

Helping the Church Think— The Intellectual Task of Christian Higher Education

Several years ago, I heard a colleague describe Christian higher education as “the church thinking.” Rather than suggesting that other sectors of the church do not think or are incapable of doing so, he was, I believe, highlighting a unique function of colleges and universities. The campus by its very nature is a bit of an ivory tower, a place set aside for research, discussion, analysis, and creativity that does not necessarily have to provide an economic profit or meet a managerial deadline. This relative freedom from the mundane, while carrying with it the danger of lack of relevance to the real world, also allows us to see things in new ways and to address issues that might otherwise be ignored. It is an opportunity that neither higher education nor the church can afford to miss.

But higher education, including its Christian expressions, often seems to be moving away from this intellectual task. Schools appear increasingly focused on pre-professional and professional programs that emphasize skills and narrowly focused knowledge rather than issues relating to meaning and value. Humanities majors such as English and history, which formerly attracted large numbers of students, now compete with social work, physical therapy, business, and computer science—among others—which offer greater employability. Rather than lamenting such shifts, which in reality are responses to society’s needs and a changing economy, higher education must adapt its intellectual task to the changing curriculum. In short, we need to find ways to connect the abstractions of philosophy, the creativity of literature, and the questing of theology—to identify a few traditional areas of study—to the real world in which people work and play.

In addition to reflecting the shift from the liberal arts to more practical emphases, Seventh-day Adventist campuses also embody a revival tradition that historically has had little interest in, and indeed has been somewhat hostile toward, intellectual life. Disciplines such as philosophy have been seen as threats to piety, and religious experience has been understood as preferable to intellectual pursuits. Instead of encouraging abstract discussion of theology, for instance, our religious tradition has pushed us to get out and win souls. Frequently, education has been perceived primarily as preparation of Christians to witness for God through evangelism and human service rather than through ideas. Mark Noll has recently ex-

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plored this situation with regard to American evangelicals, and much that he says is applicable to Seventh-day Adventism. "They [evangelicals] have nourished millions of believers in the simple verities of the gospel," he writes, "but have largely abandoned the universities, the arts, and other realms of 'high' culture."¹

Significance of a Christian Worldview

But the bifurcation of our experience between the academic and the practical, or between the world of the spirit and that of the intellect, is not biblical. The Bible addresses all of reality. In Scripture, we see people creating families and nations, carrying out warfare, tilling the

earth, writing poetry, preaching the gospel, and developing theology, all within the context of a loving God who cares about His erring children. Because no part of our existence lies outside the Bible's purview, we have the continuing responsibility of applying biblical insights to all of our activities.

In recent years, Christian educators have talked and written much about the integration of faith and learning. At a recent conference, I heard a historical reflection on this discussion. Participants noted that colleges in the Reformed tradition (Calvin College, for example) have focused on integrating Christian presuppositions with scholarly endeavor, while schools in the revival tradition

(Baylor University, for instance) have basically "added on" religion classes and chapels to curricula resembling that of secular schools. For the most part, Seventh-day Adventists have followed the "add-on" model but, influenced by writers such as Arthur Holmes who argues that "all truth is God's truth,"² some leaders have been urging us toward a more integrated approach.

The worldview expressed in Scripture,³ which includes such elements as God's creation and upholding of the universe, the fall of humanity, and the possibility of redemption through Christ, offers a foundation for all of our thinking, enabling us to achieve an integration of faith and learning. Ellen White calls attention to the Bible's broad scope and foundation for our thinking:

In its pages are found history the most ancient; biography the truest to life; principles of government for the control of the state, for the regulation of the household—principles that human wisdom has never equaled. It contains philosophy the most profound, poetry the sweetest and the most sublime, the most impassioned and the most pathetic.⁴

If we really believe that our Christianity involves everything, then we must think deeply about all that we teach, in-

cluding the most practical and seemingly non-intellectual of subjects. Integration of faith and learning, the specific intellectual task of Christian higher education, applies to professional or other practically oriented programs, as well as the traditionally “academic” areas. In pursuit of this integration, we will have to cross disciplinary and professional boundaries, learning from one another as we seek to apply Christianity to an educational world facing a new century.

Some Contemporary Issues

A number of issues cut across the disciplines and professions. These demand the intersection of theory and practice, the application of values to action, and the analysis of everything we think and do within the context of our Christian commitment. A few brief examples will illustrate the task that lies before us.

Postmodernism and the Search for Truth: During the past few decades, the movement known as postmodernism has challenged our concept of truth, arguing that notions of reality are socially constructed rather than accurate reflections of what actually exists. While its major theoretical issues relate to literary criticism, history, and the social sciences, postmodernism pervades our culture. Often when we hear a student say, “that’s just your opinion,” this reflects a viewpoint that regards all truth claims as shaped by social class or ethnicity.⁵ As Christian academics who believe in absolute truth yet recognize that the human mind is limited and historically conditioned, we need to examine this issue carefully. We must ask what it means for Christians to live in a postmodern world where knowledge everywhere appears fragmented and without foundations.

Multiculturalism: Closely related to postmodernism is multiculturalism, often described as an emphasis on diversity. Although few of us have any trouble living in a world with different types of food, games, and music, these are only the superficial trappings of multiculturalism. At a deeper level, how do we deal with clashing cultural values as, for instance, the recent controversy over Middle East child marriages in the United States? Or how do we express commit-

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ment to Christian claims of ultimate truths, while at the same time respecting world religions such as Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism? As a church that circles the globe with evangelism and service, these are questions that we inescapably face.

Mind and Body: Our church has always emphasized scientific medicine. But today we increasingly hear about alternative therapies, including many that claim to involve both the mind and the body. Although we often respond negatively to such theories, calling them “New Age,” many need serious investigation by the various disciplines that study the body, mind, and spirit. How can SDA health sciences integrate our understanding of human nature as a unity of the physical and spiritual without slipping into the extremes of pantheism on the one hand or materialism on the other?

Ethics and the Professions: Ever since the Watergate scandal of the early 1970s, we have heard calls for ethical education. In every line of work, ethical issues emerge. Whether it is treatment of employees or truth in advertising, we cannot escape matters of right and wrong. Yet because these issues so often seem composed of shades of gray rather than black and white, we have difficulty discerning how our Christian commit-

ment should shape our actions. Close examination of case studies within the context of Christian morality would help prepare students for the confusion of the “real” world.

Technology and the Environment: Although environmental issues have been discussed widely since the early 1960s, as Christians we have not said much about them. Yet whether we are directly engaged in technology, operate a business, or simply buy things packaged in cardboard and drive an automobile, our activities have environmental impact. How do we relate God’s Lordship as Creator and our responsibility as stewards to the practical affairs of daily life? For example, how do we balance the costs of pollution with those of lost employment?

Social Order and the Human Spirit: The phrase may sound abstract, but the problem has been with us at least since the beginning of the industrial revolution. Whether it is the individual forced to work by the clock, or the patient treated as a collection of body parts (each with its own specialist), or the student facing an educational system of required credit hours enforced by a bureaucracy, the issue of how we maintain our humanity in an inhuman world is a very real one. The church has emphasized spiritual values, but have we seriously discussed how to move our “Sabbath values” from the sanctuary to the boardroom or industrial shop floor during the rest of the week?

The foregoing list is suggestive rather than exhaustive. It demonstrates that the necessity of integrating faith and learning reaches beyond academic issues to the world of practical affairs. Therefore, to prepare students to live “faith-fully” in that world, it needs to place every course and program of study within the context of the tension between the values of Christianity and those of secular society. The cosmic struggle of the Great Controversy affects every aspect of our lives. An important function of Christian higher education is to find ways to identify the good and maintain it in the face of evil.

How Do We Accomplish This Task?

Although there is no magic formula

for incorporating these issues into academic life, they should be discussed across disciplinary boundaries. Nearly every issue listed above can be addressed only when we involve various disciplines in continuing conversation. How mind and body relate in healing, for instance, requires at least a linking of the biological and human sciences with theology to adequately deal with its many dimensions.

Conversations about these issues can occur in interdisciplinary seminars. Many institutions organize their freshman writing programs around themes that combine reading, discussion, and writing. This encourages students to begin thinking in a disciplined manner about some of the problems of contem-

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ideas presented. Finally, informal Friday evening and Sabbath afternoon discussion groups also encourage students to exchange ideas.

Each campus needs to find ways to develop an ongoing conversation that fulfills the intellectual task of Christian higher education. In doing so, Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities can help individual Christians, the church community, and the institutional church to better face the challenges of the contemporary world. By thinking about and applying "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3) to life in our contemporary culture, Christian higher education contributes in a distinctive way to fulfillment of the church's mission to preach the gospel to all the world. ☞

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), p. 3.

2. Arthur F. Holmes, *All Truth Is God's Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977).

3. The books offer a starting point for exploring the Christian worldview and its implications: Arthur F. Holmes, *Contours of a World View* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), and Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984). Virtually all the books examining the integration of Christian faith and learning address the traditional academic disciplines. George M. Marsden looks at the issue within the context of the world of secular academia in *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). A significant effort to demonstrate rather than theorize how to integrate Christian faith with history is Steven J. Keillor, *This Rebellious House: American History and the Truth of Christianity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

4. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1952), p. 125.

5. A good anthology of primary sources representing the modernist/post-modernist academic debate is Joyce Appleby, Elizabeth Covington, David Hoys, Michael Latham, and Allison Snelder, eds., *Knowledge and Post-Modernism in Historical Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 1996). Gene Edward Veith, Jr. provides a popularly written description of the movement's larger societal dimensions in *Post-modern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1994).

porary life. Schools can also schedule such discussion close to the end of the student's college career with senior capstone courses taught by faculty from a variety of departments.

Classwork also needs to be supplemented with what might be called a "public intellectual life." Visiting speakers on either an occasional basis or as part of a lecture series can introduce the

campus to a variety of perspectives on issues of concern. Similarly, faculty lecture programs can encourage systematic thought about these issues among faculty and involve students and the surrounding community in the discussion. Book discussion groups offer opportunities to learn from an author who has thought deeply about a problem and to respond both individually and collectively to the