



So What? *The Faith and Learning Dialogue*¹

Ted Ward

The gap between faith and learning in Christian higher education has been highlighted for nearly thirty years. What good has come of it? At least part of the motivation to deal with the matter is the nagging possibility that such criticisms as Warren Bryan Martin's may be correct:

. . . that most so-called Christian colleges define their mission in a way hardly different from the essentially secular institutions. They're going where the others are going. They're playing the "me too" game.

Indeed, just where is the *Faith and Learning* dialogue taking us? Just how often can the issues be reexamined? What will need to happen before doing something concrete will seem compellingly important?

The eager embrace of the seemingly endless series of *Faith and Learning* seminars, conferences, and workshops suggests zeal and hope—whether or not faith is well placed. A strip-bandage on a severed artery may do more harm than good; if it serves to reduce the sense of urgency or creates a false security and delusion of adequacy, such first aid is worse than none. Does the *Faith and Learning* movement offer any solution for the problem itself, or is it merely a treatment of symptoms?

The intentions are respectable and the willingness to engage in self-criticism should be lauded, but the observer cannot overlook the tendency to seek solutions in the very sort of lofty rhetoric so characteristic of the technological-scientism in today's education. Critiquing both the language of clerical control and the language of disciplinary autonomy, John Howard Yoder invites the dialogue back to earth:

On the one hand, clerical control under such slogans as 'integration' or 'penetration' ultimately cripples the several disciplines But on the other, 'autonomy' for each sphere ['sphere sovereignty'] issues in tyrannical or idolatrous abuses, since in a fallen world there is within the 'sphere' itself no way to distinguish between divinely created intention and its fallenness.

Yoder urges that the issues not be left to rest on the "disjunction between idolatrous autonomy and clericalist heteronomy."

On many points there is no disagreement:

1. No education is value-free or non-ideological.
2. Even within the public sector of a free society, there is as much or more justification for teaching from a Christian theological perspective as from any ideology.

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3. A legitimate claim to the designation *Christian* higher education must be based on teaching that explicates its presuppositional ground in Christian theology as part of its deliberate content.
4. Although the social sciences and the humanities are especially responsible for carrying an explicitly Christian moral structure into the intellectual marketplace, no discipline is exempt from the responsibility for reflecting and continuously reexamining its theological presuppositions.

Reflecting on Kenneth Hermann's contention that Christians cannot abandon the secular universities, Stanley Hauerwas concludes, "For all of its faults the university continues to offer one of the few places in our society for the development of civil discourse about the good."

The apparent ease with which some professors in Christian colleges go about their academic affairs with little or no explicit reflection of Christian premises in their professed discipline is nothing more than a symptom.

One thing is sure: intellectual dichotomizing has become an earmark of much Christian scholasticism. In one sort of experience and in its special pile of source materials the Christian professor finds academic veracity; in another sort of experience and from its pile of materials the professing professor finds the precious spiritual propositions. Would that the two piles could once again be stirred together. Or better yet, is it too much to ask that the hallmark of Christian scholarship might be the rejection of the two-pile epistemology? Since *all* truth is God's truth—a favorite cornerstone of the *Faith and Learning* movement—it is important to keep the "all" integrated.

What lies behind the disintegration and dichotomization? Surely the gap between one's faith and one's reasoning must develop after childhood's simple view of God in his universe and before receiving one's first faculty salary check in a Christian college. The popular view posits the secular graduate school as the culprit: there in Harvard, Tulane, the U of M, and SUNY's graduate programs young Christian scholars learn to survive by parking their faith in the hall outside the classroom in order to gorge on the higher stuff of their disciplines—preparing themselves to dish it out "pure," as promising new faculty persons in the Christian colleges. This scenario is too close to reality and far too common. To point the finger of blame at the secular graduate schools is temptingly logical. But it is a tragic cop-out.

The problem lies deeper—or earlier. One must suspect that the presumed victims of the secular graduate schools may have had more than a little previous experience with this form of victimization. Perhaps the problem lies in the nature and form of the Christianity that is brought to the secular graduate schools by all too many Christian young people. Indeed, what is the world to think of a religion that can be left in the hallway outside the graduate seminar? What is the world to think of a faith community whose members' motivations toward graduate sheepskins are so compelling that compromises with the very roots of their faith are pragmatically accepted as necessary? Indeed, what glory does Jesus Christ take in a system of education fretting for thirty years over its need for in-house remediation of strained ties between faith and learning? In these times of social chaos there is a terrible irony in not having one's house in order.

How does faith and learning get de-coupled in the first place? With Arthur Holmes, one may observe that:

Our graduate training, by and large, made us Enlightenment people, while leaving us uncritical of Enlightenment assumptions about scientific objectivity, and the rule of objective reason in the moral life, and the nature of persons and society.

Are we to hear this as a criticism of the secular graduate schools or of the whole educational experience, including the Christian liberal arts college?

After thirty-three years of teaching and research experience with graduates of Christian and secular colleges, I see the schism between faith and learning as being rooted in the environment of the Christian community and its colleges. From experiences as a graduate professor in several state universities, I must testify that most of the professors-to-be who were my graduate students brought a dichotomized worldview into their graduate studies. Like it or not, these graduate students included many “outstanding” graduates of Christian liberal arts colleges. If there were any predictable differences between the Christian graduate students whose baccalaureates were in the Christian liberal arts colleges and those in the so-called secular institutions, they were minimal.

The best students, in terms of my values, were aware of their pilgrimage—they were holding firmly to their faith commitments as the frame-of-reference into which every idea and every “fact” had to be tested for its fit. For these faculty-information, Christianity was not an option but a given. Its givenness was a matter of faith and its conceptual implications were an emerging and maturing consciousness—not a thing apart. There were others, to be sure, who seemed quite content to leave their Christian presuppositions and convictions outside the classroom; and some of the most distressingly crippled of these had come from “outstanding” Christian liberal arts colleges. They had learned well the neat art of defining faith and learning separately. I know of no other way to explain the reality of my own experiences except to conclude that the Christian colleges do not adequately cope with the American Christian habit of dichotomized faith and learning. To be plain about it: the Christian colleges are helping to create the very faith and learning problem for which they are so compulsively discussing remediation.

In very few Christian colleges has the issue of chapel attendance been well resolved. In even fewer institutions has “Christian lifestyle” been satisfactorily translated into Christ-honoring norms for student and faculty relationships. The first of Robert Kreider’s five distinctives of the Christian college is “the telling of the story” and the second is “a certain kind of community.” On these matters many a college stands naked. It is not until Kreider’s third criterion, “a particular kind of scholarship,” that the majority of arguments for Christian higher education seem defensible. And here one must ask whether the emphasis is on *particular* or on *quality*. Being Christian, whether as a person or as an institution, involves a willing embrace of the particular, yea verily, of the peculiar. Too often the Christian is swept up in a mass appeal to “excellence” without parsing the assumptions underlying the appeal.

Could it be that the fixation on being *liberal arts* colleges has blinded the flagship Christian institutions to the fact that they have become the most narrowly vocational of all: they produce the college professors for the Christian college establishment—and take great pride in doing so.

Faculty members and administrators in North American Christian higher education have much to learn from those who walk with Christ into the front lines of difficult social service. John de Gruchy’s vantage point is outside the experiences of most North American professors. He works in

a secular university within a nation torn to shreds by the unwillingness of the elite to come to terms with social conscience. He raises serious questions about the Christian educator's priorities:

Having prided ourselves on liberal values in the past, some of us have been forced to see that these very values in themselves can be elitist, the ideas of the ruling class if you like, which keep others in their place. This does not mean that such values are no longer important, but they have to be understood in terms of historical situations and developments rather than as Platonic ideas floating above reality which we call upon from time to time to legitimate our own interests.

Can Christians here appreciate de Gruchy's conclusions?

Education is for transformation, both social and personal. That is what it's all about. But this requires that we continually clarify our values, methods and goals in the midst of the struggle for justice—not apart from it. We need . . . to be Christians in education . . . to have commitments . . . to the well-being and transformation of society.

In the nations of North America, too, there are divisive social issues which if not treated from informed and humble intellectual grounds will drive society further into chaos. Talbert Shaw reminds that Christian higher education has done relatively little to affect the white Christian community's ignorance of one such issue. Elise Boulding reminds that ignorance of global interdependency persists among the so-called educated largely because higher education remains parochial and essentially self-centered.

As we follow the flow of literature from the *Faith and Learning* efforts, we should listen, think, and talk not just in terms of ideas and propositions but in terms of commitments and actions. If the *Faith and Learning* movement merely spins a web of self-justifying apologetics for the status quo in Christian higher education, it may already be a fad on its way to extinction. Robert Kreider may be asking the key questions: "Can a good college have this most essential of the virtues, humility?"

May God spare us from the dilettante elitism that worships ancient Greek gods in the name of "Christian higher education."

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