

## **CHRISTIAN SCHOLARSHIP IN THE LARGER ACADEMY**

The title of my reflections begs for clarification as to how I am using the contentious phrase “Christian scholarship.” As I elaborate in chapter 22 of my book *Learning to Listen, Ready to Talk*, my short definition of “Christian scholarship,” borrowed from Stephen Evans, is that “Christian scholarship” is “any creative work (breaking new ground) that fosters Gods’ restorative purposes for Creation.”

But, as I elaborate in chapter 6 of my book, I have an expansive view of God’s restorative purposes for Creation, which , therefore, results in an expansive view of exemplifications of “Christian scholarship.” For example, a Christian biologist who is doing “technical research” on the nature of the mechanism of photosynthesis is doing “Christian scholarship” if she is motivated by a desire to understand better one aspect of God’s Creation (which I take to be one dimension of God’s restorative purposes). And, this is thereby “Christian scholarship,” despite the fact the results of such research are not influenced, as far as I know, by the Christian faith perspective of the scholar (there being no such thing as Christian photosynthesis, or Jewish photosynthesis, or Muslim photosynthesis, or atheistic photosynthesis).

At the other end of a continuum, Jim Waller from Whitworth College is also doing “Christian scholarship” when he proposes a theory as to “why ordinary people sometimes do extraordinary evil” that is informed by his Christian faith perspective. And, in this case, the very results of his research are informed by his Christian perspective because there is such a thing as a Christian view on why ordinary people sometimes do extraordinary evil.

Starting with that broad definition of “Christian scholarship,” the pressing question that I would like to focus on in our time together has to do with optimum ways to disseminate the results of that Christian scholarship to the larger academy, in a way that will enable such results to gain a fair hearing in those cases where the results are deeply informed by a Christian faith perspective. There are presently two primary strategies for such dissemination.

First, scholars seek to have the results of their work published in high quality journals or with good publishing houses. Second, 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 scholarship that is informed by a Christian faith perspective. 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 of any kind, Christian or otherwise. This means that it is too easy for scholars who are not Christians to ignore the scholarly work of scholars who bring a Christian faith perspective to bear on their scholarship, or, even to demonize such 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 scholars having differing faith perspectives 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.

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 scholars whose work is informed by a Christian faith perspective 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.

With all of that as background, let me now make a concret , practical suggestion for pilot program that will take this interpersonal approach to dissemination.

**Invite Visiting Scholars Having a Diversity of Faith Perspectives to Your Table at Abilene Christian University**

Let me hypothesize that you have a faculty member at ACU who wants to bring a Christian faith perspective to bear on an important topic in her academic discipline, and hopes that her faith perspective on that topic will gain a fair hearing in the larger academy, most members of which do not share her particular faith perspective.

Therefore, my modest concrete proposal is that after our hypothetical ACU 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 topic at hand. 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 scholarship that is informed by a Christian faith perspective to gain a fair hearing.

### **Hospitality in the Academy**

For the purposes of our upcoming discussion, let me add a few words relative to the Roundtable model for faculty dialogue that I introduced last night that has seated over 1000 faculty, secular and Christian in a two-to-one ratio at dinner seminars at places like UMass- Amherst, Harvard and MIT, to discuss issues at the intersection of current academic thought with Christian thought.

I have been around the block enough times to know that what works well in one setting, like Amherst or Cambridge (MA), where there is an abundance of excellent colleges and universities from which one can attract faculty, may not be applicable or feasible, like in Abilene (TX). But, a quick perusal of the website for Abilene revealed to me that there are a number of other colleges and universities in Abilene. So, you may want to consider the possibility of a pilot project that tries out this Roundtable model for area colleges and universities, sponsored by ACU. We can soon discuss whether you think this is feasible.

In the meantime, though, let me say a few more things about this hospitality model that I didn't say last night, for lack of time. First, a number of the Roundtable participants in Amherst and Cambridge expressed deep appreciation for the opportunity the Roundtables provided for them to talk about interdisciplinary issues that were broader than the more specialized issues within their respective academic disciplines. Here is how none participant put it: "The best part of this whole series, and especially last evening, is that it forces me to stop and think about some of the broader issues that I otherwise don't find time to do, being lost in the minutia of research and teaching. What should we be teaching is certainly a question all professors should ask themselves. It got me thinking whether I should be teaching something broader than the narrow technical astrophysics courses aimed at our majors and grad students, and whether we should be giving our majors and grad students a broader view of astronomy and physical science in general. I think the answer to both is yes." So, to the extent that ACU is interested in interdisciplinary consideration of important issues, this hospitality model could provide a vehicle for such interdisciplinary conversation.

Secondly, I don't want to leave you with the impression that all Roundtable participants gave high praise to the events. For example, a number of participants expressed concern regarding the limited amount of time given to the featured presenters. Most participants seemed to appreciate the fact that lengthy lectures were not given, allowing much time for conversation. But, some felt that it was a shame that so little time was given to hearing from such world renowned scholars. In a few cases, this problem was solved

when featured presenters agreed to give lectures or participate in debates a day before or after a Roundtable event.

A concern was also expressed that some participants tended to “hog the conversation.” What else is new? The suggestion was made that the moderator should tell the gathered group at the outset of the Roundtable that “each participant should talk only once until everyone has had a chance to talk.”

One suggestion for refining the program for future Roundtables was that the scope of participants should be expanded to enable prominent community leaders to engage with scholars on topics that can benefit from the insights of each group. Some of the participating scholars disagreed, reflecting their preference to be in the company of other scholars, feeling that otherwise the dialogue tends to be watered-down or distorted.

Finally, I want to share with you a comment made by one participant in the Roundtable that featured Dr. John Polkinghorne as the presenter: “The speaker [Polkinghorne] ... has a wonderful hospitality. By that I mean something far beyond politeness or graciousness. Rather, in his arguing for his own views and explanation as to why he does not hold certain alternative views he never puts anyone else down. Quite the reverse: he creates safe space for real encounter between people of differing views.” I share that quote with you as Exhibit A on behalf of my claim that Christians can have a profound redemptive influence in the larger academy if they orchestrate respectful conversations in which they model the pre-conditions I pointed to last night: humility, patience, love, and that rare combination of commitment and openness that the academy and the entire world need to see modeled by Christians.

So, there are two concrete models for sharing the results of the Christian scholarship of your faculty with the larger academy. But, a huge question remains unanswered. Will ACU provide its faculty with the time and resources needed to do excellent scholarship worthy of being shared with the larger academy? On the basis of my experience speaking or consulting at over 50 CCCU schools, I have reached the sad conclusion that too many

CCCU schools have created another insidious bifurcation, a bifurcation between teaching and scholarship. So, I close my remarks with some reflections on the need to overcome that bifurcation.

### *Teaching and Scholarship*

Scholarly work on the part of faculty at Christian colleges and universities is often not highly valued. The attitude I was exposed to early in my teaching career was something like, “scholarly work is fine, if you can find the time to do it, after you have done the really important work of teaching and institutional service” (after which, of course, there wasn’t much time).

A better attitude eventually emerged. Scholarship is good if it will make you a better teacher. Now, I certainly agree that being an active scholar can make you a better teacher (despite my exposure in graduate school to some excellent scholars who were deplorable teachers). But, to value faculty scholarship only as a means to the end of becoming a better teacher, is still an inadequate view. The more adequate view, in my estimation is that faculty scholarship can be valuable whether or not it leads to better teaching

My view on the role of faculty scholarship at Christian colleges and universities suggests that the mission statements for such schools are truncated. In my own words, the mission statements of most CCCU schools focuses on preparing students to be agents for God’s redemptive purposes. That is great, as far as it goes. But, it doesn’t go far enough. The mission of CCCU schools should also include enabling faculty to be agents for God’s redemptive purposes by means of scholarly work that is informed by a Christian faith perspective. My more comprehensive statement of mission gives equal values to teaching and scholarship. CCCU schools wishing to embrace this more comprehensive vision of the role of faculty must then take intentional steps to enable its faculty to be both effective teachers and productive scholars. This is much easier said than done. But, there are CCCU schools that have embraced this dual commitment, The King’s University College in Edmonton, Alberta being one such school.

