

CHRISTIAN COLLEGES AS WELCOMING PLACES FOR RESPECTFUL CONVERSATION

I am appalled at the sad state of public discourse in contemporary society. I submit as Exhibit A the typical TV talk show where pundits line up on diametrically opposed sides of a given issue. Each pundit argues from a “fixed position.” With each pundit believing that he (she) has captured the “whole truth, and nothing but the truth” on the issue at hand, each is impervious to the possibility of learning anything from the position of the other. Rather, each hopes to *demolish* the position of the other, to *win* the argument (all metaphors more appropriate to fighting a war than to having a genuine conversation).

Such a confrontational, fixed positions approach to engaging others in public discourse is not limited to TV talk shows. It has been rampant in the ongoing presidential political campaigns. It is rampant in discussions on homosexuality that are tearing some Christian denominations apart. It is not uncommon in meetings of scholarly societies. It may even take place in some faculty meetings at your Christian colleges, or during some co-curricular conversations on your campuses.

The fixed positions model for discourse lies at one end of a spectrum. At the other end is an equally unacceptable option for discourse, the “whatever” option – a crass form of relativism in which any point of view on the issue at hand is judged to be as good as any other point of view. You have your beliefs, I have mine, there is really nothing to talk about.

My dream is that Christian colleges will become beacons of light in this prevailing darkness of unacceptable extremes. My dream is that Christian colleges be welcoming places that model a third way in-between the unacceptable extremes of “fixed positions” and relativism. My dream is that Christian colleges will model being welcoming places for respectful conversation among those who disagree with one another.

To put some legs on my dreams. I will propose two modest, low-budget, pilot projects for your consideration. The first will be a faculty initiative. The second will be a potential collaborative initiative between your faculty and your co-curricular staff.

Face-to-Face Dissemination of the Results of Faculty Scholarship.

For the sake of argument, let me first assume that as a Chief Academic Officer, you believe that it is important that your faculty be actively involved in doing scholarly work (If you disagree with that assumption, you will have the opportunity to express that disagreement in the Panel session tomorrow morning). To be more concrete, for illustrative purposes only, let me also assume that you have a faculty member who is interested in doing research on “the role of religion in politics” (I can think of no more pressing contemporary issue).

After this hypothetical faculty member has completed her research, how will she disseminate the results of her scholarly work, particularly to those who do not share her Christian faith commitment? There are presently two primary strategies for such dissemination.

First, Christian scholars seek to have the results of their work published in high quality journals or with good publishing houses. Second, Christian scholars present papers at academic conferences. Typically, such a presentation will be followed by a question-and-answer session, often rather brief, where attendees have the opportunity to engage the presenter. I certainly applaud these two time honored methods for disseminating the results of Christian scholarship. They are necessary, but are they sufficient? Let me lay bare what I see to be their limitations.

In brief, the current academy is not typically hospitable to the results of scholarship that is informed by a religious faith perspective. This means that it is too easy for scholars who are not Christians to ignore the scholarly work of Christian scholars, or, even to demonize Christian scholars without giving a fair hearing to the results of their scholarly

work. How can that tendency be overcome? *By orchestrating more face-to-face engagement between Christian and secular scholars that facilitate the building of personal relationships of mutual trust.* We all know that it is easier to talk about disagreements with people we know and trust than with relative strangers. But, this interpersonal approach to engagement with other scholars has not been prominent in the academy.

Therefore, my first modest proposal is that after our hypothetical Christian scholar has completed her research, in addition to the usual means for dissemination, she convene a seminar on your campus, inviting a handful of scholars (let us say 8-10) who have also done research on the role of religion in politics. The purpose of the seminar will be to have face-to-face conversation, possibly over two days, about the results of their respective research projects. In addition to Christian scholars sitting around the table (from your school or elsewhere), invited attendees will include Jews, Muslims, atheists, agnostics, Marxists, Feminists, and representatives of other world views, religious or secular. The host scholar from your institution will make clear at the outset the groundrules for conversation, to include a commitment to give an equal voice to everyone around the table, a commitment to listening well, so as to better understand the positions of others, a commitment to seeking some common ground, and, where common ground cannot be found, a commitment to demonstrate respect and concern for the well being of everyone seated around the table (elements of what I have called “respectful conversation”). I believe that this interpersonal approach will better enable Christian perspectives to gain a fair hearing, thus enhancing the possibility for Christian scholars to have a redemptive influence in the larger academy, and even in the larger society.

Let me now build a case for the importance of this interpersonal mode of engagement. The first pressing question is whether it is possible to orchestrate such respectful cross-perspectival conversations at this time in the academy? I have good news and bad news. The good news is the valid postmodern insight that many claims to knowledge are influenced by the social location of the scholar making the claim. As Nicholas Wolterstorff has persuasively argued: Whereas the “modern” enlightenment ideal was to

seek after “generic human learning”, where the scholar must be stripped of all her particularities, the academy now generally accepts the view that much learning is perspectival, reflecting the scholar’s particularities, such as her gender, socio-economic class, the intellectual tradition in which she is embedded, and her personal biography. The resulting good news is that such “perspectivalism” is now widely accepted in the academy. In many academic conversations, it is acceptable to come to the table with a perspective that is clearly feminist, gay/lesbian, Marxist, or whatever. But, not quite “whatever”. The bad news is that this new hospitality to a plurality of perspectives has not typically been extended to allow any “religious perspectives”. Logically, all perspectives should be allowed around the table. Why, then, are religious perspectives often systematically excluded?

The answer to this question is no-doubt complex. I will concentrate on one aspect of a response, that may at least apply to Christians (other religious persons can formulate their own responses). Christians do not have a strong history of wanting to engage “unbelievers” in respectful conversation. We are much better at talking than listening. Our invitations to talk with those who do not share our faith too often sound like “I have the “truth”, you don’t; let’s talk.” That is an all too common perception of persons who are not Christians as to how Christians wish to engage them. And, there are too many Christians who legitimate this perception.

How can we as Christian scholars overcome that perception, or that reality? *By modeling respectful conversation.* By inviting scholars who do not share our faith commitment to our table, providing them with a welcoming space to present their perspectives on the issue at hand, and then engaging them in conversation in ways that indicate we are actually open to learning something from a person who disagrees with us, hoping that in such a relationship of mutual trust, those who do not share our faith will also be open to hearing what we have to say from our Christian perspective.

But, there are three prior conditions that Christian scholars must satisfy for such respectful conversations to be possible. They must first exemplify humility, knowing that

all humans are finite and fallible, and cannot claim that their particular perspective is a “God’s eye” view of the truth about the issue being considered.

Secondly, Christian scholars must embrace both poles of a rare combination pointed to by Ian Barbour in his definition of “religious maturity”: *“It is by no means easy to hold beliefs for which you would be willing to die, and yet to remain open to new insights; but it is precisely such a combination of commitment and inquiry that constitutes religious maturity.”* The combination of commitment and openness is a rare combination.

Openness to the beliefs of others without commitment to your own beliefs too easily leads to sheer relativism. Commitment without openness too easily leads to fanaticism, even terrorism (as C. S. Lewis has observed, to which recent world events tragically testify, “Those who are readiest to die for a cause may easily become those who are readiest to kill for it”). One of the most pressing needs in our world today is for all human beings, including Christian scholars, to embrace, and hold in tension, both commitment and openness.

Thirdly, Christian scholars must exemplify patience, daring to believe that in the very process of respectful conversation, the gift of a greater understanding of the truth may emerge. We are called to “speak the truth <as we understand it> in love” (Ephesians 4:15), leaving in God’s hands the possibility of having a redemptive influence.

Lest you think that this idea of Christian scholars orchestrating respectful conversations with other scholars is wishful pie-in-the-sky thinking, let me briefly share with you a powerful example of where this has already happened in the work of one Christian scholar, Jim Waller, whose project I referred to in my book. Waller’s research focuses on the timely question of why ordinary people sometimes do extraordinary evil.

In contrast to the prevalent alteration theories for answering this question, Dr. Waller has proposed a theory that is deeply informed by the Christian teachings on human sinfulness (which he refers to as the “ancestral shadow” in his book *Becoming Evil* (Oxford 2002)). Dr. Waller reports that his theory has gained a respectful hearing within an elite group of

secular Holocaust and Genocide scholars, despite its being informed by a Christian faith perspective, largely because he sought to exemplify three forms of humility in his personal engagement with these scholars, “intellectual, worldview and relational humility.” By “worldview humility”, Waller means that he was willing to be self-critical of his own worldview beliefs in his conversation with secular friends who held to differing worldviews. By “intellectual humility”, he means that he acknowledged the limits of his own “specialized cognitive access.” By “relational humility”, Waller means that he refused to accept the common stereotypes of secular scholars, at the same time that he sought to dispel the common stereotypes that secular scholars have of Christian scholars.

Related to his posture of “relational humility”, Waller has informally shared with me some details of the interpersonal dynamics that has characterized his engagement with other scholars, in general, and with other Holocaust and Genocide scholars in particular. He decided early in his career as a Christian scholar that he would not go to academic conferences just to present a paper and then retreat to his room. Rather, he would take the time to get to know his fellow scholars as persons, not just as scholars. At times, this meant a quiet dinner with a co-presenter, or, better yet, someone who was a vocal critic of his presentation. It even involved the highly unusual role of his being a designated driver for a group of scholars who wanted a night out on the town at the end of a long conference day. He began developing friendships that went beyond the formality of conference attendees, including seeing pictures of children and grandchildren, hearing war stories about campus politics, and sharing soccer coaching tips for six year old daughters.

Of course, that is not to suggest that schmoozing is a good substitute for a bad theory. With his new found friends, Waller had to present to his colleagues compelling reasons for his theory in light of the prevailing standards for evaluation within his disciplinary guild. But, he found that reason-giving and building relationships of mutual trust was a cogent combination in his conversations with secular scholars.

As an aside, and a plug for a forthcoming book, after years of my touting Jim Waller's effective interpersonal strategy for engaging secular scholars, Jim has recently written his own first-person account, in an essay titled "Getting into the Loaf: Engaging the Secular Academy." This essay can currently be accessed online at the website for the Center for Christian Studies at Gordon College (www.gordon.edu/ccs). In the fall of 2008, it will appear as one of eight case-study essays in a book I am co-editing, tentatively titled *Christians Engaging Culture; A Better Way*.

In summary, then, I am proposing that the "face-to-face respectful conversation" strategy for disseminating the results of Christian scholarship has exceptional promise if Christian scholars exemplify the virtues of humility and patience, and that rare combination of commitment to their own beliefs and openness to giving a respectful hearing to the contrary beliefs of other scholars who do not share their faith commitment. The orchestrating of such respectful conversation can have a redemptive influence in two ways. First, in a world where those who disagree with each other because of their differing traditions are more likely to violate each other than to talk, Christian scholars will be modeling the call to "speak the truth in love" and to listen respectfully to the contrary perspectives of others, both of which are a deep expression of what it means to love those committed to non-Christian traditions. Second, Christian perspectives on substantive issues will gain a fairer hearing in the academy, thereby increasing the possibility of Christian ways of thinking and acting having a redemptive influence in our world.

It may be helpful if I situate my proposal for respectful conversation in the academy within three alternatives for ways in which Christian scholars can engage, or choose not to engage, other scholars in the larger academy. David Claerbaut has classified these three strategies as assimilation, secession, and pluralism. In my own words, the assimilationist Christian scholars accommodate themselves to the prevailing secular dogmas of the academy. The secessionist Christian scholars view the academy as bankrupt due to the prevalence of secular dogmas, and withdraw to the more hospitable spaces occupied only by other Christian scholars. The Christian scholars committed to

pluralism want all perspectives, religious or secular, to be allowable in academic conversations, provided they can be discussed on the basis of publicly accessible standards for evaluation. I obviously embrace the pluralist position.

The most complete discussion of, and argument for this pluralist strategy is presented in George Marsden's book *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*. Nick Wolterstorff also argues for this position, which he calls "dialogic pluralism," "a plurality of entitled positions engaged in dialogue which is aimed at arriving at truth." Finally, an eminent scholar who is not committed to the Christian faith, Richard Bernstein, describes a similar pluralist strategy as "engaged fallibilistic pluralism," which represents his "vision of a democratic society." His proposed pluralism is "fallibilistic" because of "its rejection of all forms of fundamentalism that appeal to absolute certainty, whether they be religious or secular." And it is "engaged" because it requires "real encounter, a serious effort to understand what is other and different."

In a recent reflection on his many years of advocacy for the legitimacy of "Christian scholarship" in a pluralist academy, George Marsden makes two observations that are relevant to my emphasis on the importance of establishing personal relationships of mutual trust with those within the academy, and elsewhere, with whom you disagree. First, he now sees how his using the term "Christian scholarship" was "problematic in the academic world," partly because "When we say 'Christian' a lot of other people hear 'Fundamentalist.'" He now favors the phrase "intentionally faith-related scholarship." Secondly, he states that "Another thing <he> has learned over the years is the importance of the personal dimension if we <Christian scholars> are to have a positive influence within university culture," endorsing the idea "that for Christians to successfully engage culture, they must do so by personally getting to know and take seriously people of other outlooks;" further suggesting that "the personal dynamics of acting as a loving Christian are as important as what one says."

In light of George Marsden's extensive experience engaging non-Christian scholars in the larger academy, and the high regard that the larger academy has for his scholarly work,

we do well to heed his advice. And, one possible way to do that would be for you to implement my modest proposal for a pilot project that enables at least one of your faculty scholars to convene such a face-to-face conversation with other scholars around the results of her research.

But, I want to propose for your consideration this evening one more proposal; another “modest proposal” if you think in financial terms (we have done something like what I am about to propose at Gordon College at a cost of about \$200 per year). But, you may find it to be a radical proposal, since it may be foreign to the prevailing culture at your institution.

Respectful Conversations Outside the Classroom Orchestrated by Faculty and Co-Curricular Staff Working Collaboratively

Here is my second modest proposal. Gather a small Planning Committee, with equal representation from your faculty and co-curricular staff, to annually design a colloquium outside the classroom that will enable your entire college community to discuss some important contemporary issue. In light of the upcoming presidential election, one appropriate topic for next Fall might be “The Role of Religion in Politics” (it would be almost criminal, in my estimation, for that topic to be discussed only within Religion and/or Political Science classes). But, whatever the chosen topic for a given academic year, the conversations outside of class should be jointly orchestrated by faculty and co-curricular staff working in partnership.

What may make my second proposal radical is my suggestion of a collaborative initiative between faculty and co-curricular staff. My proposal is based on the writing of Gerald Graff in his book *Beyond the Culture Wars*. Graff bemoans the tendency in higher education to equate learning with what takes place within the standard course curriculum, ignoring the tremendous potential for significant learning outside of the classroom, not as something hoped-for, but as something planned on. Furthermore, he bemoans the fact that most courses in our curriculum are taught as “ships passing in the night,” thereby

camouflaging “disagreements between members of the college community.” His remedies for refining how we teach within the standard curriculum are interesting, such as periodic joint class meetings of two different classes. But, his more radical remedy, a remedy that fits well with my proposal, is that colleges orchestrate more conversations outside of the standard curriculum, through a well-designed co-curricular program that promotes broad conversations about important issues..

My experience during 40 years at four Christian colleges suggests that the obstacles to Graff’s co-curricular proposal are enormous, since most of our colleges do not have a strong history of collaborative educational efforts involving cooperation between teaching faculty and co-curricular staff (in student development, spiritual formation and athletics). These two groups are typically like “two ships passing in the night.” So, to implement my proposal, with distinction, in the spirit of Graff’s co-curricular strategy, a significant cultural change would have to take place at many of our colleges and universities. My proposal will not get off the ground if faculty and co-curricular staff view each other as competitors, both vying for institutional resources in a zero-sum game, or both vying for that precious commodity of student time. It will not even suffice for faculty and co-curricular staff to view themselves as co-existing. Rather, faculty and co-curricular staff must view themselves as co-educators, with the work of each group intentionally designed to enrich and complement the work of the other.

Lest you think my proposal for such collaboration between faculty and co-curricular staff is also pie-in-the sky thinking, let me share with you an actual example where this has been done with distinction. Based on the thought of Gerald Graff, Gordon College has implemented an annual Gordon College Symposium, coordinated by the Center for Christian Studies, which I used to direct, which calls for strong collaboration between teaching faculty and co-curricular staff.

In the spring semester each year at Gordon (since 1998), a week is devoted to this symposium, including evening programming all week and one full day (for which all classes are cancelled). An interdisciplinary symposium theme is announced each fall

(e.g., Who is my Neighbor?; The Coming of Global Christianity; Money and Possessions). Students are then turned loose to design symposium sessions that they judge to be pertinent to the given theme. The designs have included lecture type presentations (with students at the lectern and some faculty sitting in the student chairs), poetry readings, a panel of students from a given class dealing with an interdisciplinary issue related to the course material for that class, musical compositions, art exhibits, and other venues as varied as the imaginations of students (including a pig roast on the quad one year).

This annual event has featured as many as 70 student initiated projects over the one week period, with conversations about the materials presented expected as part of each design. Total student attendance for the week has exceeded 3000, for a student body of about 1500 (mostly on a voluntary basis, although some required chapel credits could be obtained for a limited number of events). The total cost for this week of events is minimal, since it typically involves no outside speakers. It is a co-curricular vehicle for students to take more responsibility for their own learning, and for making students, co-curricular staff, and faculty equal co-participants in the educational process. I am convinced that with a bit of imagination, the faculty, administration, and students at many Christian colleges can develop similar low-cost initiatives that enable these colleges to be welcoming places for respectful conversation outside of the classroom.

Conclusion

I have presented two relatively modest proposals for pilot projects that will foster respectful conversations on your campuses: (1) an on-campus seminar convened by one of your faculty members that will enable invited scholars having differing worldview commitments to discuss the results of their respective research on a common topic of interest; and (2) an annual colloquium outside the classroom, jointly designed by your faculty and co-curricular staff, that will enable your entire college community to discuss an important contemporary issue.

It is my hope and prayer that a number of you will be willing to take steps to try these two strategies on a modest experimental scale, and that you will become so excited about the harvest produced from these small “seeds,” that you will build on that harvest to create further venues for your colleges to become known nationally as welcoming places for respectful conversation.