



The Too-Well Hidden Agenda¹

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Claims about difference can refer to quantitative comparisons or to more fundamental contrasts. A kitten is different from a cat, but it is still a cat. An island is different from a continent, but they are both of the same sort of stuff: land surrounded by water. “Christian higher education is better education” suggests that, in reference to whatever is generally done in higher education, the Christian college is doing it better: longer, shorter, higher, lower, more, less—and yet, perhaps disappointingly, somehow the same. “Christian higher education is different education” is a more exciting claim; it suggests a contrasting form and its own unique set of values.

The habit of quantitative comparison is typical of a competitive society. Contrasts of a more qualitative sort are somewhat less common. The fact that a fish is seen to be worthy of being mounted as a trophy has to do with its length and weight, not so much with its uniqueness.

Americans are more accustomed to comparing things that are fundamentally similar. For example, Americans are not accustomed to relating and comparing automobiles with airplanes. Not since Henry Ford’s 1927 Tri-Motor Transport and the Packard engines in World War II fighter planes has there been much overt relationship between automobiles and airplanes, as far as the public is concerned. They represent fundamentally different modes of travel and are, thus, not assumed to be in competition with each other. General Motors makes railroad locomotives, but you will never hear about that in an Olds dealership!

A recent commercial has surprised television viewers by dramatizing the Swedish enterprise that produces a series of scaled-up automobiles overflowed by the same company’s sleek fighter-bomber. American advertising typically presents products in simple comparative terms. Our car is better than their car because it runs more swiftly, it rides more smoothly, it rides more roughly (it lets you “feel the road,”) it is longer, it is shorter, it is smaller, it is larger, it gets more miles-per-gallon—and dozens of other claims based on different valuing of exactly the same factors. In this competitive climate, the assertion that something is fundamentally of a different sort—not just comparatively different—is rarely heard. Such a claim would seem either to be incredible or disinteresting.

Americans also tend to describe educational qualities as a matter of simple comparisons: our school is better than theirs because it is larger or it is smaller, has more of this or less of that, has smaller classes, bigger faculty, and so forth. Even Christian colleges fall into this habit of making comparative claims, especially in reference to the secular colleges and universities, unintentionally diverting attention from the uniqueness of Christian higher education. As a result, the fine print of the institutional philosophy and purpose, especially the claims about providing a fundamentally different sort of education, is rather effectively hidden.

In recent months, faculty workshops on two different campuses presented some interesting comparisons. In many ways, these institutions were similar: in the official documents each claimed

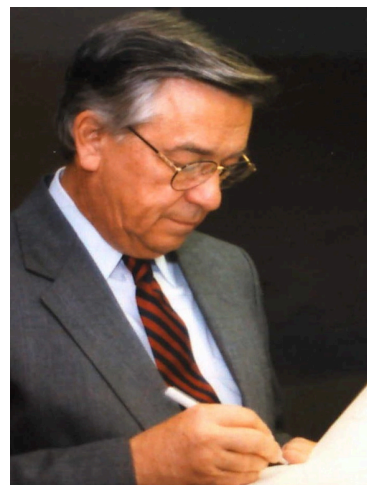
¹ Ted Ward. The Too-Well Hidden Agenda. *Faculty Dialogue*. 9 (1987): 1-5

to be Christian and to offer a “superior Christian education.” On this point, I raised a question with the faculty, administrators, and students: what distinctive and possibly unique characteristics provide evidence of the claim?

In one of the colleges the responses were given almost exclusively in a comparative form; for example, the idea of being better, providing more, requiring more, or giving more of this or that. It was unclear just what might be the uniqueness of this institution. Its students, especially, seemed pleased enough with themselves that they had made the right choice—their faculty could be trusted more, could be expected to be more interested in them, and they expressed the idea of being intellectually and spiritually “safe” through various sorts of statements. They were comparatively better off than their cousins and former playmates who had gone into the less safe forms of higher education.

Even more worrisome, most responses from faculty and students alike revealed more than a little touch of competitive “me-too.” The secular schools say that they are doing such-and-such, but we are doing it better. Is that all there is to it? A claim to be doing the same things, but to be doing them better, is easy to make. Biased opinion can be counted upon to obviate the need for backing up claims on this vague level.

In the other college, especially in the discussions with the faculty, there was a substantially slower response to the questions about uniqueness. The idea of describing the quality of Christian higher education in terms of its uniqueness was not new to them. Even the students seemed to be dealing with the question in a careful and searching way. Not that the answers were clear—they tended not to be; but the more important observation was that these people were observably involved in searching for the uniqueness. They were quick to rule out the verbal claims and the creedal statements: “Anybody can say they believe in sound doctrine.” They talked in terms of “bottom-line” reasoning as the faith foundation—where the rational meets the non-empirical: where God is. At the bottom of every idea, at the corner of every well-dug foundation, at the heart of every valid motive, and every cry of the heart is the reality of God. God, not just as dogma and doctrine; God, not just as proposition and presupposition; but God as a living reality, known through Jesus Christ and existing to make all things exist, and redeeming because all things are rightfully His, to be reconciled with truth, to be sought after in the name and authority of the King of Kings.



In that place, one could more readily sense the validity of chapel attendance. Here were young people nurtured by a faculty who coordinated their commitment to Jesus Christ and their allegiance to the values of His Kingdom, redemptively working with students to help them find ways to bring themselves under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. What was happening wasn’t always verbalized very clearly, and not everyone, faculty or students, seemed comfortable with what was going on. But there was something unique, perhaps uniquely godly, about the educational experiences that many were experiencing in this college.

Perhaps many Christian educators “talk around” the centrality of Christ because they are uncomfortable defining or defending the idea of a value-positioned education. Especially in the context of today’s educational rationalizing, it is easier to speak of other things. The popular view of

liberation-through-education presumes that it is enough to be able to “think for oneself.” Unpopular though the thought may be, Christian higher education must be concerned with the substance of what people are thinking; academically, we must make sure that professing never goes out of style.

Is there anything unique about Christian higher education? Does any common characteristic show through? Does the visitor to a campus notice it? Can the observer find it in the classrooms? Does it show up in the dormitories and cafeterias? Most important, does the graduate carry it away in the form of lifestyle and vocation?

Other than being a self-proclaimed “better” education, what is Christian higher education? Just how different and in what ways is it a thing apart? Can it correctly be described as a unique contrast with the commonplace ideas, images, and values of education? If the answer is affirmative, the next question follows: What can be done to put the uniqueness of Christian higher education out in front of the comparative claims of ‘betterness’? Answering that question exceedingly well and putting the answers to work in full view of the whole society—indeed, the whole world—is the job to be done.