

Thinking Christianly in Higher Education

Toward the end of World War II Oxford professor Arnold Nash faced the task of reeducating a world ravaged by ideological barbarism. In his book “The University and the Modern World” (1944), he called for “a worldwide order of Christian scholars” to develop an overall interpretation of human life and destiny over against the positivist and Marxist and liberal humanitarian worldviews of that day.

Thirty-six years later in his book “The Two Tasks” another professor, Charles Malik, former president of the United Nations General Assembly, voiced worries about the humanities “where worldviews are formed and set” and called for Christians to penetrate the universities with sound Christian principles. The problem, he said, is not only to win souls but to save minds.

This next year in a midwestern Presbyterian church, a Christian professor will lead an adult education class entitled “Religion and Ethics in the News.” His goal? To help shape Christian minds, to overcome the compartmentalized Christian thinking that separates secular from sacred.

Christian scholar David Wells has criticized the Church for providing therapy while neglecting to teach theology, as he wrote in “No Place for Truth” (Eerdmans, 1993). But separating theology from either psychology or the humanities is equally misguided, because such dualisms encourage compartmentalized thinking.

The compartmentalized Christian may never have been challenged to think christianly about such things as psychology or the humanities, and may even be fearful of intellectual involvement. Anti-intellectualism has been all too common both in

America and in the evangelical Church; by ignoring God’s good gifts and the calling they bring, it undermines the development of a Christian mind. On the other hand the dualistic thinker may unthinkingly have bought into the eighteenth-century Enlightenment claim that reasoning must be autonomous, independent of revelation or authority. It treated revealed religion as a private and subjective affair, unrelated to modern knowledge, resulting in the secularization of learning in all its branches, and thereby a secularized society.

Historian George Marsden has traced this erosion of Christian learning in the history of American universities: To restore a place for religious perspectives, he concluded, religiously committed scholars will have to overcome their inhibitions about relating faith to scholarship and establish academic credibility for the viewpoints they express. He subsequently elaborated on the “outrageous idea” of faith-based scholarship in the secular university, producing a vigorous controversy within the academic profession. [See his books “The Soul of the American University” (Oxford University Press, 1994) and “The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship” (Oxford University Press, 1997).]

Learning from History

Christians in the early Church faced an analogous situation. Educated in the Graeco-Roman tradition, impressed by insights of writers like Plato that seemed to parallel what they themselves believed, they wanted to know how it all related to their Christian faith. John’s statement about Christ as the divine Logos suggested the answer. He who became flesh and dwelt among us had created a world of order and given us the ability to understand it. He is therefore the ultimate source of all human knowledge, and so all truth is ultimately from God wherever it is

found. The Christian's task is to reunite such truths with the larger body of truth from which they were torn. So Augustine worked systematically through the liberal arts of his day, exploring their foundations in the unchanging wisdom of God (in *De Ordine*, book 2, and *De Musica*). This overall worldview, along with his later work *On Christian Doctrine*, which showed how the breadth of liberal learning contributes to our use and enjoyment of Scripture, became a major influence on education for more than a thousand years, shaping Western culture.

While the Enlightenment changed all that, the vocation of Christian learning did not change. The challenge of worldview thinking now is to reintegrate biblically based theology and values with the humanities and sciences and apply them to contemporary society and culture. This involves both critical and creative thinking: critical of non-theistic assumptions and their influence, but creative in exploring more consistent alternatives. When Christian colleges speak of integrating faith and learning, essentially they refer to this. They address it through faculty development as well as pertinent general education and departmental courses.

One church-related college asked its faculty to explore what the denomination's confessional standards contribute to each of the academic disciplines. Several years ago, a group of ten colleges initiated an "ethics across the curriculum" emphasis, developing fresh approaches to current moral concerns in every department of learning. One such institution began a center for applied Christian ethics which focuses each year on a multidisciplinary ethical issue, with a summer workshop to prepare teachers for their participation, as well as public lectures and debates and student research projects. Gordon College has established a Center for Christian Studies that sponsors research and writing projects by scholars from all over the country. The Council of Christian Colleges and Universities, headquartered in Washington, D.C., now includes more than one hundred schools across North America committed to a Christ-centered education that integrates faith, learning, and living.

The Christian academic community in America is clearly multifaceted: Christian colleges with institutional commitments to worldview thinking, committed Christian scholars in secular universities,

and the professional associations they develop to further the task. In my own discipline, the Society of Christian Philosophers, founded twenty-five years ago, brings scholars together for mutual support and joint endeavors. They hear and critique each others' papers, publish a first-rate professional journal called *Faith and Philosophy*, and even send groups to meet with other philosophers in China. Their members have earned the academic credibility to which Marsden referred and have significantly changed the face of philosophy of religion in America.

Similar groups exist in other disciplines and professions, and recently a Council of Christian Scholarly Societies was organized to facilitate the exchange of ideas and cooperative projects. One of their ongoing concerns is to encourage and mentor future generations of Christian scholars in these fields.

Cultivating the Next Thinkers

How can this be done? How can we expose young people to worldview thinking, introduce them to faith-based learning, and help them catch a vision for Christian scholarship and become part of this widespread Christian academy? Here are my suggestions.

1. Talk about it as you would about other missions and Christian callings. Make it part of their picture of what Christians are and should be doing.
2. Be as intentional about developing their minds as about nurturing faith and character: Developing God-given capacities is simply a matter of stewardship. It means being more than a fact-gatherer, not being gullible but learning to think for oneself, stretching the mind with tough tasks, disciplining it to work through them methodically to the end, learning to unpack ideas, examine assumptions and discern implications.
3. Encourage them to explore Christian perspectives on their studies. The Christian obviously has more than pragmatic reasons for protecting the environment and conserving natural resources, but what should a theological understanding of history or politics include? What in our theology gives meaning

to work or creative art? John Calvin put it this way in Institutes of the Christian Religion:

[T]he use of the gifts of God is not erroneous, when it is directed to the same end for which the creator himself has created and appointed them for us . . . Wherefore, no one will observe a more proper rule, than he who shall diligently regard this end.

So in thinking about politics, God's purpose for government is the key. Since social justice seems to be the overall biblical concern, that goal should be the main focus of Christian political thinking and involvement. Similarly work should aim to steward the resources of God's creation for human needs, a purpose that should carry over into career decisions and business ethics. Even play has meaning as a re-creative activity that develops skills, builds community, and delights in God's creation. The humanities are a matrix for worldviews, because of the ideas and values that arise as we contemplate the complexities of human experience. A helpful body of reading on such Christian perspectives awaits our students in all their fields of study, and a good place to start might be the book series entitled *Literature* (or *History*, etc.) *through the Eyes of Faith* (sponsored by the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities; published by Harper).

4. Remind them that intellectual honesty is essential in Christian scholarship. Their reading will soon reveal that there is often no one Christian view on many an issue, and ignoring this fact, like fudging evidence, undermines one's credibility. Disagreements should be welcomed because they can reveal the complexity of an issue, challenge premature dogmatism, teach intellectual humility, and push us further ahead. In political matters, for example, Calvin emphasizes justice, while others emphasize peacemaking and reconciliation. A British friend of mine wonders why American evangelicals are so politically conservative while British evangelicals are more supportive of liberal causes that address human needs. Christians can ill afford to ignore the underlying reasons on either side, so we need to scrutinize our conscious and tacit assumptions honestly, shaped as they almost inevitably are by some admixture of biblical and cultural concerns.

5. Help your students find a supportive community with active interest in Christian learning. The most obvious candidate is of course a good Christian college where students are serious about their studies, but that is not the only possibility. A group of friends might well commit themselves to talk regularly about what they are reading along these lines, and on some secular campuses a Christian organization provides such occasions. This is most often the case in graduate schools, where a faculty and grad student fellowship often exists. InterVarsity Christian Fellowship has a nationwide network along these lines. A community is important for more than the encouragement it affords, because developmental studies show that by participating in its life and activities we tend to make its story our own and to internalize for ourselves the goal and ideals it embodies.

6. Suggest an academic career as a Christian calling for the capable student. As a college teacher, I made a practice of raising that possibility in discussing life goals with students or in commenting on an outstanding paper. In a number of cases, this expression of confidence was all it took to elicit questions about graduate schools. But be sure they read books like Marsden's "Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship" and take his wise words to heart.

7. Take continued interest in their grad school experience, and help them keep the vision of Christian scholarship amid all the demands and specialization in their chosen fields. They need to find peers who share that vision or a seasoned Christian scholar who could advise and mentor them along the way. Such relationships are invaluable. The ideal friendship is of people with the same convictions and similar goals, who give of themselves to each other and talk openly about their work and its frustrations, and who accept criticism and advice. This kind of relationship shapes character, sharpens judgment, and reinforces commitments.

8. Finally, young Christian scholars need your financial support. Higher education is expensive, and a Ph.D. program is likely to take five years or more beyond college. Research funding for explicitly Christian projects is often not available, and scholarly writing is slow and time-absorbing work. We need foundations and individuals who will make grants

available, whether to individuals and colleges directly or through Christian professional organizations. We need persons to share the vision of Christian scholarship and help bear the load. We need future generations of Christian scholars.

Arthur F. Holmes, Ph.D., is a Wilberforce Forum Board of Reference member and Professor Emeritus of Wheaton College. He is the author of "Building the Christian Academy" (Eerdmans, 2001), in which he explores the tradition of learning, focusing on periods in history that can influence the building and maintaining of the Christian academy today.

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