind of “oasis” in the midst of vast swaths of farm land. Many people share a feeling of camaraderie over living near the same city. The boundaries between the “sprawl” of city areas are often not clearly defined, leading some to even hyphenate two cities’ names in order to state the region they are from.

³ This can include being fired from one’s job, if their reputation at work diminishes far enough.

Houses, rather than being part of the group identity, like city, and state, are seen as an extension of the individual. Their purpose is to serve as a practical dwelling and also a symbol of status, independence, and good taste. Minnesotan houses are often furnished for the purpose of rest, and casual fellowship. The house is seen as an almost spiritual retreat from the secular business of the world. An ideal house would be clean, healthy, comfortable, fun, and aesthetically pleasing. Doing home improvement projects yourself is a thing of pride for many Minnesotans, and many are willing to buy unfinished houses for the purpose of finishing it in a personalized fashion.

At this point the reader may notice that we have mentioned the importance of contributing to the community or family many times. This is because Minnesotans find much of their individual meaning through their what they do.⁴ For many Christians it is very difficult to comprehend that they have value in Christ, apart from the tasks they accomplish. This is a vital area for the church to speak into, as our identity is not in what we have done, but in what Christ has done.

Possessions in Minnesota can serve as a status symbol, but mostly exist for the benefit of the individual and their family. Having items that are not worn-out is seen as important for the value of the individual person, but other than this not much of a person's meaning or value is derived from possessions.

⁴ The father of one of our friends died after a long battle with an aggressive brain tumor. The last six months of his life were marked by his inability to accomplish basic tasks. He struggled greatly to comprehend his worth as a man, when he was incapable of work, and struggled with depression and contemplating suicide as a result. The sense of one's identity being entirely wrapped up in what one does is a significant area of need in Minnesota that the church must speak into.

The Stories of Our Lives

Stories make up an important part of social and moral dynamics in Minnesota. In order to indirectly criticize someone, a person will often tell a cautionary tale about someone (not present) who did a similar thing with bad results. At the same time, personal stories with bad or good results carry a lot of weight in group conversations. A person with a scientific study, can often be outweighed by a story about a bad experience by an individual. Inspirational tales of hard-working, successful people are often used to encourage working hard, even if there is no immediate benefit for the individual. Sometimes these stories come together as “group stories” that shape traditions. If multiple people in a family or community have had similar experiences, they often join their stories together to form one metanarrative of cause and effect that has implications for how things are done in the community from that point forward. Outside of the local community, a larger story that carries weight in Minnesota is the American Revolution, and the continual fight for freedom by service men and women. This group story leads many young Minnesotans into careers in the military out of a feeling of duty, a desire to do something honorable, enhanced prospects of gaining a long-term career, difficulty disappointing their recruiters, and the hope of free college.

Minnesota has multiple cosmic stories that shape the narrative by which people live their lives. First is the Christian story of creation, fall, redemption, recreation, but on an everyday level, other stories are often prevalent. Optimistic stories of progression are popular in Minnesota, history is seen as improving the life of the community, and for the individual a bright future is always ahead if they work for it (including heaven for a person facing death). Many Minnesotans do not have the return of Christ in view in their day to day lives, though they may

believe in Christ's second coming. For most there is a sense that this life will continue on without much direct intervention by God, though many expect to live on with God after death.

Death is often viewed as one of life's great evils, though many see it as inevitable. Many often find themselves seeking to understand why their loved one had to die, but most find comfort in knowing that they will never fully understand, and instead work to accept the world as it is. Most, even many non-Christians believe in some kind of good life after death. For most Christians, this life is in heaven with Jesus, alongside friends and family who have also passed away. The idea of a physical resurrection is not often spoken of, which is an area the church should emphasize more. Many different theories abound as to the immediate destination of the spirit of the deceased. Generally, anything the grieving find comforting is accepted, and beliefs that the deceased is still sending messages, visiting dreams, or may be in some way still present are common in Minnesotan Christian communities. This split-level Christianity exposes yet another area of belief that needs to be addressed by the church.

Human Well-Being and Misfortune

Minnesota's explanation system for how to live well is generally wrapped up in natural, human initiated means. It is believed that good planning, heading the wisdom of others, and working hard will bring about the best outcome. Conveying one's blessing to others is done through the giving of physical gifts, or saying words of encouragement or prayers (expected to have mostly mental effects). Cursing, in Minnesota, describes a person using crude language, and may be offensive to the hearer. It is expected to have no effect, as long as the hearer does not take the cursing to heart.

When a person wants to convey sincerity, they might take an oath against their personal wellbeing, or the wellbeing of their family. This is not common though, as Minnesotans expect

one another to be generally trust worthy. Because the default in Minnesota is to be trustworthy, insisting on the truthfulness of one's statements is likely to make others disbelieve you more. Merit in Minnesota is earned through the actions of the individual, and is expected to return on the doer as a reward in a relatively short period of time. Hard work is expected to be rewarded in being able to afford a comfortable lifestyle. Good morality is rewarded with a good reputation.

Increasingly, young people in Minnesota are turning to benign-appearing magic in order to feel more in-control of their lives. Books such as *"The Green Witch: Your Complete Guide to the Natural Magic of Herbs, Flowers, Essential Oils, and More"* dot the bookshelves of a number of nominal Christians' homes. Some people of all ages use a mix of Celtic symbols, Native American artifacts, totems, and talisman alongside prayers to Jesus in order to ward off bad things. Harrow decks and astrology are also becoming used more commonly as a method to control one's life. Even serious Christians may engage in praying through a house using various props, rearranging furniture, or getting rid of certain items in order to get rid of negative energy.

Another way Minnesotans believe the world around them is affected is through luck. This is most often through "lucky people," and not particular objects in general. Children often feel that they might have a lucky pen or pencil that they like to use on tests, but aside from this, belief in luck does not go much farther as people do not commonly seek out ways to increase their luckiness. Luck in Minnesota is a thing stumbled upon, not earned or lost.

In Minnesota adversity is often viewed as a trial from Satan, a result of living in a "messed up" world, or the direct results of one's unwise actions or laziness. Untimely deaths are often attributed to bad the nature of this world, because it is almost always seen as improper to suggest that the dead would be deserving of death, and no one wants to attribute death to the work of Satan. The reasons for natural disasters are not often contemplated, rather communities

try to focus on what they need to do to move forward, and possibly physically protecting themselves in the future. Disease is often combatted with increasing natural immunity by being outside or consuming certain foods. Disease can also be prevented by carefully disinfecting the spaces inhabited. Many people prefer to use methods of disease prevention they can control, and as such prefer not to use vaccines or medical treatments unless unavoidable. Failure is mostly seen as a failure on the part of the person to work hard or heed the wisdom of others.

If adversity strikes Minnesotans seek to fix the problem themselves using home remedies or lifestyle changes. If these don't work other people in the community or family will be consulted. If the person is still bothered, they will likely visit a technical expert. This expert is likely to be a medical doctor for physical ailments, a psychologist, counselor, or pastor for mental or behavioral issues, or other applicable expert who caters to the specific type of adversity. If the adversity is still unsolvable, the idea that the person has an incurable fault (such as laziness) may be assumed. However, if the person insists that there is no fault to be found in them, spiritual warfare is often suggested as the cause. This spiritual warfare is combated through group prayer and personal Bible study. If the adversity continues to persist, sometimes the effort of the person is called into question, or it is assumed that God is somehow glorifying himself through this person's trial.

Mental illness is a complicated issue in Minnesota that is seen as overlapping mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual domains. Autism often seen as the fault of the parents or other environmental factors, ADHD is seen as a problem with laziness and self-control. Depression can be seen as a spiritual attack, an inability to move on from a negative event, or a medical condition that should receive treatment. The vast array of mental illnesses can be treated very differently due to the different presentations of the people affected. Some believe in the medical

community's description and diagnosis of mental illness, others look to environmental or spiritual causes, and others see mental illness as the result of insufficient will power.

Overall, the fact that many Minnesotan's easily turn to prayer in times of adversity is very encouraging, however the intense syncretism with various spiritually-tinged practices is concerning. The church should be clearer that God does not need us to do something the "right" way in order to intervene in our lives. In addition, a better theology of suffering would also be important to convey to the community, reminding all that suffering is not primarily due to a personal deficiency. This would be of great comfort for the many families suffering in shame or silence, believing that they are suffering or have caused the suffering of their family due to not being able to work hard enough. We personally found great comfort in Deuteronomy 8, when we went through a time of want. Few were willing to offer assistance as this was seen as enabling our possible laziness, though we were having great difficulty working and caring for a child with special needs. I took great comfort in the idea that nothing we have has been earned by our own hand, but that everything comes from God.

Guidance and the Unknown

In Minnesota, the unknown is often dealt with by consulting the collective wisdom of the community which is gained through the past experiences and stories of others. Science and biblical wisdom make up an important part of this collective wisdom, but much of it comes from stories of personal encounters that may apply to this new situation. Many also pray to God for signs and answers to what they should do next. Many of these same people might consult astrology or go to a tarot reader for extra assistance in determining their next source of action.

In general, people believe dreams to be entirely benign, though if two people share a dream, or if the dream has specific implications for a current event, the dreams are more likely to

be taken seriously. In this case it is up to the dreamer or dreamers to conclude what the meaning of the dream was, though if they are particularly troubled, they may consult family and friends who are open to the idea.

Seeking of divine information is almost entirely done through a Christian perspective in Minnesota. Christians often meet as a group to pray about why something is happening, determine the correct course of action, avoid danger, select someone for religious office, or find lost items. One correction to this that is needed is that Christians in Minnesota are often concerned that they are out of an unknown “will” that God has for our lives, while giving little focus to obeying what God teaches in the Bible. Instead, we should teach that it is doing God’s will to obey what he teaches in the Bible, and that he gives us the freedom to make decisions within biblically permissible options.

Right and Wrong

The prevailing moral order in Minnesota is based on Judeo-Christian heritage, but it is not concrete, and varies greatly based on the social context, and on the effect the action will have on people in the community. Sin is greatly associated with human selfishness, and often involves any action that directly harms another. Murder, assault, abuse, and robbery are the worst sins that can be committed and the doer is often considered irredeemable. Failing to care for the needs of family or friends, failure to care for strangers stranded in winter, being a confrontational or rude person, and putting one’s own comfort above the comfort of the group are viewed as lesser, but significant sins, and may result in social punishment or ostracization of the group. Local laws are seen as important, but breaking laws that do not have immediate negative effects on others are viewed as, “oh well.” Being a lawbreaker isn’t nearly as bad as being a person who cannot be respected by the community. Most people do not care if rules or laws are broken, if the

perpetrator is a respectable and generally agreeable person. However, if a person is disliked by the group or viewed as problematic, people will dig up previously unenforced rules to enforce on the disliked person. Violation of God's laws within the Christian community are handled in a similar fashion. Breaking individual commandments (especially once) is understood to be covered by grace. The perpetrator is encouraged to "do better next time," but also consoled by a gentle "we all make mistakes."

Instead most churches emphasize the biblical teaching that all the law can be summarized by loving God and loving others. This resonates well with the Minnesotan high value for relationships, and is embraced by both church goers and non-Christians alike. To fail to love is to be seen an awful human being to the core, or to be viewed as having deep psychological issues that need to be dealt with as soon as possible. For Christians, unloving acts towards others in the community (such as adultery) are treated very seriously. Perpetrators are often pressured to confess their sin, repent earnestly, and seek the forgiveness of both God and the person they have wronged. Those unwilling to do so often excommunicate themselves due to the immense shame they experience.

The primary way an offender can reconcile is to show remorse, by accepting their shame, and seeking to restore the relationship with the victim. This is often done by offering to offset the suffering caused or by doing penance of some kind to show the sincerity of the apology. If the apology appears appropriately sincere, the victim is obligated to forgive graciously. This often leads to the victim bearing a significant part of the responsibility to fully restore the relationship, and if they are unwilling, the victim becomes the offender of the relationship. This is also the primary way most Christian Minnesotans reconcile with God. When a person believes they have

offended God, they will seek reconciliation by sincerely asking for forgiveness and showing remorse for their offense.

Other aspects of sacrifice and reconciliation exist in Minnesota but are much less a major part of righting wrongs. Gift-giving is important during certain occasions for maintaining relationships. Fellowship through eating and drinking together is an important sign of community, and helps to further deepen existing relationships. And helping others for the purpose of creating or alleviating obligation is a common part of life in Minnesota.⁵ However, all of these play more of a role in maintaining interpersonal relationships, and are not really used to right wrongs.

Having everything in its proper place is an important value in Minnesota. It is believed that in order to offer hospitality to others, or have a calm atmosphere at home for one's family, that almost everything should be in the place it belongs. In this case, pollution is all of the clothing, toys, food, etc. that is not in its proper place. Chemicals are also often seen as a major pollutant in Minnesota. Organic food, cleaning products, clothing, and toys are popular, and many people prefer to use natural medicine in order to avoid having to bring the "chemicals" of medicine into the home. In some ways, people can also be seen as a pollutant if they go outside of the boundaries the community expects them to stay in. This last point is particularly troubling, especially because it is not apparent to most people until they find themselves abnormally irritated about an "outsider" is in their community.

In Minnesota purity is regained through the hard work of an individual or a team putting things back to the way they are supposed to be. There are no formal rituals to get rid of impurity,

⁵ Some people in Minnesota do not have a feeling of obligation when others help them, and therefore do not feel a need to reciprocate. This can create awkward tension when someone who expects to be repaid helps a person who doesn't feel they need to repay the kindness.

the closest is maybe “Spring Cleaning” where the community works hard together to wash away the mess and stuffiness accumulated over the winter. This is probably because impurity is not considered to have an impact on a person’s connection with God, rather only one’s health and mental peace are believed to be affected.

The World of Sacred Signs

Signs are everywhere in Minnesota, as they are in every culture, and in general they follow a pattern common to other western countries. Language is fine tuned enough to clearly communicate technical meaning, but also expressive enough for art and indirect communication. Most non-linguistic signs tend to be visual. Music is enjoyed, but only has broad expressive meaning when visual aids or lyrics are absent. Scent may carry a level of symbolism that is not common in other parts of the U.S. This is possibly due to the high value placed on outdoor spaces and experiences in the home. The smell of spices is connected with coziness, herbal smells communicate health and cleanliness, the scent of pine may bring to mind family and good memories, and flowers evoke the idea of spring and fresh starts.

Symbols that are dominant in Minnesota closely correlate to dominant symbols in American culture, however a few symbols stand out as particularly Minnesotan. Being outdoors in remote areas is a special kind of retreat for many. A number of people own small cabins on a lake out a rural area (often in the north of the state). Often when a person has time off, they will take their family “up north” which means to spend time in retreat in a rural area that is common to them. The joke is that this is so commonly referred to as going “up north” that many people will say they are going “up north” when they are in fact traveling south to their cabin. Camping, hiking, and going “up north” all embody the idea of using time to unwind and connect with those you love.

Another dominant symbol (perhaps the dominant symbol) in Minnesota is *WINTER*.

Winter is the great unifier of the whole community. It evokes feelings of coziness (being indoors watching the snow), fear (being stranded during a blizzard), pain (-60F windchill), fun (playing in the snow), excitement (hockey, snowmobiling), invigoration (a brisk walk in 15F temperatures), and dread (shoveling snow). The community bonds over both the shared enjoyment of winter and the concern of surviving the winter. The images of winter can be a symbol for both peace and terror, beauty and depression, all of which evoke familiarity and a deeply felt response from the community.

Within the home, and sometimes within organizations, signs and symbols are often used to tell the story for the people who reside within the walls. Art on walls, objects on shelves, even religious symbols displayed are chosen for the main purpose of pointing to the beliefs and interests of the owner. Family pictures are often displayed, as are artifacts of family memories, for the purpose of reminding the occupants and visitors of a pleasant past.

Performative symbols in Minnesota are similar to other cultural traditions in America. Graduations, wedding ceremonies, and court trials are all important direct performative symbols. We also have a few notable indirect performative symbols. In Minnesota, giving food to another person is often seen as a symbol of friendship or a desire for the other person to recover soon (in case of sickness). The “Minnesota Goodbye” is the main performative symbol of good relationships in Minnesota.⁶ It shows that the host is not eager for the guest to leave, and is prepared to go through all kinds of personal discomfort in order to continue to host the guest. For the guest, taking a long time to say good bye says that the host has offered good hospitality, to

⁶ *How to Talk Minnesotan*, on PBS, August, 16, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/video/tpt-documentaries-how-talk-minnesotan/>.

the point that they are reluctant to leave, even if it means inconveniencing the host and themselves further. The two people involved will continue to verbally dance around the idea of the guest leaving until the guest firmly insists that they must leave, though they hate to, and physically leaves the premises. Reaching the point of exchanging a “Minnesota Goodbye” with an acquaintance is an important part of the relationship and often indicates that a friendship has indeed been formed.

Nondiscursive language and symbols are extremely common in Minnesota, as people prefer to speak in non-direct language. One excellent example of this is the frequency with which people use the word “like.” It is actually very difficult for Minnesotans to speak more than a few sentences without using the word “like” to make a comparison to a greater reality beyond the immediate issue being discussed. Bracketing is also very common in everyday conversation, with people often switching tone of voice to indicate that they are expressing a different point of view, or explaining the viewpoint of someone else.

Sacred symbols that point to divine realities are not very common in Minnesota, due to the Christian, Protestant background. However, many Christians seem to have a favorite painting of Jesus that carries divine significance for them personally. Parents who have lost a child or suffered a miscarriage often hang a portrait of Jesus lovingly carrying a child. Those who have grown up in a more legalistic family may cherish a painting that portrays Jesus laughing. Kim and her mentor were both happy to discover a painting of Jesus walking on water, reaching down to help up his drowning disciple (the viewer), as they both have learned to appreciate God’s graciousness and discipline in the midst of growing faith. All of these portraits serve to capture one aspect of Jesus portrayed in the Gospels, and remind the viewer of that reality in an experiential way. Other sacred symbols include common Christian traditions such as the folding

(or holding) of hands and the closing of eyes during prayer to indicate that the speaker is talking to God, the taking of communion, attending church services in a building along with the traditional form of a church service, and baptism.

Sacred Myths

For the purpose of this section, the word “myth” will be used to mean a story that transcends time and space to serve as a paradigm by which to understand life, and the individual’s place in it. This story may or may not be factual, and the use of the word “myth” to describe the story will not be used in the sense of separating fact from fiction, but in separating important paradigmatic stories from less meaningful ones.

In Minnesota, the cosmic narrative is largely formed from biblical narratives. In short everything exists because God exists, God created everything that exists, humanity messed things up through disobeying God, and from then until now God in his goodness has been working to bring us back into a relationship with him. The myths that form our beliefs and values come from the Bible, and from the retold tales of hard-working ordinary Minnesotans.⁷ Specifically, beliefs about the dangers of medicine, vaccines, and chemicals come largely from well-known cautionary tales passed from person to person. The corresponding high value placed on things being “natural” or “homemade” find their roots in similar narratives. The beliefs of proper driving and safety during the winter, and the corresponding value of checking on the safety of others in winter, come from stories of near-death/ accident experiences in the life of various people from all over the state. Many Minnesota families also value college or trade

⁷ Paul Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999) 268. We must note here that the Minnesotan emphasis on work is connected to a glorification of the “self-made man” popularized by the stories written by Haratio Alger in the nineteenth century.

school and use narratives of opportunity to encourage to tell their children that the opportunity for a good job and life is tightly linked with attending further schooling.

In Minnesota, the identity of the state is wrapped up in the myth of “Minnesota Nice,” a story about how a person from another state moved to Minnesota, and fell in love with the state because of how nice and friendly all the people are. The reverse of this story is also told, stating that at one time, a Minnesotan traveled to another state and was met with such rude unfriendliness that they decided to return home and never leave again. Minnesotans pride themselves on this part of their state identity. In addition, stories about a person’s ancestors who originally immigrated are often told to reinforce a sense of extra-national identity, and funny tales of the pranks and misadventures of local people reinforce both a sense of local identity and community.

For most people, the cosmic narrative also serves as the origin story for humanity, and separation myths also come from biblical accounts. Cultural heroes are likewise found in the Bible, but are also found in historical and local narratives. Martin Luther is a popular cultural hero in Minnesota, due to the Lutheran/Protestant background of the state. Early American explorers are also somewhat seen as heroes, due to the popularity of outdoorsmanship and survivalism.

Catastrophic myths are mostly limited to local events, as eschatology is often seen as too removed from everyday life to be concerned about. Examples of local catastrophic myths include the “Halloween Blizzard of 1991,” which is considered the largest continuous snowfall event in Minnesota history. The snowstorm continued for three days, dumped over 28 inches of snow on central Minnesota, resulted in 7 deaths, innumerable injuries, 418 car accidents, and cost

Minneapolis and Saint Paul over \$700,000 in road clearing expenses.⁸ Everyone in Minnesota has their own personal stories related to the difficulty of dealing with the snow and cold common in the state. We personally have stored up so many “... and we barely made it home in one piece” stories due to getting caught driving through a blizzard, that we have finally learned not to drive on country roads during snowstorms. The town in which we lived in Minnesota was also deeply affected by the “1998 Comfrey-St. Peter Tornado Outbreak,” in which 14 tornados wreaked destruction for 4 hours, with the strongest falling into the F4 category.⁹ It was impossible for us to talk about St. Peter with the locals without the destruction of the tornadoes being brought up as the reason why things are the way they are today.

For Mankato, the large city near St. Peter, the “1965 Mankato Flood” has also been mythologized. The flood, a result of melting snow, forced thousands to flee their homes, destroyed much of the downtown business area and changed the landscape of the city as it was known. The hard work of local high schoolers who joined in the effort to sandbag North Mankato, resulted in the institution of Mankato “Fun Days,” a celebration of fun kid-friendly activities, as a way to say “thank you” to all the young people who helped save much of the residential part of the city. After the flood, massive flood walls were built, and rebuilt, in order to fortify the city against future destruction¹⁰. Surviving businesses, have memorialized the water mark from the flood, and proudly display it to newcomers. In a way, stories of catastrophe are so

⁸ William Bornhoft, “Top 20 Snowstorms in Twin Cities History: 1891-2018,” *Patch*, April 17, 2018, <https://patch.com/minnesota/southwestminneapolis/top-20-snowfalls-twin-cities-history-1891-2018>. Nick Woltman, “The 1991 Halloween Blizzard everyone still talks about,” *Pioneer Press*, October 31, 2016, <https://www.twincities.com/2016/10/31/halloween-blizzard-of-1991-dumped-28-inches-of-snow-on-twin-cities-in-3-days/>.

⁹ Deanna B. Narveson, “1998 St. Peter tornado stirs up memories for some, is a history lesson to others,” *The Free Press*, March 23, 2019, https://www.mankatofreepress.com/news/local_news/st-peter-tornado-stirs-up-memories-for-some-is-a/article_71d0464c-2edb-11e8-9767-63b2bf8e3a1b.html

¹⁰ Tim Krohn, “Part 2: 1965 flood brought devastation, heroics,” *The Free Press*, March 22, 2015, https://www.mankatofreepress.com/news/part-flood-brought-devastation-heroics/article_d676cc58-cdd4-11e4-80a3-134a6dc31da8.html

beloved in MN, that they might be considered part of our identity or community myths.

Minnesotans take great pride in their ability to band together and survive the massive onslaughts of nature.

Minnesota doesn't entirely subscribe to all western myths of spiritual warfare. Western spiritual concepts of dualism are present in some ways, though most see the spiritual as being involved in their daily lives, even if it isn't very showy. In a similar way, Minnesotans do not really believe that spiritual things are intrinsically, aggressively involved in their daily lives the way traditional religions do. However, one area of western myth that is integral to life in Minnesota is the Indo-European myth of the battle of good and evil. Most people often end up seeing biblical stories through this lens, seeing God as battling Satan, a concept very different than the submissiveness of Satan to God in the book of Job. Even in Revelation, Satan is pictured as battling with other angels, in the presence of God though, Satan is incapable of resistance. We must be reminded that God is God, and Satan is a comparatively small and weak created being who is in no way God's equal. Outside of spiritual issues, the Indo-European myth is popular in Minnesota entertainment. The battle between good and evil is a common trope, and good is almost always expected to win in the end, both in entertainment, and in real life.

Religious Rituals

Like all societies, rituals are an important part of the structure of life in Minnesota. Minnesotans enjoy structure, but try to avoid high structure and formality as much as possible. Jeans are pretty much considered acceptable attire for every occasion, but going over to a friends' house is likely to occur at a regular repeated time, involve eating the same food (maybe pizza and mountain dew), sitting on the same spot on the couch, and playing the same games, in the same order. Though many, if not most, Minnesota rituals are informal, they do exist and

carry with them many levels and depths of meaning, that we will explore based on the type of ritual. The most formal of these rituals correspond to life-cycle rites of passage, that were discussed near at beginning of the paper, and these will not be discussed again in this section to avoid repetition.

Induction Rites

Because Minnesota is not a very formal culture, there are few formal organizations that one can be inducted into. The primary organizations in one's life, outside the family, are one's job and church family. In this sense the first day at a new job serves as a kind of induction rite. Often the new employee meets their manager at the front office, who then escorts them into an "orientation meeting" along with other new employees. The new hire must typically be escorted to this meeting, as it is often held deep in the company, in a room that is confusing to get to without a guide. This often makes new hires feel a sense of bewilderment and dependency on their guide, as they attempt to quickly learn their way around the unfamiliar company as quickly as possible. At this meeting the new employees enter a kind of intermittent state called the "trainee," they are neither full independent employees, but neither are they simply a member of the public, they are now a part of the company and responsible for learning how things are done here.

Trainees often form quick friendships with the people who started work on the same day, or began their training near the same time in the same department. While people outside of work don't know what is like to work at the company, and seasoned employees maintain their distance, co-trainees bond through their mutual mistakes and struggles to learn the company's ways and culture. Instruction is often conducted for the first three months of work, during which elder employees, called "trainers," teach the new employees how to do the company's

procedures and warn them about difficult co-workers to “watch out for.” When a trainee is believed to be proficient in their new job, paper tests, practical tests, and supervised but independent work may all be used to confirm that the trainee is ready to become a full member of the company. After three months of work, and the successful completion of proficiency testing in necessary areas, a trainee is welcomed into the trained employee state. This transition typically comes with a small raise in wages, the opportunity to participate in the employer’s health and dental insurance, and the opportunity to earn paid time off.

Entering into church membership can also be an induction rite in Minnesota. Many churches have membership classes or Bible studies that must be attended before one can become a member. In these cases the participants often form close bonds with the people they enter into these membership classes with, as they are taught about the distinctives about the church of which they are becoming members. The church will often test the beliefs of those who wish to become members, and upon completion of membership classes, successful applicants are welcomed into the church community. Often members have more ability to participate in the decision making of the church, and more volunteer and leadership opportunities available.

Conversion and Revival Rites

Because much of the population of Minnesota comes from a Protestant, Christian background, conversion and revival rites are part of the culture as a whole, not simply part of church culture. Public testimony is important in reaffirming the Christian identity of the group, and the power of God to triumph over evil and help his followers. Baptism is an important initiation rite for Christians, through which the new believer’s identity is remade as a Christian and is welcomed into the church. In addition to these, revival rites are an important and common part of the Christian life in Minnesota. Most churches send their people on group retreats

multiple times during the year in order for their spiritual life to be refreshed. A nice thing about the way Minnesotans often pursue retreats is the group emphasis. It is easy for the “spiritual refreshment” to wane, when the experience is only individual, but when it is part of a group experience, the people involved are able to continue to discuss what they learned and experienced at the retreat for months to come. This also helps the group to have more conversations about spiritual things in general, as this is a difficult barrier for some, that the retreat helps to break down.

Minnesotans use Christian concerts at their churches to bring retreats into the community. This allows the whole church to participate, and gives an opportunity for outsiders to come into the church and learn about the Gospel. Concerts held at churches are often exciting and upbeat events that bring a sense of revival to the group. Some churches have grown so fond of this that they have a service entirely devoted to popular Christian music on a weekly basis. Unfortunately, this concept ignores the purpose of revival rituals, and overtime the concerts often become a more mundane and entertainment focused affair, that does little for the spiritual vitality of the church.

Pilgrimages

In Minnesota, one of the greatest experiences one can have is to take a trip to the boundary waters. Though it is not required by everyone, it is often talked about as a truly spiritual experience, where the person becomes more in tune with nature. The pilgrim travels far away from civilization, lives more independently on only what they can carry in, and experiences a time of true peace. This pilgrimage should be done with a group of people, who desire to share in their sense of wonder and awe of nature together, and form closer bonds with each other. A similar form of this journey is to go “Up North,” where the participant typically travels to some

wooded area with a lake, and tries to accomplish the same things as a pilgrimage to the boundary waters. This trip will typically be more convenient, as it is located closer to stores and restaurants, and may involve more luxurious living situations, such as campers or cabins as opposed to tents.

Another pilgrimage that Minnesotans often take is a trip to the Mall of. This trip consists of a large-scale shopping journey, where one is immersed in hundreds of stores in one of the worlds largest shopping centers. Although the trip doesn't last that long, it will typically last a great deal longer than a regular store or mall, and is accompanied by a fair amount of browsing in random shops. This process can make a person feel more like they are sophisticated American, as they bear witness to all the extravagant merchandise on display, and purchase unique and popular items for their person and home.

Festivals and Fiestas

Some festivals in Minnesota follow traditional American Holidays, such as Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. These festivals reaffirm the relations that people have with their families, communities and churches, through a shared celebration. Family reunions, likewise strengthen the bonds between extended family members, and encourage the shared values of the family. Church Potlucks and End of the School Year Celebrations help the church and school communities' bond and strengthen relationships, while also affirming participation in these communities. Birthdays are celebrated as a way of building up and encouraging the individual, as well as reminding them of their place within the community. And Finally, Wedding and Relationships Anniversaries help spouses affirm their love for one another and their commitment to the relationship for years to come.

Memorial Services

While celebrations look forward, memorial services tend to help with remembering the past. In Minnesota, the Fourth of July, is the main celebration of American patriotism and a remembrance of both the spirit of independence and the work of the community that allowed our country to become what it is today. Memorial Day serves as an important day for many to visit the graves of their family members and ancestors who died in service to the country. Many Minnesotans observe anniversaries of their loved one's deaths, often by spending time with friends or family discussing memories of the one who has died. The last major memorial remembrance in Minnesota is the Lord's Supper. While communion has many meanings to Christian communities, in Minnesota the "remembrance" part of the Lord's Supper is especially emphasized, and congregants are often given a few minutes of silence to contemplate the great sacrifice that Jesus made for us.

Social Satires

When dealing with injustice within their society, Minnesotans often cope by gathering with friends and watching comedy TV commentary and by sharing satirical posts on social media. While social media is used for a variety of purposes, a very common use for the platform in Minnesota is for the exchange of jokes satirizing various injustices in the society and making fun of common difficulties that others face. Many Minnesotans do not actually share much of their real life on social media, but rather share videos, pictures, jokes, and commentary that they find funny or cleverly ironic.

Crisis and Protection Rites

Because harsh weather and related catastrophes are common in Minnesota, rituals for dealing with crisis are a regular part of life. Family and friends often check on each other, either

by phone or in-person after extreme events, and are prepared to rush to the rescue if needed (and it often is). Neighbors are ready to help each other get their cars unstuck, jump dead car batteries, and shovel the driveways of sick or elderly friends. Minnesotans are always ready to bring food to help those who are too sick or too busy caring for the sick to make food. Visiting friends in the hospital is also an expected part of life, and done for the purpose of reminding the sick person that they are still part of the community, and that they have friends who are ready to help in times of need. Most Minnesotans also have a guest bedroom or blow-up mattress available on a moment's notice, should a snow storm arise that prevents their guests from returning home. The important ritual that is repeated in all of these instances, is the constant asking "is everything ok?" "Do you need anything?" with sincerity that says the person would be willing to drop everything else in order to provide aid.

When a group meets a spiritual or long-term crisis, prayer groups are formed to regularly petition God to intervene and give wisdom to leaders. For the psychological and mental challenges of everyday life, Minnesotans often drop everything they are doing to meet a suffering friend for coffee or other outing, and serve them by being present and listening.

Re-Creation Rites

After any disaster, it is common for the whole community and extended family to come together to clean up the mess, and help with rebuilding. This improves morale greatly and makes the work go more quickly. A common re-creation rite occurs when friends move from one house to another. The moving family will often invite friend, family, and church community over to their old house to pack or to their new house to unpack. This offer often involves both some aspect of setting up the new home and receiving pizza and pop from the family who is moving. This ritual is often such an enjoyable community affair that some Minnesotans claim to love

helping people move, and even own pickup trucks for the sake of helping others move whenever possible.

Religious Leaders & Institutions

Religious Leaders

Religious leaders in Minnesota are mostly Christian, though representatives for other religions exist. Shamans however, are not openly present in Minnesota. Even folk-like religious practices in Minnesota are often conducted by pastors or members of a family, and not any sort of official intermediary for spirits. Healers are quite prolific in Minnesota, due to the value of natural medicine. Chiropractors, homeopathic doctors, naturopathic doctors, acupuncturists, holistic medical professionals, and essential oil experts are likely present in every community. Pastors, counsellors, older friends, and family are often sought out for help with mental or spiritual distress. Some Minnesotans seek out tarot readers for divination, though this is a much less common religious leader in the culture.

Prophets exist in Minnesotan culture, though there is a significant difference between prophets that act in divine vs. more earthly matters. Charismatic denominations encourage people to seek prophecy, and use the optimistic prophecies of their members to encourage the group that good things are in store. On the other side, a number of people in Minnesota have taken on the role of secular prophet, and invest themselves in confronting the group's moral ambiguity on important issues. A significant war of words occurs periodically between people who act as secular prophets on the opposite sides of vaccine and medicine usage. A number of people have also invested themselves in warning other Minnesotans of the necessity to repent from racism, classism, and immoral lifestyles. The fact that these people appear "prophet-like" in Minnesota may be due to the fact that most Minnesotans are not very outspoken, so those who

champion issues linked to morality and work to earnestly confront society, appear to act in the role of prophet.

Many pastors act in the role of priests in Minnesota, but due to a strong belief in the “priesthood of all believers” this role is definitely limited. For a number of families, the father/husband inhabits this role on behalf of their family. In some cases, this can cause confusion about the “priesthood” of the wife and Christian children, as the man is seen to have almost divine authority and is believed to act as intermediary between God and his family. Good men use this role to encourage and build up their families, while troubled men use this authority to deceive and manipulate. If the man becomes abusive it can take a long time for the church and community to step in for the sake of the wife and children, and the aftermath can shake the stability of family structures throughout the whole community.

Pastors often act in the role of teacher, maybe even more so than the role of priest or prophet. Sunday sermons are often delivered in the mode of lecture, and the pastor often leads one or two Bible studies during the week. Their work is done for the purpose of instructing church members about God and how to live a good, God-honoring life. Elders, deacons, and other mature Christians can also fill this role, though at a lower, less authoritative level.

Religious Organizations

In Minnesota religious institutions or churches are mostly Christian. Some religious sects exist in Minnesota, though they are not common to see in everyday life. On the other hand, secular sects are common. Many people gather together to champion specific causes or to engage in a particular activity with great zeal. Quilting for example, can turn into much more than a hobby. Many quilters devote great time and energy to making magnificent quilts, attend weekly quilting social groups (where they meet up with others to quilt), and take part in quilting retreats,

competitions, and conferences. These quilters often identify themselves through clothing that is at least partially quilted or bears some saying indicating the wearers great love of the craft.

Political groups, hunters, crafters, and even homeschool groups can take on a sect-like quality, and are so common that it occasionally feels like if you have not joined one of these groups, you are not truly living.

Organized religions in Minnesota are very institutionalized, with many tracing their denominational lines back to Martin Luther himself. Due to this, a great deal of nominal, stifling forms of church institutions abound, but also a number of Lutheran churches have worked very hard to remain flexible and relevant in their practices. In Minnesota, many Lutheran churches look and act very much like non-denominational evangelical churches, or like Bible churches in Texas. This has been done in order to retain vision and fellowship and avoid the tendency to be controlling or impersonal. For the most part, the efforts to retain a semi-institutionalized status has succeeded for many churches, resulting in a vast array of small, friendly, modernized church communities that dot the Minnesota landscape.

Religious Movements

In Minnesota, religious movements tend to be very syncretistic and are often incorporated into the old ways of doing life and religion for the individual person. As such they are difficult to distinguish as individual movements, but more appear as trends that get added on to a person's everyday routines. In our lifetimes, movements to incorporate nature-based magic, astrology, and pagan beliefs has arisen and incorporated itself into the lives of many. A possible major religious movement in Minnesota is the movement of the children of formal institutionalized Christianity into the "Nones," a category of young people who do not desire to be affiliated with any formal religion, though they may or may not believe in God.

In my experience, these people often have beliefs in the spiritual and seek to incorporate pagan and Christian beliefs and practices into a new, moral, individualized religion. This movement of young people seems to stem from the aftermath of the fall of modernism and the stress caused by the “great recession” of the late 2000s. Young people feel that modernism is too dogmatic, and wish to believe in a system that leaves room for more nuance. They felt abandoned by formal religion (which often sided with banks) during the economic collapse. And, the good lifestyle promised by following the community wisdom of “work hard and go to school,” has yet to materialize. Because Minnesotans commonly use community and nature as a coping mechanism, it is not unusual that young people incorporated nature and rituals that involve spending time with others, into their attempts at creating a new religious framework. Their rejection of Christianity per-se, has much to do with their rejection of tradition, legalism, and capitalism (which they see as failing them). They are not specifically rejecting Jesus, as they view his teachings and life as exemplary (and anti-capitalist), rather they are rejecting the idea that Jesus is God, and therefore that his disciples (their parents) can exercise divine authority over them.

These young “Nones” live in a religious space that has yet to fully materialize, they are neither fully Minnesotan, but neither are they fully globalized or secular. Many feel lost, but have no desire to be found by traditional Minnesota culture, or institutionalized churches. Currently, it seems like most are being temporarily satisfied by changing career paths and throwing themselves into work that is moderately enjoyable, and capable of paying the bills, if they find it. We have yet to fully understand how Christians can respond to this particular religious movement, as Minnesotan “Nones” tend to shut down the minute Jesus is mentioned, and therefore efforts at reaching them have not been very successful. Instead, it seems that

perhaps the best response for now is to witness through sincere, wholistic, and loving Christian living, as Minnesotan “Nones” tend to be much more sensitive to the power of stories lived out, rather than just repeated. Also, spending time listening to them, and acknowledging their struggles are great ways to reach their hearts.

Conclusion

The ordinary Minnesotan inhabits a very down to earth, practical culture that has been affected by heritage, habitat, and faith. It contains many elements that may be seemingly contradictory, but can be somewhat explained by the idea that the culture is holding in tension the desire for individual freedom, alongside a high value for relationships and community. Minnesotan’s high value of spiritual things and nature have also combined to create unique patterns of life, that though they are not opposed to the church, do need to be thoughtfully addressed by Minnesotan Christians. Today, many younger Minnesotans are abandoning the church as they face daily struggles that they believe the church does not care to answer. In the future, Christian Minnesotans must learn to graciously adapt to the changing culture, while also standing firm in embodying a biblical lifestyle and faith.

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