

Dialogic Discourse: Christian Scholars Engaging the Larger Academy

By Harold Heie

Why is it that ordinary people sometimes do extraordinary evil? I cannot imagine a more timely and urgent question in the light of horrendous conflict in our world. This question is the focus of research that has been done by Jim Waller, a professor of psychology at Whitworth College (WA), in his scholarly specialty of Holocaust and Genocide Studies.

Waller notes that in the contemporary debate in Holocaust and Genocide Studies, alternative theories as to why ordinary people sometimes do extraordinary evil typically propose an “alteration process,” which can take one of two forms. One form includes “divided-self” theories which hypothesize that an ordinary person can commit extraordinary evil by creating some “other self” to do that evil. An alternative alteration theory rejects the idea that a person can create a second self. Rather, the alteration process that takes place is that the primary, and only self, is altered fundamentally as a result of the power of potent social forces, like those unleashed by Hitler in Nazi Germany.

Surely Waller’s choice to study holocausts and genocides and his posing of this vexing question reflects, at least in part, his commitment as a Christian. That is not remarkable, since the choices of all scholars as to the topics they wish to study and the questions they then wish to pose often are influenced by their worldview commitments, whether they be religious or secular.

What is remarkable, at least within the larger academy, is that Waller’s response to this question is informed deeply by his Christian faith commitment. In contrast to the

prevalent alteration theories, Dr. Waller has proposed a theory that is informed by Christian teachings on human sinfulness.¹ Has Waller gone too far, allowing the very substance of his research (not just his choice of topic and question) to be informed by his religious beliefs? A common response of non-religious scholars, and some religious scholars, in the academy is “yes.” The results of scholarship that are informed by religious faith commitments have no place in academic discourse. This essay first presents an argument that rejects that response, and then suggests an interpersonal dialogic strategy of orchestrating “respectful conversations” for disseminating to the larger academy the results of scholarship that is informed deeply by a religious faith perspective, Christian or otherwise.

An Argument for Allowing Religious Perspectives in the Academy

At first glance, the present state of the academy would seem to hold promise for allowing consideration of scholarly claims that are informed by religious faith perspectives. The good news, apparently, is the valid postmodern insight that many claims to knowledge are influenced by the social location of the scholar making the claim. Drawing on the work of Nicholas Wolterstorff, it can be argued persuasively that, whereas the modern enlightenment ideal was to seek after generically 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

¹ James Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

which she is embedded, and her personal biography.² 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 typically this new hospitality to a plurality of perspectives has not been extended to allow any “religious perspectives.” Logically, all perspectives should be allowed around the table. Why, then, are religious perspectives typically excluded?

There is no easy answer to this question. I will concentrate on one aspect of a response that may at least apply to some Christian scholars (other religious scholars can formulate their own responses). Christians, including not a few scholars, 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. I will argue soon that Christians, including scholars, can best overcome that perception by modeling respectful conversation that starts by building personal relationships of mutual trust. But first, I will outline how I would respond in the abstract (outside the context of discussing scholarly results for a particular research project) to those scholars who believe that there is no place in the academy for scholarship that is informed deeply by a religious faith perspective.

² Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Scholarship Grounded in Religion” in *Religion, Scholarship, & Higher Education: Perspectives, Models, and Future Prospects*, Andrea Sterk, ed., (Notre Dame, In: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 6-7.

First, I would point out that it is not just religious scholars who come to the table with worldview commitments. All scholars come with such commitments, including the staunchest proponents of philosophical naturalism. All of us around the table have fundamental beliefs, albeit differing ones, about the nature of reality, our place within that reality, and how one can know any of these things. Therefore, no particular worldview should be privileged, *a priori*, in a way that discounts, without discussion, a proposal influenced by a differing worldview.

Secondly, for those scholars who are wed to extreme forms of empiricism that preclude claims to knowledge that cannot be directly tested by the senses, I would point out that we all share a number of beliefs that are not empirically verifiable directly, such as the belief that human rights should not be dependent on race or gender (or any other aspects on our particularities), or the belief that it is wrong to abuse infants. Surely, we would not preclude discussion of such beliefs and their implications just because one can point to a worldview, religious or secular, as the “source” of such beliefs.

Thirdly, I would propose that none of us around the table are “disembodied intellects” (what Harvard pastor Peter Gomes is reported to have called a “brain on a stick”). Human experience is too rich to be reduced to the cognitive. We need to be open to insights from a variety of sources, like our feelings, life experiences, worldview commitments (religious or secular), and even the products of our active conscious or subconscious imaginations.

“Time out,” you may say. Am I not welcoming all kinds of kooks to the table? Does this open-ended variety of potential sources of claims to knowledge open wide the floodgates to bizarre claims in academic discourse? Not if all those around the table have

agreed on what I take as one inviolable ground rule for academic discourse: Any claim to knowledge must be supported by a public rationale, independent of its supposed source, and that rationale must then be evaluated on the basis of publicly accessible standards for evaluation (for example, the standards for evaluation that are presently operative within a given disciplinary guild). Some elaboration is called for.

No claim to knowledge is self-evidently true based on a proclaimed unimpeachable source, even if the supposed source is the Bible or some special type of “revelation from God.” Some Christians, claiming such sources, have made blatantly false claims, such as claiming the superiority of the white race. And some Christians have performed egregious acts destructive of God’s redemptive purposes in the name of special claims to knowledge, from the Crusades to Waco. Appeal to a particular source of knowledge will not suffice in public discourse. Rather, one needs to present a rationale for one’s knowledge claim in terms that can be understood by partners in conversation and can be evaluated using publicly accessible standards for evaluation.

This distinction between genesis and evaluation of a claim to knowledge means that Christians wanting to engage publicly in respectful conversation should not play the “Bible trump card,” ending the conversation quickly by asserting, “here is what the Bible says.” Please note that I am not saying that what a Christian scholar believes about the issue at hand should not be informed by her understanding of the Bible. The biblical record certainly should inform her thinking. But we must make a distinction between the results of Christian thinking and dissemination of those results in a secular setting. Appealing directly to what the Bible says may be convincing in an adult Sunday School class in a Christian church. But it carries no weight, nor should it, when few, if any, of

the other persons involved in the given conversation share a commitment to the Christian faith and its belief in biblical authority. Even if the source of the claim is my understanding of biblical teachings, it must be evaluated, along with competing claims, using appropriate publicly accessible standards for evaluation.

This is not to suggest that the issue of the “source” of a knowledge claim is totally irrelevant to its evaluation. It is legitimate to ask whether a particular claim to knowledge is produced by human mental (cognitive) faculties that are functioning properly. For example, when observing some phenomenon that begs for explanation, are the person’s perceptual processes reliable? Does she see adequately the phenomenon that is occurring? It may be reasonable to question a report about the number of geese on my front lawn given by a person suffering from double vision. Or, when a person with normal vision is reporting on something she saw six months ago (like the number of geese on my front lawn), is her memory reliable? But, assuming such “tests” are passed, my major point here is that the validity of the claim to knowledge should be evaluated on the basis of publicly accessible standards, not its supposed source.

Those are the arguments I would present (in the abstract) for the validity of allowing for academic discourse relative to scholarly results that are informed deeply by a religious faith perspective. I live with the hope that, over time, an increasing number of non-religious scholars will find such arguments to be persuasive. But in the meantime, I commend, for consideration by Christian scholars, the modeling of an interpersonal strategy for dialogic discourse within the larger academy that goes beyond abstract arguments.

Modeling Respectful Dialogic Discourse Within the Academy

Given the predisposition of many in the larger academy to not allow for academic discourse about scholarly work that is informed deeply by a religious faith perspective, much fine work by Christian scholars is ignored or dismissed abruptly without being given a fair hearing. How can that tendency be overcome? By orchestrating more face-to-face conversations between Christian and secular scholars that start with 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.

What I envision is Christian scholars 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 open to learning something from them. It is my hope that within 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.

To be more specific, in my own attempts at such dialogic discourse, I would attempt to model the following ways of talking with others, which are characteristics of what I take to be “respectful conversation.”³

- I will try to listen well, providing each person with a welcoming space to express her perspective on the issue at hand.
- I will present my perspective on the issue with a non-coercive style that invites further conversation with those who disagree.

³ Harold Heie, “Respectful Conversations” in *Learning to Listen, Ready to Talk: A Pilgrimage Toward Peacemaking* (New York: iUniverse, 2007), 80-94. This volume provides more nuanced elaborations on the content of this essay.

- I will seek to understand differing perspectives, religious or secular, by entering empathetically into the assumptions that distinguish other views and trying to grasp the rationales for those differences.
- I will seek some common ground with those who disagree with me, while also seeking to illuminate our differences.
- I will try to demonstrate respect and concern for the well being of all participants in the conversation, even when significant common ground is unattainable due to irreconcilable differences in perspective.

But there are three prior conditions that Christian scholars must satisfy for such respectful conversations to be possible. First, they must 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.⁴

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”⁵). One of the most pressing needs in our world today is for all

⁴ Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science & Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 138.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), 28.

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 return to my summary of the scholarly work of Jim Waller. Recall that the theory Waller has proposed for why ordinary people sometimes do extraordinary evil was informed deeply by his Christian faith perspective. I once asked Jim how he managed to get an elite group of mostly secular Holocaust and Genocide scholars to give his proposed theory a fair hearing. He said that it helped that he volunteered to be the “designated driver.” I was dumbfounded and begged for elaboration.⁶

In brief, Waller reported his perception that his theory has gained a respectful hearing with his secular colleagues, despite its being informed by a Christian faith perspective, largely because he sought to exemplify “intellectual, worldview and relational humility” in his personal engagement with these scholars. 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

⁶ For Professor Waller’s first-person account of what I only summarize in this essay, see “Getting into the Loaf: Engaging the Secular Academy.” The Center for Christian Studies at Gordon College, www.gordon.edu/ccs.

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 shared with me some details of the interpersonal dynamics that have 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 newfound 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 relationship-building was a cogent combination in his conversations with secular scholars.

Therefore, I propose that the “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 orchestration 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 deep expressions of what it means to love those committed to non-Christian traditions. Secondly, 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.

Situating my Proposal for Dialogic Discourse in the Academy

In over-simplified terms, many Christian scholars engage, or choose not to engage, other scholars in the larger academy in one of three ways.⁷ Assimilationist Christian scholars accommodate themselves to the prevailing secular dogmas of the academy. Seccessionalist 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. A third way is that of dialogic pluralism, as has been proposed by Nicholas Wolterstorff, George Marsden, and others.⁸ Christian scholars committed to dialogic pluralism want all perspectives, religious or secular, to be allowable in academic conversations, provided they can be discussed on the basis of

⁷ See David Claerbaut, *Faith and Learning on the Edge: A Bold New Look at Religion in Higher Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 77-89.

⁸ Wolterstorff, 14; George Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Richard Bernstein, “Religious Concerns in Scholarship: Engaged Fallibilism in Practice” in *Religion, Scholarship, & Higher Education: Perspectives, Models, and Future Prospects*, Andrea Sterk, ed., (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 150-158.

publicly accessible standards for evaluation. Obviously I embrace the dialogic pluralist position.

It is important for me to make clear that my proposal for more dialogic discourse in the academy is not to call into question the two time-honored means for Christian scholars to disseminate the results of their work to the larger academy. Christian scholars should continue to have the results of their work published in high quality journals or good publishing houses. They should also continue to present papers at academic conferences, engaging conferees in some dialogue in the question-and-answer sessions that usually follow such presentations. But I now propose that in addition to, not in place of, these tried-and-true strategies, more Christian scholars should engage in the more interpersonal in-depth dialogic discourse that I call for.

In a recent reflection on his past (and present) advocacy of the legitimacy of Christian scholarship in a pluralist academy⁹, 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 with whom you disagree. First, he now sees how his using the term “Christian scholarship” was “problematic in the academic world,” partly because “[w]hen we say ‘Christian’ a lot of other people hear ‘Fundamentalist.’” Now he favors the phrase “intentionally faith-related scholarship.” Secondly, he states that “[a]nother 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.” Now Marsden endorses the idea “that for Christians to successfully engage culture, they must do so by personally getting to know and take

⁹ George Marsden, “Being an Intentional Christian Scholar Today,” unpublished manuscript, presented at a Whitworth College (WA) conference on *Christians Engaging Culture: Models for Public Policy Practitioners, Politicians and Scholars*, October 25, 2005.

seriously people of other outlooks,” further suggesting that “the personal dynamics of acting as a loving Christian are as important as what one says.”

Other Examples of Academic Dialogic Discourse

The good experience of Jim Waller is not idiosyncratic. David Thom, a campus minister at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, lamented the lack of genuine engagement between Christian scholars and the larger preponderance of secular scholars at the five highly regarded colleges and universities in the Amherst area. He developed a program to “explore the intersection of current academic thought and Christian thought,” using an unusual Roundtable format that fostered respectful conversations. No lectures are given. Rather, prior to an evening meeting on an announced theme, all invited participants receive some brief initial reflections (electronically) from a featured scholar (or two, in some cases). The meeting, scheduled for a dining room, then begins with fifteen minutes devoted to opening comments by the featured scholar (or 30 minutes for two featured scholars), primarily to identify the questions that beg for discussion. This is followed by 60 minutes of small group discussions prompted by these questions, over a meal around dining room tables. Then the meeting concludes with 60 minutes of moderated discussion as one large group, which usually numbers between 45 and 60.

This program originating in Amherst has now expanded to Harvard and MIT, and has featured such notable Christian scholars as Jean Bethke Elshtain, John Polkinghorne, and Owen Gingerich. The expressions of appreciation from participating scholars, religious and secular, for being provided the opportunity to engage one another in this hospitable conversational manner have been numerous.¹⁰

¹⁰ More information on these Roundtables, and an extensive listing of evaluative comments from attendees, can be accessed at www.amherstroundtable.org and www.cambridgeroundtable.org.

The Center for Christian Studies (CCS) at Gordon College has also sponsored events that emphasize this conversational approach. Two examples are noteworthy, with my brief report containing some hard-earned advice. The first event, in the late 1990s, was an interfaith dialogue, co-sponsored by the CCS and the Interreligious Affairs Department of the American Jewish Committee, which brought together Jewish and Christian scholars and public leaders to discuss “The Role of Religion in Politics and Society.” The Saturday day-long round table conversation about some contentious issues, like “Prayer in the Public Schools,” was stimulating and respectful.¹¹

But our program did not get off to a good start during the keynote event on Friday night, which drew a large community audience. At that opening event, two prominent Christian public leaders presented, in no uncertain terms, their diametrically opposed views on the question, “Do Religion and Politics Mix?” They were dogmatic and doctrinaire, not giving the slightest evidence of wanting to learn from one another. That did not detract from the good conversations we had on Saturday, but those conversations could have been richer if these two keynote speakers had shown up on Saturday, as was our expectation, to engage, and possibly even learn from, those we had gathered for conversation. The lesson we learned was that when inviting guests to such events, it is best to choose participants who are more committed to conversation than to pontification, to education rather than indoctrination.

A second fruitful conversation is one that the CCS orchestrated in historic Fanueil Hall in Boston around the theme of “International Public Policy.” A splendid group of prominent Christian and secular scholars gathered for a round table conversation on

¹¹ See Harold Heie, A. James Rudin, Marvin Wilson, eds. *The Role of Religion in Politics and Society* (Center for Christian Studies at Gordon College and the Interreligious Affairs Department of the American Jewish Committee, 1998).

controversial sub-topics, including “The Middle East: How to Heal Tensions,” “Reparations for Slavery and its Aftermath,” and “Global Environmental Policy and Global Warming.” The small group round table conversation, observed by a large audience representing a number of the Boston colleges and universities, was very respectful and fruitful. So was the subsequent Q&A session with the larger audience, until the very end, when an interrogator and one of the round table members engaged in a nasty shouting match. Of course, shouting matches can take place in small groups as well. But it is my intuition that the follow-up to our round table conversation would have been more fruitful and respectful if we had all adjourned to relatively small concurrent break-out groups, organized around several announced leading questions (as in the Amherst model for discourse), giving each audience member the option of choosing one break-out group (or two or three successive break-out groups, as time allowed).

My CCS experience with trying to orchestrate respectful conversation prompts me to give one final word of advice: before engaging in conversation, announce to those gathered your expectations for respectful conversation (if you think this goes without saying, it does not). To be sure, this can be done poorly and in a condescending manner. But I have found from my own attempts to do so that this can also be done in a winsome manner that focuses on the idea (all too often ignored in our time and culture) that showing respect for one another is how humans ought to engage one another. In my own opening comments of this nature, I would first highlight two principles based on the work of Jurgen Habermas¹²: “reciprocity and mutual recognition”—each person should take into account the interests and viewpoints of all others present and give them equal weight

¹² See Jurgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990).

to his or her own interests and viewpoint; and “equal voice”—each person is given equal opportunity to speak. I have at times even been so bold as to share the characteristics of a respectful conversation that I enumerated above. I have found that making clear my expectations for how we should engage one another can effectively disarm those who have come looking for a fight.

These are some further examples of reasonably successful attempts to orchestrate respectful conversations among scholars, along with a bit of advice learned the hard way. It is my hope and prayer that more Christian scholars will accept the challenge to engage other scholars in such interpersonal in-depth dialogic discourse.¹³

¹³ This essay originally appeared in volume XXXVII:3 (Spring 2008) of the *Christian Scholar's Review*, 347-356 (Copyright 2008 *Christian Scholar's Review*). The author thanks the *Christian Scholar's Review* for their permission to post this essay on this website.