

ON UNIFYING FAITH AND LEARNING

John W. Hawthorne

Point Loma Nazarene University

Introduction

In the movie *The Truman Show*, Jim Carey plays Truman Burbank who has lived every moment of his life on a soundstage as part of the ultimate reality television show. Every aspect of Truman's life from his birth to his marriage to success in his job has been broadcast to a viewing public. The only person unaware of the Truman Show is Truman Burbank. To him, he is simply living life as it comes much as any of us would. He is completely unaware of all of the planning, props, and directorial decisions that make his life so pleasant daily.

One day, a "star" (a stage light) falls from the sky and lands at Truman's feet. From that moment on, Truman begins to suspect something is going on in his world beyond what he thought. Over time, he begins to see the apparatus that made his world work. Through this process, he discovers freedom for the first time in his entire life.

In the same way, this writing is designed to develop an understanding of life at the contemporary Christian college by examining the various processes that make Christian higher education a unique approach to learning. Students and faculty members who live and work in the midst of the Christian college take much of its uniqueness for granted. They rarely appreciate the characteristics of the institution they attend because, like Truman, they accept the world as it is without looking at its operating mechanisms.

Christian Higher Education

Many students and faculty lack a clear sense of the uniqueness of Christian higher education. They remain unsure about the purpose of the institution, often experiencing confusion about whether it is primarily a religious organization that also provides educational experiences or primarily an educational institution with a Christian identity. There is an understandable reason for this difficulty in articulating a clear purpose for Christian Higher Education. Too much of the effort to "*make the case*" has involved demonstrating that 1) Christian colleges offer the same qualities of education as our secular counterparts, 2) the secular schools will take a position hostile to the faith, and 3) Christian colleges bring the added component of spiritual sensitivity that takes the faith seriously.

The drawback inherent in such definitional efforts is that they rely exclusively on the comparison with the secular institution of higher education to make the case. First, one must believe that a Christian education does not involve trading educational quality for other important qualities of the educational experience. It is important that the Christian college be seen as providing necessary training and development so as to prepare its graduates for their life goals, whether job or graduate school.¹ But the choice of a Christian college also relies on a negative evaluation of the secular school. One has to distrust the atmosphere of the secular school and prefer the environment of the Christian college as an alternative. A student who recognizes that educational goals can be achieved and that there is added value in the Christian college can feel "at home" in that environment. But always lingering as an unstated element in all of our thinking about Christian colleges is the comparison with the state school; where most students' friends attended, whose faculty members write the textbooks, which is considerably cheaper, which is frequently covered in the local media, and whose mascot is seen on sweatshirts worn by folks who never attended the school.

This work attempts to spell out an alternate vision of Christian higher education that does not depend on contrasts with what happens at state schools. We need a vision of the Christian college that speaks to its unique role in American society by relying on its own internal strengths and not simply its relative value.

The Paradox of Worldviews

As I reflect on my quarter-century in Christian higher education, I find that faculty and administrators haven't clearly explained why we exist as Christian institutions of higher learning. We have given people permission to talk about their Christian faith when public education limits what is appropriate. We affirm the value of scripture, but there is more to Christian education than finding scriptural parallels to sociological, biological, or economic perspectives. We are relatively smaller institutions so we don't lose students, or, more correctly, when we lose them we know we lost them. We have active spiritual life programs, but it's not clear how they are to contribute to our overall mission goals. There have been too many dialogues about "*what we think our mission is*" everywhere I have worked. At the moment, there seems to be at least as many answers to that question as individuals answering the question.

But we still need to clarify a reason for being. Ironically, struggle over mission may be more of an issue for those in Christian colleges than it is for those in state schools. Several years ago, I was invited to a reception sponsored by a local state school to introduce their new president. In mingling with my counterparts at that school, I was impressed by the way they understood the unique contribution my college made to higher education in the state. I was embarrassed to recognize that I had adopted a competitive stance when there was no need. In a very real sense, we are not competitors because we are trying to accomplish different objectives.

The comparison between the secular school and the Christian college runs throughout the history of the Christian college movement. Even as Christian colleges have developed into the quality accredited institutions they are today, the steps along the journey seem to always require a sideways glance at what our secular colleagues are up to. A brief consideration of the general history of Christian colleges can illustrate how we are concerned with an identity that is seen as "relative" to the other schools.

Historical Considerations

Christian colleges in the last half of the twentieth century were different from the ministry training academies from which many arose. As the colleges pursued regional accreditation, with its dependence upon peer relationships between all forms of higher education, it was necessary to find faculty members who held advanced degrees and who specialized in particular subjects. However, this increasing professionalization of the college still required a solid Christian component. It was important for the faculty members to be professing Christians. Many institutions established specific faith statements that prospective faculty were required to affirm, a practice that continues to this day. To maintain the quality of the holistic component of the Christian college, many colleges clarified specific requirements for chapel attendance and religion courses.

The broadening of mission and expansion of program, to say nothing of the social disruptions facing higher education in the late 1960s and early 1970s, pushed the Christian colleges to attempt to stake out their particular approach to education. These rapid social changes provided the context into which Arthur Holmes, a recognized professor of philosophy at Wheaton College who has served as a spokesman for Christian higher education for the past 30 years, defined the particular role of the Christian college. How could the Christian colleges of the early 1970s respond to the growth, expansion, and increased professionalism (stemming from increased reliance on doctorates and strength of

regional accreditation) without risking the mission drift that had characterized historically church-related colleges like Harvard and Yale a century earlier?

Faith and...

In *The Idea of the Christian College*, Arthur Holmes attempted to articulate the specific mission of the Christian college as centering on *the integration of faith and learning*. At the center of this Integration metaphor is the recognition that key assumptions and presuppositions imbedded in both Scripture and Christian tradition have definable educational implications. To Holmes, these assumptions and presuppositions have a legitimate place as part of scholarly preparation and became the key mission for the Christian college². The assumptions and presuppositions change the nature of the educational experience regardless of the subject matter taught. The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities has published books illustrating this approach with titles such as *Sociology Through the Eyes of Faith* (or Biology... or Business... or History...). An exploration of faith issues constituted a "blind spot" in the critical thinking commitments of secular academics. For many of them, the worldviews that Holmes wanted to integrate were seen as a combination of anti-intellectual faith on the one hand and modern scientific knowledge on the other.

Consider the positions of adversaries in the infamous Scopes evolution trial in 1925 (see Larson, 1988). Three-time presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan traveled to Dayton, Tennessee, to argue in favor of the state law that outlawed the teaching of evolution. Using a rigid biblical interpretation, he argued that the evolutionary approach would undermine individual faith and moral order.³ Nationally known defense attorney Clarence Darrow, in his defense of John Scopes, was seen as the example of progressive, rational learning. His defense depended upon the use of our "modern" approach to scientific empiricism (what philosophers call "positivism"). Journalist H. L. Mencken, who had established himself as a critic of religion in the press, covered the trial with relish. His picture contrasted the calm, scientific view of Darrow with the fundamentalist mindset of Bryan. Although Darrow provides a major critique of Bryan's point, the facts of the case (Scopes never denied teaching evolution to his high school students) and their own backgrounds caused the jury to convict Scopes. Even though Darrow lost the case, his position was established as the socially dominant worldview.

The Scopes trial provides a good example of the problem created by an attempt to contrast "worldviews." When the Christian college attempts to take matter of faith seriously as an educational topic, it is met with a key question from its secular counterparts: *How can one be a good scholar and seriously consider such topics?* This problem is made worse by the fact that we Christian college faculty were trained in an approach to academic pursuits that even causes us to ask the same question (even if silently). Furthermore, when the Christian scholar approaches topics that are part of the operating realm of the secular institution (the evolution question in the Scopes trial is a good example), it is done with a similar degree of suspicion: *How can one be a good Christian and seriously consider such topics?*

A Unified View

On the other hand, there is an approach to understanding Christian colleges that avoids the separation that I have been describing. Both of the questions asked in the previous paragraph are significant questions deserving of careful answers. I want to suggest that the real problem lies in separating the realms of thought in the first place. If our approach to Christian colleges instead begins with an assumption of wholeness of faith, learning, and life, we end up at a very different place. Seeing a unified view of faith and learning requires a new perspective. It is helpful to look at another case in which a bifurcated view of reality was reshaped into new understandings. A familiar but powerful story in the book of Acts can

serve as a model for how we could change our thinking about the work of Christian colleges. It is the story of Peter's vision in chapter 11:

The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem the circumcised believers criticized him and said, "You went into the home of uncircumcised men and ate with them." Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it happened. "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles, and birds of the air. Then I heard a voice telling me, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." I replied, "Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth." The voice spoke from heaven a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." This happened three times, and then it was pulled up to heaven again. Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, "Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved." As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God!" When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life."

(Acts 11: 1-18, New International Version)

I will leave it to others to explore the great theological significance of this vision (extending the Gospel to the Gentiles, including us). For our purposes in understanding the Christian college, three ideas need elaboration. First, even though Peter was a righteous man, the voice from heaven told him not to "*call anything impure that God has made clean.*" The understanding of God was broader than the understanding of Peter. It is a real temptation for all of us to shape our worldview around our own prior comfortable understandings of life when God is saying, "*kill and eat.*"

Second, Peter makes a bold statement in explaining his newfound understanding: "*Who was I to think that I could oppose God!*" He arrived at this understanding through a very logical process of being attentive to the connections between what Jesus had said and what Peter experienced. It is an affirmation that God is present in surprising ways and places.

Third, when the other apostles hear the story they praise God and make a bold pronouncement of the larger meaning: "*So then, God has even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life.*" They change their life-long perspective on the basis of Peter's witness. They have been with Peter throughout their ministry and they have seen him struggle to understand Jesus' teachings. Because the apostles know Peter's character, trust his integrity, and carefully consider what he has seen and done with Cornelius, they open themselves to a much broader vision of the Gospel.

This story from scripture provides a model for adjusting how we think about faith and learning. It suggests the important role that paradox plays in our understanding. Peter is holding to his deep belief that he should be faithful to God through his obedience to Mosaic Law and he is also completely open to what new things God is teaching him. It is not

possible for him to choose only one of these options. He must be simultaneously embracing both. In fact, even using this story illustrates my point. As a sociologist and educator writing about the philosophy of Christian higher education, how can I use scriptural example as a model? I'm far more likely to argue, "*Lord, you know I am an academic and have always built careful and theoretical arguments based on the best scholarship.*" But maybe the Lord says back to me, "*Don't ignore what I have given you, read and consider.*"

Taking a merged approach to sociology and theology is different from the way I normally do scholarly work. My normal preference is to follow the scholarly patterns of my sociologist counterparts. One should read deeply in the field, make reference to the understood debates in the literature, and advance the argument in one's own work. To give academic credibility to such supernatural sources stretches me in ways that call me to rethink where my ideas come from in the first place.

Let me suggest a different parallel with the story of Peter's vision. Consider the case of a first-time freshman attending a Christian college. All his life, he has studied the Bible and tried to understand its application to his life. He has heard good preaching and taken it seriously. Perhaps he attended a Christian high school and was well versed in apologetics. What will be in his sheet let down from heaven? Perhaps it comes when he is asked to read about the origins of the gospels in a Bible class, must read an existentialist writer in English class, or take seriously the theoretical perspective of Karl Marx in a Sociology class. His response will be like that of Peter: "*Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has even entered my mind.*" Such a student will struggle through the initial shock, just as Peter struggled. We should make sure that he doesn't have to do so alone. Peter says he had six believers with him when he went to see Cornelius. It is necessary to have trusted colleagues (students and faculty members) available as one is working through new understandings. The student is also challenged to find the consistency between this new understanding and what he has learned of God in the past. And when he explains that new understanding to his friends, to his faculty members, and especially to his parents or pastor, they must carefully hear, evaluate, and respond as the other apostles did for Peter.

Implications for the Christian Higher Education

These reflections on Christian colleges suggest that the key characteristics that define the educational process in Christian Higher Education should arise from their key convictions about learning. For far too much of its history, Christian higher education has been concerned with separating itself from its more secular counterparts. The result of this mistaken orientation has been that the Christian college is far better at explaining what it is not than in articulating its key reason for being.

Peter's story is central to the educational task of Christian Higher Education. From the time they first hear about a college, students need to know that they will confront ideas that may be different from those experienced in the past. All aspects of the college life should be congruent in providing a trusting environment within which the student opens herself up to new learning. It is of critical importance in this exploration for the student to have a sense of trust in those faculty and staff members who create the supportive environment. The work of confronting these new ideas is as disorienting for an 18 year old as Peter's vision was for him.

The faculty and staff must maintain three consistent orientations. First, in their own Christian exploration they must be articulate in how they are continually learning. Not only are they willing to move outside their normal comfort zones but they are willing and eager to engage others in how they react to that movement. Second, those who form the institution must be continually affirming their Christian commitment in the face of the new learning. They must be able to model for their students the sense in which their faith is vibrant and fearless and is never something that needs to be guarded. The idea that the

Christian faith must be protected from various writings, opinions, theories, or perspectives suggests that God could not hold us firm. Such a position is the exact opposite of what Peter experienced. Third, the faculty and staff must be continually reminded what it's like to be 18 or 19 years old. This is the apex of the process of individuation, where students are learning who they are as opposed to who they've been told they were. This time of exploration and experimentation must be handled with extreme care. For those of us who are well beyond 18, it can be hard work to remember what it is like to try to live on one's own and to be free to create one's own successes and failures. This is a significant point because 18-year-olds face the temptation of transferring parental authority to whatever professionals they attach to in the college setting. It is not the task of faculty and staff to tell students how to solve their quest for meaning but simply to support them while they pursue the appropriate quest one pursues at eighteen years of age.

The heart of the educational enterprise in Christian Higher Education is the student's quest. The critical elements of institutional success are not based solely on high graduation rates and strong GRE scores (Graduate Record Examinations, see <http://www.ets.org/>), although these are important byproducts. The most important challenge of the Christian college or university is to provide a place in which the student can pursue this quest in ways that are sensitive to God's leading, academically grounded, faith affirming, and celebratory of the student's unique identity.

When we recognize that the Spirit is working in the lives of our students to develop new understandings in their search for Truth, Christian Higher Education shifts its focus from the delivery of information to the stewardship of a Divine process. The recognition that God is at work in our midst is what makes us distinctive from our secular counterparts. It opens the door to the risk-filled adventure simultaneously occurring in both quality higher education and a deepening Christian walk.

This article has suggested a more fruitful approach to thinking about the relationship of faith and learning than the integration metaphor common within Christian Higher Education. In place of suggesting faith and learning as competing worldviews, seeing them as parts of a unified whole infused with the spirit of God opens the door to new educational possibilities. The model of Peter's vision provides a starting place for further conversations about how faith and learning inform each other. The resulting image of Christian Higher Education becomes that of Incarnation. In this model, Christ is present in the classroom not because of what we teach or how we teach but because He promised to be with us always (Matthew 18: 20). Recognizing His presence, with all of the awesome implications it brings, is what should make Christian Higher Education the remarkable enterprise that it is.

References

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Notes

¹ Harvard president Derek Bok (2006) observes that vocational components are part of all educational institutions. The challenge is to determine how vocational education balanced against larger liberal arts concerns.

² The Reformed foundations of these questions are well established in Richard Hughes' *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind* (2001). Hughes outlines the impact of a Kuyperian view of faith and learning as key to the Reformed understanding. This paper is consciously attempting to avoid those preconceptions. See also Jacobsen and Jacobsen, *Scholarship and Christian Faith* (2004).

³ A new biography of Bryan by Michael Kazin (2005) suggests that Bryan was far more nuanced and complex than the press of his day allowed.

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