

REJECTING BIFURCATIONS: CHOOSING BOTH/AND RATHER THAN EITHER/OR

I remember well the belated going away party that the faculty at Messiah College threw for me in 1994. It was really a kind and gentle roast, consisting of many skits, each of which highlighted one of my idiosyncratic behaviors. It went long into the night, since my idiosyncrasies are legion.

In one skit, a group of six or so faculty members sat around in a circle. Tom was the first to speak up. He said, "I am here tonight because I am a bifurcator." He then went on to describe a sordid life devoted to bifurcation, after which the others, in chorus, said "we love you Tom". Mary then spoke up, saying "I also am a bifurcator," going on to describe the depths of despair to which her bifurcation had taken her. "We love you Mary," they all said in unison. Well, by now you get the idea.

That skit speaks volumes. For, if you dig beneath the surface of my recent book, *Learning to Listen, Ready to Talk: A Pilgrimage Toward Peacemaking*, you will see that it calls into question some very prevalent bifurcations (and one trifurcation). It is my attempt to keep together things that are commonly torn asunder. And, as I look back over my 40+ year career in Christian higher education, I think it is fair to say that much of my work has been devoted to rejecting such dichotomies,

So, this evening, I will briefly point to a number of bifurcations that my book calls into question, giving you just a brief glimpse of how I have tried to hold some things together, choosing both/and rather than either/or.

Learning and Living

I am amazed and dismayed at the extent to which college students (not to mention their teachers) make no connections between what they are learning in college, and their daily living. All too many of them view learning while in college as preparation for some

future, typically focusing on preparing for that first job, or for graduate school, or for a career.

Of course, such preparation for the future is important. But, exclusive preoccupation with such future-oriented learning misses the truth that what you are learning now should deeply inform your attempts to live well now.

Although I tried to explain in the Preface of my book that my narrative was most deeply informed by my conviction that “living and learning are of one piece”, that focus did not appeal to traditional Christian publishers. Witness the reaction of one Christian publisher to my manuscript: In effect he said, “Harold, we like what you have to say about justice and peace, and epistemological issues related to evaluating competing claims to knowledge [what another publisher called my “intellectual treatise,” found primarily in Parts II & III of my book], but we are not interested in those many elements of personal biography that you include in your manuscript, because we have found that personal memoirs sell only if you are famous.” He didn’t have to add that both he and I knew that I wasn’t famous.

But, he missed my whole point in writing. If I had just reworked and re-submitted my “intellectual treatise,” as he invited me to do, I would have bought into the bifurcation between learning and living. That surely would have been the easier path for me to choose. But, I was determined to reject that bifurcation, not by telling how it has to be both/and, but by showing how learning and living were inextricably intertwined in the life of one pilgrim.

To put this in more scholarly terms, the bifurcation between learning and living that I was calling into question can also be named the bifurcation between “the personal and the scholarly.” The received publishing wisdom is that you cannot write something that is both personal and scholarly within the covers of one book. But, that is precisely what I aspired to do. Readers will have to judge how well, or poorly, I accomplished that.

Let me now jump into a trickier bifurcation, one that is a cousin to the learning and living bifurcation. I refer to the bifurcation between claims to knowledge that are “personal” and claims to knowledge that can be discussed publicly.

Personal and Public Claims to Knowledge

[Another way to look at my rejection of this bifurcation is that I reject the common “two-realms theory of truth,” wherein one realm is the “objective realm,” containing truths that are public, and the other realm is the “subjective realm,” containing the truths of faith and religious experience that are only “private truths”]

One of the most destructive myths of our day is the idea that religion is a private matter; strictly a personal matter. In effect, this means that it is OK for religious people to hold privately to beliefs that are informed by their faith perspective, or to hold to them within their families or their religious communities, but such “religious beliefs” should not be introduced into public discourse.

The major problem with this myth is that it assumes that it is possible, and desirable, to eliminate “personal dimensions” from claims to knowledge. The eminent Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff rejects that assumption, in the following way.

Wolterstorff calls into question what can be called the “enlightenment ideal,” which he refers to as the quest for “generic human learning.” The idea of generic human learning is that when seeking after knowledge, we must strip ourselves of our particularities, such as our race, our gender, our personal biography, and the worldview tradition in which we are embedded, be that religious or secular, thereby seeking after learning that is “generically human.”

Not so, says Wolterstorff. First of all, it is impossible for any human being to strip herself of her particularities. And, to even try to do so would eliminate the possibility that her particularities could lead to a perspective on the issue at hand that is worthy of careful

consideration, along with the various perspectives that others may bring to the conversation because of their differing particularities. When persons having such differing perspectives are seated around the same table, talking to one another, they are engaging in what Wolterstorff calls “dialogic pluralism,” which he defines as “a plurality of entitled positions engaged in dialogue which is aimed at arriving at truth.”

If Wolterstorff is correct in asserting that particularities inform claims to knowledge, for all people, not just religious people, then there is no compelling reason why claims to knowledge informed by any one set of particularities, like claims that are informed by a religious faith perspective, should be excluded from public conversation.

But, you may ask, doesn't such “dialogic pluralism” lead us into some wild, unmanageable territory? Once you allow for the particularities of each one around the table to deeply inform their claims to knowledge, are you not opening the floodgates to all sorts of “kooky” claims? Initially, yes!

How can such “kookiness” be contained? Only by recognizing that public discourse should not focus on the “source” of one's claim to knowledge, but rather on the adequacy of the “content” of the claim, using publicly accessible criteria agreed to by those seated around the table.

This assertion on my part provides an element of coherence for my book narrative. On the one hand, I allow for a wide variety of “sources” of one's claims to knowledge, including elements of one's particularity, such as one's personal biography, and one's religious or secular worldview (the contours of which I lay out in Part I of my book). But, no claim to knowledge can be validated because of a supposed unimpeachable source, even if that source is the Bible (since others seated around the table may not accept the authority of the Bible). Competing claims to knowledge must be evaluated based on the presentation of public rationales that can be tested using agreed upon criteria for evaluation (as I suggest in Part II of my book).

Please indulge me if I close this section with a brief political commentary relative to the upcoming presidential election in the United States. What one of the two candidates has said about the proper relationship between faith and politics (I won't mention his name, but his initials are Barack Obama) is that religious views should be included in political discourse, but such views need to be presented in terms that are accessible to all citizens. I agree wholeheartedly.

But, you may now be asking, Isn't all that I have just said in rejecting the bifurcation between personal and public claims to knowledge a violation of the separation of Church and State? To that bifurcation I now turn.

Church and State

I may now be walking into a lion's den. I don't know how Baptists in Canada typically view the relationship between Church and State. But, I do know that in the United States, Baptists, especially Southern Baptists, are very strong on arguing for a high wall of separation between Church and State.

I agree that there ought to be a high wall of separation between Church and State at the institutional level. As institutions, the Church and State should not mix. But, as you may surmise from my rejection of the bifurcation between personal and public claims to knowledge, it is an error, in my estimation, to extrapolate beyond such institutional separation to the position that the stance that a politician takes on any given legislative issue should not be informed by any religious beliefs.

In brief, the stance that any politician takes on any public issue is informed by her particularities, which include her value commitments, whether those commitments be religious or secular. Politicians do not check their values in at the door when they enter the halls of legislature.

And, if that is the case, all value commitments, religious or secular, should be out on the table in political discourse. There should be an “even playing field,” where no political point of view is ruled out because it is informed by a religious faith perspective, Christian or otherwise.

Biblical Knowledge and Academic Disciplinary Knowledge

It was my growing dissatisfaction with this bifurcation that propelled me into Christian higher education 45 years ago last month. As I was completing my graduate studies, I realized that I had become an entrenched intellectual dualist. I had embraced two compartmentalized worlds of knowledge that never intersected. I had grown to love my world of biblical and theological knowledge (my “biblical insights,” for short). And, I had also grown to love the world of knowledge opened up to me by the academic disciplines (my “academic insights,” for short). But, these two worlds of knowledge were in airtight compartments, an impenetrable wall between them. My secular college cared little about my biblical insights, and my church feared my academic insights.

When I became aware of this insidious bifurcation, I began my lifelong quest to uncover connections between my biblical insights and my academic insights. In Christian higher education, we call this the quest for the “integration of knowledge,” which I take to be one of the two aspects of the meaning of that central phrase “integration of faith and learning” that is the most fundamental distinctive of Christian higher education. The second aspect of that distinctive emerges from my rejection of a common trifurcation, to which I now turn.

Thinking, Feeling and Doing

As I elaborate in the autobiographical Part I of my book, I have learned a great deal from each of three Christian theological traditions in which I have been immersed for extended periods of time. From the pietist Lutheran tradition in which I was raised, I learned the importance of “feeling deeply” about my Christian commitment. But, the underside of

that tradition was the temptation toward an anti-intellectualism that amounted to a “mindless emotionalism.”

Therefore, it was like a breath of fresh air when I was later immersed in the Reformed Christian tradition, a tradition that highly valued “thinking deeply,” where intellectual pursuits were taken to also be an act of worship. But, the underside of that tradition was the temptation toward an “arid intellectualism” (I have some Reformed friends who haven’t felt anything in years).

Still later in my Christian pilgrimage, I was immersed in the Anabaptist/Mennonite community. The overarching view of my new Anabaptist friends, put into my own words, was that what you think about deeply, and feel about deeply doesn’t amount to a hill of beans unless you “live it out.” But, this focus on “doing” also has an underside, the temptation toward an activism that is not deeply informed by theological understanding.

In light of my immersion in these three great Christian traditions, I want it all. I want to wed thinking, feeling and doing in my own life, and in the lives of my students. My rejection of the trifurcation of thinking, feeling, and doing, can be expressed positively as my commitment to what we in Christian higher education call “holistic education,” which is the “personal integration” that I take to be the second aspect of the meaning of the phrase “integration of faith and learning.” In high faluting terms, it is the integration of the cognitive, affective, and volitional aspects of what it means to be a “whole person.” In more colloquial terms, it is the wedding of the “head, the heart, and the hands.”

To make this section of my presentation more concrete, let me point to a significant bit of mischief that is perpetrated at many Christian college campuses by those who live by this trifurcation that I have rejected. I will make my point by telling you a true story.

At one college where I served, the student development/spiritual formation staff had designed and implemented a Voluntary Service program that was flourishing. In any given academic year, about 85% of the students were actively involved in one or more

off-campus service activities, ranging from working in soup kitchens, serving terminally ill patients in hospice settings, and working for a local chapter of Amnesty International.

I was asked to chair a committee to review this program, in light of the growing national emphasis, in the States, on “service/learning” programs. Our committee recommended that students who volunteered for a particular service opportunity be encouraged (not even required) to take courses related to their choice of service. For example, students involved with the local Amnesty International chapter would be encouraged to take courses in international relations and economic development.

The student development/spiritual formation staff were not pleased with our recommendation. In effect, their response was that students just want to serve, they just want to “get their hands dirty,” so to speak. They don’t want to study about what they are doing. What an insidious bifurcation between “thinking” and “doing,” leading to the bizarre result that students who wanted to serve in soup kitchens were not encouraged to explore why there are soup kitchens in the first place.

This example is a special case of the common bifurcation between the work of the faculty and the work of the student development/spiritual formation staff that is very prevalent at many Christian colleges, a bigger topic that I cannot deal with at this time.

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.

Saving Gospel and Social Gospel

In the pietist Lutheran tradition in which I was raised, God's redemptive purposes for the world essentially boiled down to one purpose: that men and women may be saved, through the person and work of Jesus Christ. I certainly still embrace that purpose. But, I now believe that is a truncated view of God's redemptive purposes.

All of God's creation groans for redemption (Romans 8: 19-22). The comprehensive message of God's saving grace (the "good news" of the gospel) is that through the person and work of Jesus Christ, God intends to redeem all of Creation (Colossians 1: 15-20). This comprehensive view of God's redemptive purposes was captured most eloquently by Abraham Kuyper in his inaugural address as the President of the Free University of Amsterdam in the late 19th century, when he said, "There is not a square inch on the

whole plane of human existence over which Christ, who is Lord of all, does not proclaim: ‘This is mine’.”

According to this broad view of God’s redemptive purposes, Christians are called not only to evangelize by pointing men and women to the saving grace of Jesus Christ. We are also called to be agents for social justice, for peace and reconciliation where conflict reigns, for the flourishing of the natural creation, for increasing the storehouse of knowledge about all aspects of God’s Creation, as well as being agents for beauty where ugliness reigns.

If you also embrace this broad view of God’s redemptive purposes, then the insidious bifurcation between the social gospel and the good news of salvation for individuals is nonsense.

My Will and God’s Will

If Christians are in fact called to be agents for God’s redemptive purposes (broadly defined), as I believe we are, this emphasis on the importance of human agency calls into question another prominent bifurcation on which I was raised in a pietist Lutheran church, the bifurcation between “my will” and “God’s will.”

I was bought up with the idea that God wishes to obliterate my will as a human being, replacing my will with God’s will. I was led to believe that to be a mature Christian, you had to give up your will. But, that would make me something like a stone, an object without a will. God made me a person, and having a will is a God-given attribute of personality—the ability to formulate and execute purposes.

To be sure, my will can be contrary to God’s will because of my sinfulness. But, the ideal is not the obliteration of my will, but the transformation of my will into the likeness of Christ (II Corinthians 3:18; 5:17). What God desires is a synergy of our wills, our being

“on the same page,” so to speak, so that we can be “partners” in the redemption that God wills for all of Creation.

And, as you may have noted from my book, I believe this partnering with God is a dynamic process: As I walk each day, faithful to my present understanding of how I can contribute, today, to the fostering of God’s redemptive purposes, it is in this very process of walking that I gain greater insight into how I can continue to be an agent for God’s purposes.

Leading and Following

I have some hard earned opinions about this bifurcation, with some battle scars to show for it. In a nutshell, I disagree with the view that the leader is the person who needs to be followed.

The fundamental problem with this view of leadership, often called the “command-and-control” model, is that the results of such leadership are only as good as the leader.

To be sure, a good “leader” must start with a vision. But, she must embrace the possibility that the giftedness of her “followers” will enable them to contribute to the shaping, and even improving of that vision, and then to its effective implementation. In that very process, the leader will sometimes be following the good ideas of those he supervises, thereby blurring the bifurcation between leader and follower. The problem with the leader taking up all the decision space is that the final decision will be only as good as the leader. If the leader shares that decision space with her followers, the final decision can reflect the collective gifts of leader and followers.

Commitment and Openness

I have saved the most fundamental bifurcation for last, the bifurcation between commitment and openness. My book is essentially an invitation to respectful

conversation between those who disagree with one another. That invitation will not be accepted by anyone who embraces the bifurcation between commitment and openness.

The synergy between commitment and openness that I commend is captured most eloquently 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.*”

Such a combination of commitment and openness, which is a pre-condition for my “respectful conversation” project, is exceedingly rare these days, no matter where you look (in colleges and universities, places of worship, homes, the halls of legislature, anywhere). Persons typically gravitate to one of the two poles, with destructive results in either case.

Openness without commitment leads to stark relativism: you have your beliefs, I have mind; end of conversation. Commitment without openness leads to fanaticism, even terrorism (as C. S. Lewis has said, to which recent world events tragically testify: “those who are most ready to die for a cause are also those most ready to kill for it”).

My dream for Christian colleges and universities, like Atlantic Baptist University, is that they be beacons of light in the darkness of these unacceptable extremes, modeling both commitment and openness in respectful conversations between persons who disagree with one another.

