Learning from faith: Christian scholarship in the context of the American secular academy

Aprendendo pela fé: o estudo e o aprendizado cristão no contexto da academia secular norte-americana

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ABSTRACT
The present article seeks to extend the dialogue about faith and learning to the space of American public universities where faith, in particular, is problematized by the secular nature of such institutions. The author shall argue that universities should maintain a curious posture about the role of religious convictions in the teaching and learning of their scholars and students, so that they may better appreciate the value of the distinct contributions of Christians in their pluralistic and democratic spaces. The author offers a brief account of the important historical developments of the integration model of faith and learning, while considering the implications of the model in light of the customs and traditions of the American academy. Finally, a modest proposal shall be articulated by which Christians may live their religious convictions while members of these secular institutions of higher learning.

Keywords: Christian scholarship; integration of faith and learning; academic freedom; American secular universities.

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RESUMO
O presente artigo visa estender o diálogo a respeito da fé e do aprendizado ao espaço das universidades públicas norte-americanas onde a fé, particularmente, é problematizada pela natureza secular de tais instituições. O autor argumentará que se faz necessário que a universidade mantenha uma postura curiosa sobre o papel das convicções religiosas no ensino e na aprendizagem de seus docentes e discentes, de forma que a mesma possa melhor apreciar o valor da contribuição distinta dos cristãos no seu espaço pluralístico e democrático. O autor oferece um breve relato dos importantes desenvolvimentos históricos relacionados ao modelo de integração (integration model) da fé com o aprendizado, considerando as implicações do mesmo à luz dos costumes e tradições da academia norte-americana. Por fim, uma proposta modesta será articulada por meio da qual os cristãos possam vivenciar suas convicções religiosas enquanto membros de instituições seculares de ensino superior.

Palavras-chave: estudo e aprendizado cristão (Christian scholarship); integração da fé com o aprendizado; liberdade acadêmica; universidades seculares norte-americanas.

RESUMEN
Este artículo tiene como objetivo extender el diálogo sobre la fe y el aprendizaje al espacio de las universidades públicas norteamericanas en donde particularmente la fe es problematizada por la naturaleza secular de esas instituciones. El autor argumentará que es necesario que la universidad mantenga una postura de curiosidad sobre el rol de las convicciones religiosas en la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de sus profesores y estudiantes, de manera que pueda apreciar mejor el valor de la contribución distinta de los cristianos en su espacio pluralista y democrático. El autor ofrece una breve reseña de los importantes acontecimientos históricos relacionados al modelo de integración (integration model) de la fe al aprendizaje, teniendo en cuenta sus implicaciones a la luz de las costumbres y tradiciones de la academia norteamericana. Por último, el articula una modesta propuesta por la cual los cristianos puedan vivir sus convicciones religiosas como los miembros de instituciones seculares de educación superior.

Palabras clave: estudio y aprendizaje cristianos (erudición cristiana); integración de la fe y el aprendizaje; la libertad académica; las universidades seculares norteamericanas.

Religion informs the lives and choices of people of faith. It offers a lens through which many people see and interact with the world around them, including the world of higher education. Jacobsen and Jacobsen (2008) posit that rather than diminishing in relevance and disappearing, religion seems to be reemerging in American public life in the twenty first century. Their assessment is that we now live in a postsecular world: “what [they] mean by the term postsecular is the simple fact that secularization as a theory about the future of human society seems increasingly out of touch with realities on the ground”
(JACOBSEN; JACOBSEN, 2008, p. 10). One of such realities is the observable change in the religious landscape of America. In recent decades, the United States has become the most religiously diverse nation in the world (ECK, 2001, p. 4). According to sociologist Stephen Prothero (2007, p. 5) “religion is emerging alongside race, gender, and ethnicity as one of the key identity markers of the 21st century”.

This reality points to practical and critical questions that the academy is primed to contend with: in an educational era devoted to inclusion and pluralism, how does the modern public university factor in and make room for religious believers who see their faith as an integral element of their scholarship? What are the implications of such relationship between one’s faith and one’s scholarly pursuits, particularly when carried out in the context of secular universities (i.e., public, non-religiously affiliated institutions)? Moreover, how do professing Christians make meaning of their scholarship when relying on their faith as an informational basis for the questions they ask and the academic projects they engage in?

Religious students and scholars are ever so present within American colleges and universities, not only private and/or faith-based but also public (i.e., secular). Many report to see their faith as an important facet of who they are. Thus, it becomes important for the university to maintain a curious posture about the role faith plays in the scholarship that students and educators engage in. In my view, a contrary posture would indicate a denial of an important reality in American higher education: that religion is not only resurging in the private spiritual practices of individual citizens, but that it accompanies many believers as they attempt to carry out their scholarly activities and live out their religious identity in the public realm of secular universities.

Since the integration of faith and learning is not a new phenomenon in the academy, in this paper I will first offer a brief account of important historical developments that should help us to conceptualize what is meant by the integration (or interaction) of faith and learning. I will then proceed to explore some of the implications of such integration in light of the particular customs and traditions of the American academy. Finally, I will attempt to articulate a modest proposal, preliminary at best, by which Christian students and scholars, committed to what their faith means to their scholarship, may attempt to live out their convictions while contributing to the civic and pluralistic nature of secular

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1 The results of a recent survey conducted by Neil Gross and Solon Simmons (2008, p. 22-25) indicate that American professors who consider themselves atheists and agnostics are only a minority in the academy, with the number of those expressing religious beliefs varying across types of universities and different disciplines. What is worth noting is that the authors indicate that more than half of the professors who were surveyed describe themselves as believers in God. And of those who do so, about a third of them describe themselves as born-again Christians.
institutions of higher education. Moreover, in light of the fact that many faith-based universities may already operate under the accepted premise that faith and learning should be integrated in education, this paper will extend the conversation on faith and learning to public universities where such matters are potentially problematized by the secular nature of these institutions.

My hope is also that through a better understanding of how Christians view their educational calling or mission, a conversation might be furthered whereby the academy may see the value in the unique contributions of believers in the public space of institutions of higher learning. Therefore, I will argue that the contributions of Christian students and scholars have the potential to meaningfully add to the diversity of knowledge produced and shared within these pluralistic and democratic communities of teaching and learning.

The conceptual foundation of my paper will rest on the Protestant, Reformed understanding of how faith and learning can be cogently integrated into the life and scholarship of believers. I must also acknowledge that American higher education is also indebted to the work of Catholic thinkers and educators. In that respect, this conversation will flourish in the following pages as mostly an ecumenical attempt to understand the role of faith in the scholarly experiences of believers – Catholics and/or Protestants – in the context of the American secular academy.

**Christian Scholarship and Other Influential Forces: A Brief Historical Account**

Theologian Andrew Walls recounts that the origins of Christian Scholarship is tied to “evangelistic theology – scholarship in mission, made necessary by mission” (WALLS, 2002, p. 167). According to the author, Christian scholarship came to being with the expansion of the Christian mission to the Greek world, which broadened the role of theology as the early Christians attempted to articulate their faith to people who had been shaped by a Greek inheritance centuries before Christ (WALLS, 2002, p. 166-167). Walls adds that in a market of religions Christianity was but one option among many. So, the task of early Christians (including, in particular, the Apostle Paul’s relentless work of apologetics) was, to a great extent, to make sure that the story about a Jewish carpenter was not distorted, exaggerated, or misunderstood (WALLS, 2002, p. 167). Thus, one might argue that this was, in essence, the early expression of Christian scholarship: a scholarship tied, as it still is, to the missionary nature of Christianity with the intention to best represent the personhood and divinity of Jesus Christ.

Likewise, American public higher education is indebted to a rich tradition of the Christian Church, which established, hundreds of years ago, institutions of education for the training of young minds.
institutions of education for the training of young minds. The Catholic Church in particular can be credited for the establishment of many European medieval universities from which our modern universities stem. However, from a historical perspective, it is also important to note that even the earlier Catholic universities of Europe in the Middle Ages had to contend with radical ideas, heresy, and looming sedition, which caused the church to keep a close eye on the secularizing tendencies pervading the Christian academy since its inception (JACOBSEN; JACOBSEN, 2008, p. 8).

Although other important historical developments have helped to shape the character and purposes of the American academy, a major shift happened in higher education from the Classical to the Enlightenment periods: a shift from God-centeredness (faith in God) to man-centeredness (faith in reason), which dramatically redefined the scholarly task of those in the academy (DIEKEMA, 2000, p. 1-2). In fact, one might argue that such man-centeredness in scholarly pursuits resulted in an overreliance on reason alone, often forcing religion to the margins of academic conversations. Under the premise that religion could thwart a truly liberal education, compromise the attainment of individual autonomy, frustrate the objective aims of academic freedom, and possibly encroach on the legal boundaries that separates (at least in the United States) religious from secular matters, the academy sustained for some time, albeit often in subtle ways, its commitment to relegating religion to a lower status of rational justification. But what were the consequences of that?

I am inclined to agree with former president of Calvin College, Anthony Diekema, that while religion had for some time been perceived as a threat to liberal academic pursuits, its marginalization, in effect, has threatened academic freedom itself (DIEKEMA, 2000, p. 38). Moreover, Diekema explains that from within and outside of the academy as well as from within public, private, and religious institutions, the phenomena of political correctness, prior restraint, censorship, and ideological imperialism, have demanded (sometimes forcefully, but more often subtly) of faculty and students the surrender of their worldviews and the ceasing of their pursuit of truth (DIEKEMA, 2000, p. 11). In turn, these threats to academic freedom have contributed to the binding of the intellect, often compromising the very foundation of academic freedom as a moral practice deeply embedded in the ethos of the academy (DIEKEMA, 2000, p. 28).

In modern days, the impact of secularization and secularism\(^2\) has caused higher education to be reshaped in dramatic ways. Although

\(^2\) Note that, different than the term “secular”, which should imply the disposition of public spaces, such as the secular university, to remain neutral toward religious convictions and justifications (although in practice religion still seems to be inequitably treated in present academic dialogues), a certain reading of the terms “secularization” and “secularism” suggests an even more fierce opposition to religious worldviews in an attempt to restrict and/or relegate religious expressions of individuals strictly to private spaces.
half a century in the making, Jacobsen and Jacobsen (2008, p. 9) recall that by the mid-twentieth century we started to observe in America a critical shift in the relationship of the academy with religion. The authors remind us of the publication of God and Man at Yale in 1951, in which the young and conservative William F. Buckley offered a sharp critique of how his alma matter (Yale University) had been marginalizing religion while still claiming its Christian and religious character as an institution. By the 1960s, arguably motivated by the theory that the world was being increasingly secularized, institutions of higher learning began to signal a more secularist (i.e., anti-religion) stance on education. As religion seemed to have less and less of an influence on American society and with the world becoming increasingly secularized, in the academy, religion, once seen as “a source of inspiration or insight concerning human life and thought”, had been rejected and pushed to the side (JACOBSEN; JACOBSEN, 2008, p. 9-10). Only a decade later, major American universities, defining public knowledge in purely secular terms, had bleached religion from their goals and purposes. Around the end of the 1970s, institutions of higher learning had relegated religious beliefs solely to the private lives of individuals. Public knowledge disseminated in the classroom would have only scant connections to the personal beliefs and practices of students (JACOBSEN; JACOBSEN, 2008, p. 10).

Some would argue that this is precisely the era in which we currently live. However, there is also a glimmering hope for religion – and for Christian scholarship – in light of new developments in the academy, especially in what pertains to an arguably new commitment to diversity and multiculturalism in present days. In light of that, one might find reasons for some optimism that the American academy, motivated by factors that cannot be adequately addressed in the context of this short discussion, may be regaining an interest (albeit still timidly) for religion. Christian scholarship, in particular, continues to be reshaped by recent cultural shifts in the academy. “It is no secret to those involved in scholarship”, states Diekema, “that Enlightenment answers have

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3 See Peter L. Berger, The Sacred Canopy: Elements of Sociological Theory of Religion (New York: Doubleday, 1967), where the renowned sociologist outlines his definition of the term “secularization”, contributing to what is now known in academic circles as “secularization theory”. According to such theory, we would see, particularly in the West, less and less of religious influences until the world had finally and completely turned its back on religion, moving full force toward modernity with the individual at the center of all humanly experienced activities. Interestingly, this was a position that Berger himself retracted and revised a few decades later, affirming that “the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions […], is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled ‘secularization theory’ is essentially mistaken” (BERGER, 1999, p. 2).
become post-Enlightenment questions. The fundamental presupposition of autonomous reason’s self-sufficiency has been found to be seriously flawed” (DIEKEMA, 2000, p. 2). Thus, Diekema suggests that the parameters of a culture other than Enlightenment is in the making. Reason, he adds, is being relocated and placed within a wider range of human gifts and talents: “a very pervasive rediscovery of values, spirituality, ethics, emotions, intuition, and human communal concerns seems to be shaping the new worldviews emerging in our [American] society and all over the world” (DIEKEMA, 2000, p. 2). This, I assume, would be the opportunity in which serious Christian scholarship may regain its proper place in the academy: not one of dominance, for such stance would compromise the very freedom Christianity aspires to promote. In my view, Christian scholarship should seek to contribute to a space characterized by comradery and solidarity, where the believer might, in a distinctive way, learn in and add value to the educational aims of the secular academy.

The Integration (or Interaction) of Faith and Learning

Although there are many ways in which Christian scholars can approach their work, a very influential American model of Christian scholarship in recent years is the one known as “the integration of faith and learning”. This model has delineated to a great extent the boundaries of present conversations about how Christians approach their scholarship (JACOBSEN; JACOBSEN, 2004, p. 16). Tracing its historical origins, Jacobsen and Jacobsen recount that the model was developed by Evangelical Protestants after World War II in an attempt to combat the pejorative image of fundamentalist antiintellectualism. The authors clarify that Evangelical Christian scholars felt compelled to demonstrate that they were on par with their secular colleagues in what pertained to mastery of their academic disciplines (JACOBSEN; JACOBSEN, 2004, p. 17). They further explain that

The task of the Christian scholar was understood to be twofold: (1) to critique the premises of modern learning when and where they directly conflicted with Christian truth, and (2) to discover the ways modern learning at its best might either reinforce or refine the truth of faith. This was and is the foundation of the integration model of Christian scholarship (JACOBSEN; JACOBSEN, 2004, p. 18).

George Marsden, a leading voice of the integration model in recent decades, posits that the model is not meant to victimize Christians or highlight the discrimination against them in the secular academy. He is concerned, nonetheless, that the attitude of the dominant academic
Christian students and scholars strive to find connections between the material realm (i.e., the world created by God) and the spiritual realm (i.e., the relationship of men and women with their Creator). Achieving the implications of one’s faith – an esteemed practice of countless students and scholars – must be suppressed in the educational space (MARSDEN, 1997, p. 6). According to Marsden (1997, p. 7), this is a culture that simply takes for granted the separation of faith and learning; a culture that trains scholars that remaining quiet about their faith is the price for full acceptance in the academic community.

While Marsden’s (1997, p. 10) views on the integration model also represent a critique of how modern, secular universities regard the role of faith in the academy, it is important to highlight that the author’s perspectives on faith and learning also seek to expand the reach of scholarship, even to include persons of other faiths or of no formal faith at all. This, I suspect, should appease to some extent the apprehensions of certain members of the academy who are concerned about a possible Christian agenda that might seek to dominate the secular educational space and dictate the rules of higher education in what pertains to public institutions. Additionally, Marsden’s (1997, p. 8) moderate proposal of how Christian scholarship ought to be understood (if not embraced) by the academy, serves as an affirmation of the value of pluralism, which, in turn, helps to sustain the democratic nature of public university classrooms and of the culture of secular campuses at large.

From a particularly Christian view, it is also important to consider that Christian living and Christian learning are deeply interconnected ideals for believers. Christian philosopher Arthur Holmes (1987, p. 25) underscores the fact that “the human vocation is far larger than the scope of any job a person may hold because we are human persons created in God’s image, to honor and serve God and other people in all we do, not just in the way we earn a living”. Christian scholarship, by way of integration of one’s faith and learning, becomes part of a larger goal aimed at by students and scholars who find meaning in their academic pursuits through the connections they endeavor to make between who they are and what they do – namely, individuals made in the image of God for his purposes and his glory. Thus, many Christian scholars aspire to align themselves with the Apostle Paul’s admonition: “whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord” (Cl 3.23).

In fact, such exhortation becomes an important distinguishing motto and motive for many Christians in the academy. In that vein, Christian students and scholars strive to find connections between the material realm (i.e., the world created by God) and the spiritual realm (i.e., the relationship of men and women with their Creator). Evangelical historian Mark Noll explains that such way of studying the world is connected to studying all that Christians believe to have been created through the person of Jesus Christ. He suggests that “to believe that we are attached to Christ inspires the confidence that God can be attached
to anything we might study” (NOLL, 2011, p. 33).

Equally important to note is that Christian scholarship emphasizes that believers ought to make good use of their minds. Because a certain way of doing scholarship is Christian, should not, under any circumstance, excuse students and scholars from using their intellect to their fullest potential. Their academic calling is, for many believers, synonym to a divine appointment to use one’s gift responsibly, gratefully, and worshipfully. As David Dockery explains, to love God with one’s mind means to think differently about the way a believer learns and teaches. This is a rigorous task, affirms the author:

a call to serious Christian thinking simultaneously affirms our love for God and our love for study, the place of devotion and the place of research, the priority of affirming and passing on the great Christian traditions and the significance of honest exploration, reflection, and intellectual inquiry (DOCKERY, 2012, p. 6).

Dockery adds that since they see life and learning from a Christian standpoint, Christian scholars should look for ways in which to restore coherence to learning by unifying knowledge as a seamless whole, in concert with the “unifying principle that God is Creator and Redeemer” (DOCKERY, 2012, p. 7).

However, what seems disconcerting for many Christians today is the apparent departure from conversations between disciplines that historically complemented each other but that, in present days, find themselves in competitive terms with one another (HAUERWAS, 2007, p. 98). Marsden (1997, p. 3) reminds us that “knowledge today is oriented increasingly toward the practical; at the same time, in most fields the vast increases in information render our expertise more fragmentary and detached from the larger issues of life”. Holmes (1987, p. 56) also posits that interdepartmental interaction is often frustrated by these gaps formed between disciples that, in turn, often prevent scholarly collaboration and partnerships.

While disciplines enjoy their own autonomy and independence in the secular, modern academy, Christian scholarship seems to issue an invitation anew for greater cooperation among disciplines. Such invitation is often based on the premise that the world may be understood holistically, in unison with God’s creation and intentions. In essence, what Christians attempt to add to scholarly conversations is a unique reading of the world, whereby, through their worldview, they may be able to offer a different set of interpretations for the phenomena they explore in the intersection of their faith and their
scholarly endeavors.  

*Faith and Learning in the Framework of the Academy’s Commitment to Freedom*

The mission of countless American universities reflects, in one way or another, the idea that knowledge can only be acquired through a relentless search for truth. This is in fact the central idea that informs our notion of academic freedom. This is also what Christian scholarship – the study, research, and learning qualified by the Gospel – aims at.

As Cornelius Plantinga suggests, it is important to note that all learning is in fact faith-based, not just purely objective. “The question”, states the author, “is never whether a person has faith in something or someone, but in what or whom” (PLANTINGA JUNIOR, 2002, p. 67). Since every scholar has commitments, what matters is honesty not neutrality (HOLMES, 1987, p. 71). Honesty liberates the scholar, for it allows her to articulate the impact of her worldview on her scholarship rather than pretending it does not inform and/or support her scholarly pursuits (DIEKEMA, 2000, p. 47). Obviously, it is worth noting that there are boundaries generally accepted by the academy that every scholar, whether religious or non-religious, should respect.

That said, I would argue that education, in its attempt to harness the creativity of the human mind, in line with the spirit of freedom that guides the academy, is obliged to keep open the lines of communication that foster dialogues on the most controversial topics, including competing educational arguments grounded on the study of religion and on theology as sources of knowledge and organized disciplines. After all, “controversy is at the heart of academic freedom” (BERGMAN, 2011, p. 138). For through such freedom scholars can set themselves on whatever journey needed in order to tackle the many possibilities that can point to answers to the number of questions that the pluralistic academic community finds worthy of asking. Moreover, I would argue that the secular academy would be well served by different angles from which to tackle the questions students and scholars of different religious persuasions choose to ask.

As Ronald Thiemann (1996, p. 37) reminds us, “we must take up the task of seeking to define an appropriate place for religion within a pluralistic democracy. Our failure to do so will leave us caught in the grip a paralyzing and destructive predicament”. However, as the author suggests, we need to redefine our interpretation of the wall of separation between church and state (Thiemann, 1996, p. 37). A strict interpretation of how such “wall” functions in the context of American secular society may disrupt the intended balance created by the law itself between the establishment and free exercise clauses of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution (CARTER, 1993, p. 105-109).
While a thorough legal analysis of constitutional implications would be practically impossible in the context of this short discussion, it is important to highlight the fact that while the United States Constitution informs certain freedoms (e.g., freedom of speech, expression, and association) that pertain to our democratic life in public forums, the academy, in distinct terms, is also steeped in customs and traditions that are paired with these freedoms, which even the U.S. Supreme Court recognizes to be vital in the life of institutions of higher learning. C. John Summerville (2006, p. 96) posits that

Seen in this light it should be illegal for tax-funded universities to eliminate religious perspectives simply because they are religious, if they otherwise seem plausible or convincing. That would be viewpoint discrimination, singling out religion alone and thereby committing an ‘impermissible classification’ under the Due Process Clause of the Fifth Amendment.

While tax supported institutions of higher education cannot impose religious values or views on its member-citizens, they are not allowed to discriminate on the basis of one’s religious views either.

In light of that, we must ask: how are institutions to work around such seemingly paradoxical ideas? Here, I suspect that both proponents of more or less religious freedoms in public higher education may not be able to fully satisfy each other on a strictly legal basis. Gladly, I think that the notion of academic freedom can help to address, although not without difficulties, some of the apprehensions about how to properly afford religious views a place in secular academia. Furthermore, while it may not necessarily resolve irreconcilable legal provisions, in a spirit of cooperation from within its own establishment – as even the courts have often made allowances for – we may find hope that different viewpoints on questions asked by students and scholars can be properly represented in the pluralistic space of public universities. After all, the very idea of academic freedom seems to support the notion that different viewpoints are needed and can contribute to both the public and the private good when students and scholars embark on an independent search for truth.

Moreover, even above convention, academic freedom implies, as Diekema suggests, a fundamental right of students and scholars to pursue truth. As a functional concept reserved solely for the academy, academic freedom is communal in character, carrying no legal or constitutional sanction (DIEKEMA, 2000, p. 7-8). “It arises”, as Diekema (2000, p. 8) explains, “from the essence, the very ‘soul’, of the academy. [...] It concerns the collective and personal integrity within the academy which resists any threat or intimidation to the pursuit of truth from any source”. As such, the author adds, academic freedom should
be protected from single interests (or self-interests) that push people to conformity. In fact, religion is especially apt to being asked to conform given its often-controversial nature. Truth, Diekema insists, adds diversity to human thought and discovery. With political correctness (often perceived as an expression of intolerance toward religion) truth becomes relativized beyond what academic freedom can reach for, posits the author. In fact, when academics become captive to the desires of special interests, the pursuit of knowledge is compromised and, by extension, the academy becomes a place where ideological imperialism reigns (DIEKEMA, 2000, p. 25).

Viewed in such light, academic freedom, while related to the rights of freedom of speech and freedom of the press, is also fundamentally distinct from these rights:

While rights related to freedom of speech and freedom of the press are constitutionally granted and protected by law, academic freedom is a right granted specifically to teachers and scholars in the academy, by the academy (DIEKEMA, 2000, p. 8).

Academic freedom, therefore, can become more susceptible to politization and special (or self) interests, some of which might demand the articulation of one’s scholarship solely based on reason.

Reason, as narrowly constructed by an Enlightenment framework, cannot be the only source of answers for our human experiences, particularly when seen in light of the cultural consensus that have brought about a postsecular age in the American academy, as articulated by Jacobsen and Jacobsen (2008, p. 10). However, as Holmes (1987, p. 47) reminds us, neither should the Christian replicate the kind of antiintellectualism often even found in churches. In essence, regardless of constitutional guarantees, the freedom afforded by academic customs and traditions (or allowances made by individual disciplines) should not allow one’s religious convictions to serve as an excuse for lack of intellectual rigor or even the kind of rational approach that keeps the student or scholar in check while working out her scholarship with the assistance of her unique religious viewpoint. I would argue that seeing one’s scholarship as an opportunity to learn more and better about God’s creation and even God’s truth would require of the believer a level of stewardship of her academic vocation that should motivate her toward the highest level of integrity.

Concluding Thoughts: A Modest Proposal

In light of the aforementioned considerations, I would argue that the American academy would benefit from paying closer attention to how a Christian worldview that seeks to integrate faith with learning
might add value to the educational project of students and scholars. While affirming the importance and relevance of religious claims from the standpoint of those who profess to see the world through this particular lens, the academy takes one more step toward greater inclusion and diversity of ideas in its educational space, renewing its commitment to the very freedoms prized by secular institutions of higher learning.

That said, the onus also lies on believers themselves. I think it would be important for Christian students and scholars to consider ways in which they might effectively learn from their faith while responsibly exercising their membership to the secular academy. This, in turn, brings up an important question, central and normative to the present discussion: what does the integration of faith and learning mean for Christian students and scholars at public institutions of higher education? In my view, here are some possible answers:

(1) Christian students and scholars need not fear their academic journey as it pertains to the relentless pursuit of truth involved in their scholarly activities. In fact, they should search for truth in their disciplines, as all members of the academy should, wherever it may be found. From a faith perspective, Christians can rest confidently that “truth is truth. The Christian accepts truth where he or she finds it without feeling the need to claim possession of that truth” (HAUERWAS, 2007, p. 28). And if that is so, Christians can confidently collaborate with others – whether religious or non-religious – in projects that would advance public knowledge of the world and of those who inhabit it.

(2) When approaching their scholarship from a faith perspective, it would be important for Christian students and scholars to be forthcoming about how their convictions impact their scholarship (no differently than any other good researcher should), acknowledging how their biases and preferences (and even their pre-conceptions) inform their scholarly projects. However, one’s faith should never be an excuse for less rigorous or intellectual work. In fact, one’s Christian convictions should inspire even greater zeal when exploring the world through one’s discipline or field of study; especially since one’s scholarship, in the context of one’s overall Christian mission, is viewed as any other activity “as working for the Lord” (Cl 3.23). Their work – wherever it may be practiced – is never disconnected from their witness. By representing their scholarship well, and being forthcoming about their faith perspectives on what they study, Christian students and scholars also contribute to better representing their Christ in the secular academy.

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the projects aspired by universities that are committed to democracy and the value of human thinking and diversity.

(3) While religion is experiencing an increased visibility at secular, public universities that mirrors its resurgence in the culture at large (JACOBSEN; JACOBSEN, 2008, p. 14), Americans are still quite illiterate about religion (PROTHERO, 2007, p. 1). Many do not know (or even seek to know) the meaning that those who call themselves “believers” attribute to their religious convictions. Therefore, Christian students and scholars ought not to assume that the way in which they see the connection between their faith and their scholarship will be received with no resistance by the larger secular academy. Hence, Christians should value the opportunity to articulate in a sensible and intelligent manner how faith and learning intersect in their scholarly pursuits. While a reasonable articulation of how their faith interacts with their learning may not serve to necessarily convince certain members of the academy or even the public in general of the value of their worldview, by doing so, Christians may help to keep open the lines of communication between faith and reason in the secular academy.

(4) I envision that a solid academic articulation of how one’s faith informs one’s scholarship may, in turn, encourage other religious students and scholars to bring their own religious justifications to the fore. I believe that these academically sound justifications for how one’s religious worldviews impact one’s scholarship can serve as an effective “witness” to not only the academy at large, but also to other religious scholars themselves; particularly those who would be otherwise convinced that to earn their space in the secular academy they would need to set their religious convictions and viewpoints aside. Such clear and explicit articulation – where plausible and logical, of course – may serve to encourage other believers to raise the level of their own reasonable justifications for the projects they understand the participation of their faith to be central and essential.

I think, however, that it is important to highlight that while faith most likely will intersect one way or another with the scholarly projects of many believers, it does not mean that faith should be the only lens through which Christian students and scholars view and explore the world. Even though, in my estimation, such lens is rarely (nor should it be) disregarded by the student or scholar that calls herself a Christian, she should be conscientious of the fact that the university – while part of God’s creation and a fertile ground for her evangelistic mission – is not the church (HOLMES, 1987, p. 73). Every effort must be made on the part of the believer to preserve the integrity of those who receive one’s faith-informed scholarship. Likewise, although faith is never (nor should it be) set aside (for faith is not a mere act, but a fact about the very identity of the believer), as legitimate members of the academy
Christians can and should make good use of all the resources that their discipline affords them, whether religious or not, if these do not violate ethical, legal, and especially Christian, principles.

Finally, I would argue that to think Christianly is, in essence, to both philosophize (i.e., to love learning while recognizing that the very ability to learn is a gift from God) and theologize (i.e., to make faith an active component of one’s academic pursuit in recognition that God himself, along with his creation, is worthy of being studied and understood). Both practices should motivate the believer toward obtaining greater and better knowledge and wisdom. Moreover, the Christian should be inclined, through the interaction of her faith with her learning, to faithfully understand both the world (believed by her to have been created by God) and those who inhabit it (those created by and, in the case of human beings, in the very image of God). In my view, this is a particular practice that the modern university cannot prevent either in practical terms or by political decree. In fact, academic freedom (i.e., the right to teach and the right to learn) is not prescribed nor defined by the law but by the very customs and conventions agreed upon and shared by members of the academy. Such freedom accounts, at least in part, for the fact that “academic institutions exist for the transmission of knowledge [and] the pursuit of truth” (AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS). With such freedom at one’s disposal one can aptly learn and teach from and with faith.

References


