

The SBJT Forum: How Does One Integrate Faith and Learning?

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the Forum's format. C. Ben Mitchell, D. A. Carson, Craig Blaising, and Scott Hafemann have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the Forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: How does a Christian professor impact a secular university?

C. Ben Mitchell: Teaching philosophy and applied ethics in a largely secular context is fraught with serious challenges and stimulating opportunities. Undergraduate students arrive at state universities imbued with a very simplistic relativism. Taking a cue from Louis Pojman, on the first day of class I asked my undergrads at the University of Tennessee to answer the following question anonymously: "Are there any ethical absolutes—moral duties binding on all persons at all times—or are moral duties relative to a particular culture?" As one might suspect, about ninety-five percent of my students denied the existence of moral absolutes. The most interesting response I received was from a student who replied, "I don't know. I mean, Hey! Dude, are you kiddin' or what? Anyway, ask Ghandi or somebody. I have no religion and pretty much no absolute moral convictions. But, hey, those Catholics are pretty weird."

In light of the prevailing relativism (or even ethical nihilism) of undergraduates, I spent most of my time in class challenging the notion that there are no moral ab-

solutes and showing students how relativism bites itself. (Should we take the statement, "there are no moral absolutes" as an absolute?) Offering the Holocaust and female genital mutilation as challenges to simple relativism presented splendid opportunities to demonstrate that there are some things which are always wrong, regardless of cultural conditions.

Interestingly, I have found that seminary students are not immune to relativism, even of the simplistic variety encountered in the secular academy. Unlike the secular context, in the seminary setting we can appeal to an authoritative revelation to deconstruct ethical relativism. Nevertheless, the *Zeitgeist* of the age is so powerful it is often difficult to disabuse even seminarians of their naive relativism.

Working with colleagues in the secular context is equally challenging. The prevailing sentiment among secularists is that religious ethicists, especially evangelical Christians, are philosophical Luddites. Yet, when a Christian applies herself or himself to the task of mastering the discipline, the secularists take notice and evangelicals may gain respect. Even though my colleagues were aware of my

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convictions, they also knew that I understood and was continuing to grapple with the important and interesting ethical issues in the discipline. The fact that I was as intolerant of simplistic answers as they were gained credibility. While seeking to offer “a word in due season,” evangelicals in secular settings must be careful to gain competency in the variety of methodologies of their respective disciplines.

The fact is, the evangelical task requires greater diligence than the secularist is usually willing to apply. We must not only understand the secular mind; we must also seek to apprehend an evangelical response, the mind of Christ. The apostle Paul is a wonderful model for us. In Acts 17:28, as he debates the philosophers of the ancient world, he reveals his awareness of the literature of his day. He quotes the prominent influences on his culture. Ignorance of the contours of the culture will only be met with rolled eyes and off-putting smirks. But when evangelicals take seriously the task of competent scholarship, even the secularists take notice.

Now, competence in the methodologies of the secular academy does not entail capitulation to those methodologies. Nevertheless, we have an obligation to state the arguments of our opponents in the most charitable and discerning ways. We must not be guilty of bearing false witness against our neighbor by misstating his or her view. Moreover, if we are going to engage the culture, we must engage the most potent arguments secularists have to offer. Naivete is unbecoming the Christian scholar, whether in the secular or the Christian context. Having spent most of my adult life in secular universities, my experience has been that secularists are not the bogeymen some Christians make them out to be. In fact, I have learned

much from my fellow students and colleagues that has made me a better Christian scholar. Especially in philosophy and ethics, my colleagues taught me to think critically and analyze carefully. The ability to dissect an argument is rapidly becoming a lost skill. Popular culture is suffused with *ad hominem* attacks and logical fallacies. Good scholars should not only not be guilty of such fallacies, they should expose them no matter where they appear—even if in our own arguments.

The task of the evangelical scholar is to see one’s discipline through the lens of the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Whatever the discipline, whether it is philosophy, ethics, literature, history, political science, psychology, mathematics, or the so-called hard sciences, there is a distinctively Christian way of understanding and interpreting the discipline. One goal of the evangelical in the secular setting should be to sift all that he or she knows through the sieve of divine revelation in the context of a comprehensive Christian worldview.

Another goal of the evangelical scholar in the secular academy is to be a counselor to other Christians. He or she will doubtless have many opportunities to assist students to interpret their studies in the light of biblical truth. Sadly, most Christian students are ill equipped to handle the secular assault on their beliefs. Because our churches have done so little to prepare them for these challenges, students often feel uncomfortable disputing what they are learning or they crumble under the assault and end up repudiating the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Either outcome is a tragedy for those who are called to be salt and light. The evangelical scholar can be a much needed repository of encouragement and intellectual strategy for students struggling to integrate their faith with their education.

The present upheaval in the secular academy may well provide new opportunities for Christian scholars. I am not suggesting that evangelicals will be appointed in large numbers to university philosophy faculties. What I am suggesting is that against the dark backdrop of nihilism and glitz of postmodernism, increasing numbers of persons are seeking substantive alternatives. Secularism is vacuous. Neo-paganism, though pervasive, is nonetheless empty. Woe to us if we do not have a credible worldview to offer a burnt-out culture.

SBJT: What is the role of New Testament studies in a Christian university?

D. A. Carson: For the last two years, the institution I serve, Trinity Evangelical Divinity school, has been incorporated into a larger body, a fledgling Christian university. Yet the roots of this enterprise go back precisely one century. Because we are celebrating our 100th birthday, various festivities and memorials are taking place, not least among them the publication of a book that looks backward with gratitude to God while reflecting on the way ahead. My part in this book was to write an essay under the title, “Can There Be a Christian University?” (see pp. 20-38 of this issue of *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*.) That assignment encouraged me to re-read things I had forgotten, dig out essays and books I had not read, and above all try to think my way through the subject. With that lengthy essay completed, my problem in this limited space is how to select a few points that will adequately establish a foundation for what needs to be said on the present topic.

The first Western universities were founded at the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth centuries.

They began either as Cathedral schools (e.g. University of Paris, which grew out of the Cathedral of Notre Dame; Oxford University) or at least as small colleges where all the teaching was undertaken by one religious order or another (e.g. Peterhouse, the beginning of Cambridge University). The organization of their libraries and the shape of their curriculum show what held them together: the unity of knowledge was bound up with the assumption that theology is the queen, since all truth is God’s truth, and what he has disclosed of himself in the Word (theology) or in nature is all of a piece. The *uni* in *university* was grounded in revelation.

With the Enlightenment came a gradual shift in perspective. This did not happen overnight. Many of the greatest early minds of the Enlightenment were profoundly Christian. If the eighteenth century was the century of David Hume and the French Revolution, it was also the century of Thomas Reid, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and the Wesleys. Nevertheless, the Enlightenment emphasis on autonomous reason was gradually aligned with rising philosophical naturalism. In the nineteenth century, John Henry Newman’s seminal *The Idea of a University* could still envisage a Christian (Catholic) university where theology held the vision together, and the liberal arts provided all the help that the natural world (Protestants would prefer to speak of “common grace”) might provide—whether in civilization, rationality, courtesy in debate, intellectual training, and independence of judgment. Newman’s descendants generally prefer to remember what he said about liberal arts than what he said about theology. By the twentieth century, the scarcely less important work by Karl Jaspers, *Die Idee der*

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Universitat, had replaced Newman's theology with a form of German idealism. Jaspers sees the unity of the *university* in a fairly ill-defined idealism and a great deal of impassioned pursuit of objective truth. However difficult that pursuit may be, it is still held up by some scientists (e.g. Paul Gross and Norman Levitt, *Higher Superstition*) and, suitably modified, by some historians (e.g. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Idea of the University*).

So a simple contrast is discernible. Medieval and early Enlightenment universities were *universities* by virtue of their commitment to a unifying vision of revealed religion and the concomitant theology; late modernist universities were *universities* by virtue of their assumptions regarding the objectivity of truth and the power of the human intellect to uncover it. The unifying factor shifted from content to method, with a much hazier conception of unifying truth. The current shift toward postmodern epistemology, however, has left both these visions in tatters. Truth itself is now widely thought of as purely perspectival. There is lots of truth, but no objective truth. Methods themselves are incurably tied up with socially conditioned worldviews. In this sort of framework, a contemporary university may be a place for tertiary education, equipping people (for instance) with various professional skills, but there is no common vision that makes it a *university* any more. Perhaps it should be called a multiversity.

Thus we come to the *Christian* university. Sadly, many universities began as Christian foundations, but for various reasons went astray. The reasons are complex; entire dissertations have been written on that subject. Not a few institutions that refer to themselves as Christian universities today are Christian in that a

substantial number of their faculty profess to be Christians—but that's about all there is to it. Many of these faculty members are sincere believers, but innocent of any real theological grasp, incapable of worldviewish thinking. They teach their subjects more or less the way they are taught in secular universities, sometimes self-consciously aping secular universities, preserving only a veneer of biblical proof-texting.

My argument, then, is that a Christian university worthy of the name should take self-conscious steps to reverse these trends. Concrete things can be done: hiring procedures can be reviewed, accountability structures can be established, discussion groups can be set up in an inter-disciplinary fashion to encourage worldviewish thinking, faculty development can become more intentional and more confessionally secure. I have tried to outline these and other practical steps elsewhere.

It is only at this point that one may usefully respond to the question, "What should be the role of New Testament studies in the Christian university?" For unless one agrees on what a *university* is, and what a *Christian* university is, the question remains too fuzzy to be useful. For the sake of argument, I shall assume that the biblical scholars in this hypothetical Christian university are profoundly committed to the truthfulness of Scripture and are unabashedly confessional in their self-understanding. I shall also assume (though the assumption is fairly utopian) that the Scriptures are being taught, at some level of excellence, in every discipline: that, too, is part of the role of New Testament studies in a Christian university.

Moreover, if the university is genuinely shaped by the Word of God, then the entire community will cherish all teaching

that is faithful to Scripture, alive with devotion, worldviewish in perspective, rooted in history and accurate exegesis while proving contemporary in formulation and interaction. The New Testament scholars must not only attempt to excel in their narrow field, but must earnestly seek to build a “whole Bible” biblical theology – and then seek to relate it to the world in which they live. Further, because they belong to the community of the university, they should seek to find or establish university structures in which the marrow of such biblical theology is disseminated throughout the community – even as they themselves profit from the broad exposure to university colleagues with diverse areas of specialization, thus enriching themselves in cultural awareness and expanding their own horizons lest their biblical vision be too narrowly constrained.

What New Testament scholars in a Christian university must *not* do is devote *all* their energy to the specialized monographs of their own guild, such that the biblical formation of the university is entirely neglected.

SBJT: What is the relationship between spirituality and academics in Christian education?

Craig Blaising: The relationship is best expressed in Proverbs 1:7, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” The word for knowledge here is a general term which covers knowledge of various sorts, from personal and moral to scientific and technical. It embraces the breadth of fields that would properly constitute general education. When Solomon became king of Israel, he asked God for wisdom and knowledge. God answered his prayer and gave him “very great discernment and breadth of mind” (1 Ki 4:29). The knowl-

edge that God gave him included a knowledge of God and his ways, or moral knowledge, plus botanical and zoological knowledge. First Kings 4:33 states, “And he spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even to the hyssop that grows on the wall; he spoke also of animals and birds and creeping things and fish.” Management, administration, and business knowledge were acquired by Solomon as well. In all of this Proverbs 1:7 stands as a signal that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of all such knowledge.

Obviously, this does not mean that Christians know more than non-Christians or that Christians will score better academically than non-Christians. Rather, it means that reverence for God and submission to him are the proper conditions for the study of creaturely things.

Such knowledge can be pursued in rebellion against God, as anyone familiar with the moral climate of education in most colleges today is well aware. That possibility (and actuality) exists because of the fact that we were created in God’s image (Ge 1:26-28; hence the possibility for knowledge) and because God is slow to anger (Ex 34.6). Adam and Eve pursued the knowledge of good and evil in rebellion against the will of God. But with that knowledge came suffering and death.

Proverbs 1:7 stands as a warning and a correction to that early learning experience in the Garden of Eden. In the beginning, human knowledge was pursued with folly, to the detriment of us all. In contrast, Proverbs 1:7 states that knowledge and wisdom begin in reverential submission to God. A truly Christian education, that is one that is truly biblical, does not concede a division between the head and the heart. Its aim is nothing less than total discipleship.

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SBJT: What do you see as the key issue currently facing distinctively Christian institutions of higher learning?

Scott Hafemann: I come at this question having returned two years ago to teach at an evangelical liberal arts college after eight years in seminary education and three years prior to that at two other such colleges. I also graduated from a distinctively evangelical liberal arts college. The mantra chanted on all these campuses is the fundamental maxim, “All truth is God’s truth” (the *“sola scriptura”* of Christian education) and its corollary in regard to practice, “The Integration of Faith and Learning.” My guess is that this conviction and its implication are widely shared by all Christian schools, at least as a matter of confession. So the key issue is not “creedal” in this narrow sense. We know our foundation and calling as Christian educators. Rather, the issue today is the “bondage of our academic will” under the slavery of subjectivism in all things religious. In other words, the issue is whether we are willing to pay the price of true academic freedom.

The first cost is institutional. If believing that all truth is God’s truth means that we must integrate our faith with what we are learning in every other discipline, then it also implies that one has two distinct entities which can be brought together into a harmonious whole. All “integration” is built around points of integration which must come together, mutually informing one another, rather than remaining “separate but equal.” This means that for Protestants an active interaction will take place between our growing understanding of the content and claims of the Bible (“faith” as a noun describing the truth of God’s self-revelation) and our growing understanding of the world

around us (“world” as a noun), under our confidence in God as creator and redeemer (“faith” as a verb).

As Christians we are therefore called to a twofold “faith” for the sake of being Christian in space and time, since God has revealed himself in space and time. Such a calling will cost Christian institutions money and their faculty time, both very precious commodities. No such active integration can take place unless the integrator has a developing understanding of the Bible and Christian tradition that can keep up with his or her other “field” of study. For the Christian college, this will entail a significant commitment to faculty education and accountability in order to overcome our biblical and theological illiteracy (e.g., the Alumni Association of Wheaton College is currently raising a two million dollar endowment to support a \$120,000 per year commitment toward the faith and learning development of its faculty!). For the Christian faculty member, this will require a significant willingness to keep developing a biblical worldview and to keep applying it explicitly to one’s field and *vice versa*.

At the moment, I see little inclination in this direction on most campuses. In a day in which the subjectivism of our cultural heritage has downsized “faith” into personal piety, a call for competence in the content of biblical Christianity for the sake of developing an explicitly Christian worldview seems to be too costly at best or to be an irrelevant waste of time at worst. Instead, we remain content believing, at least functionally, that to be a Christian scholar is to be competent in one’s field as a “doctor” and to “love Jesus” as a graduate of some anemic Sunday School. In most classrooms and faculty discussions, “to integrate” means simply to “inspire” and

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to be “inspired,” since private devotion now commonly substitutes for doctrine under the rubric of “faith.”

Before pointing a finger at the college in this regard, we must keep in mind that the Christian colleges are simply following the path already trod by the seminaries before them! Nowhere is the tyranny of subjectivism in terms of religious experience, now baptized under the rubric of the “Spirit,” more evident than in the minimal, English-Bible based curriculum and relational theology that now dominates most American theological education. My hunch is that the lack of respect for the relevance of serious theological engagement with the Bible has not come originally from the liberal arts classroom, but from the pulpits under which the professors in these classrooms have been converted and raised, and, for the most part, still remain.

The other prohibitive cost is personal. The integration of faith and learning may cost a Christian educator significant prestige and promotion in the academic guild as a result of coming out of the closet with an explicit Christian evaluation. Given the constraints and prejudices of modern scholarship, it is increasingly difficult to be explicitly Christian, much less evangelical, in one’s scholarship and get a hearing. So most Christians remain purely “descriptive” in their published works, agreeing tacitly with the ancient, modern, and post-modern popular opinion that religious commitment is merely a private, community-based opinion. The “integration of faith and learning” thus takes place implicitly in that one operates from a worldview that believes in referential meaning (we hope!) and is sympathetic to religious experience. Indeed, in these decades of “post-modern” literary theo-

ries and areligious sensibilities, the very fact that we offer a descriptive portrayal of reality and that we are interested in religious themes at all does reflect basic Christian attitudes and assumptions.

There is also much to be said for simply “being there” as a committed Christian in the realms of contemporary academic discourse, calling attention to sound methodologies and realities that would not otherwise be heard. Such “historical” work early on in one’s career may win one the right to speak more directly later. But, in the end, such implicit integration can be done by anyone who values religious experience as a human phenomenon and has a conservative hermeneutic.

My concern is that this kind of implicit integration is not adequate to sustain a distinctively Christian college like the one in which I am honored to teach. Implicit integration ends where the goal of integration begins: the explicit evaluation of reality from a distinctively Christian point of view and the explicit evaluation of our distinctively Christian point of view from what we have learned about the world. Certainly we cannot expect to have all the answers; but we must be able to raise the right questions and to begin to develop a Scriptural framework for answering them.

To address such evaluative questions in scholarship will mean that we will often be rejected in our guilds and that many of our integration projects will take on an “in house” quality that makes them relevant “only” in Christian academic circles. Here, too, Christian colleges and their faculty must be counter-cultural for the sake of the kingdom of God, courageously engaging in what Marsden has recently called “the outrageous idea of Christian scholarship,”¹ regardless of whether or not someone will publish it, and rewarding such serious

work as if it had been! If not, are we willing to argue that implicit integration is really enough to sustain a distinctively Christian college, rather than simply a religious institution? As things stand now, the issue is whether Christian colleges will have theological fiber and institutional backbone. Will they reverse the trend of substituting piety for learning and devotion for doctrine when it comes to the Bible (but not to other fields of inquiry!)? Will they avoid the pitfalls that have already captivated most of our seminaries?

ENDNOTE

¹ George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997).

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