

On the Integration of Faith and Discipline

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During my decade and a half of service at a Christian university, I have regularly encountered Christian faculty who were unsure of and sometimes frustrated by the commitment of other believers to “integrate faith and the academic disciplines.” Up to this point I have answered such requests verbally; this is an effort to answer those questions in writing.¹

For most of us, the primary convictions about our academic careers were shaped at modern, secular research universities. The universities, major journals, conferences, and other discipline related institutions all agree: scholarship has its greatest authority when it is thoroughly secular, in other words, when it is removed from the influence of religion. Secularization is not all bad. As Marsden observes, when your car is ailing, you don’t want your mechanic to exorcize the demons out of your fuel injectors. You want a solution that operates independently of your mechanic’s religious faith; in other words, you want a solution that is methodologically secular.² Most of us have benefited from the rigorous thinking, insistence upon credentials, and opportunities to teach that came with modern secular education. Science has been so remarkably successful in its mastery of nature with this approach that every discipline has had to confront comparisons with scientific methods, epistemology, and authority, all of which include the conviction that the best inquiry is thoroughly secular and value-free. But

¹ This paper was originally written to aid professors who were applying to receive an in-house grant at Union University. The grant required an essay on the integration of faith and discipline, a requirement that proved challenging. Commonly, faculty either resisted the question or had little understanding of the depth that is possible in answering. This paper was an effort to address their concerns briefly and direct them to additional resources.

² George M. Marsden, “Introduction,” in George M. Marsden and Bradley J. Longfield, eds, *The Secularization of the Academy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 6.

here, of course, lies the problem; during the past century and a half, secularism became more than merely methodology encased within an assumed Christian framework. The framework has been torn down and, ironically enough, modern secularism presents and represents a distinct faith perspective, antagonistic to Christianity. Value-free knowledge has proven to be a fiction.

Encompassed within the modern and now post-modern traditions are corrosive arguments and attitudes that most of us have faced and tolerated. Directly anti-Christian commentary and assumptions are common. Additionally, the terminal degree confers professional credentials, authority, and the right to speak; thus, academic specialization is widely believed and felt to be superior to every other (non-credentialed) area of thought and action. When we step outside our credentials we apologize and defer; many efforts to speak as a Christian academic include this hesitation. We could list more features, but the larger point is the important part: the academic community assumes and argues for the separation of faith and discipline and this fact presents some problems for believers. We have all been deeply shaped by the goals and values of secular education. Along with the benefits—which are numerous and profound—have come significant detriments.

One set of by-products among Christian academics has been religious self-censorship: a reluctance to think through religious arguments, a separation of private faith from public secularism, and a hesitation to raise critical questions founded in Christian faith.³ Christian academics are often ignorant of the Christian roots of their disciplines. We are often unaware of

³ George M. Marsden, “The Soul of the American University: A Historical Overview,” in *Secularization*, 16 – 25. George Marsden, “Matteo Ricci and the Prodigal Culture,” in James L. Heft, S.M, ed., *A Catholic Modernity?: Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture* (New York: Oxford, 1999), 83-93. Although I only cite Marsden’s commentary here, Charles Taylor’s Lecture itself is a model of what Christian scholars need to be about. See also Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994).

the biblical precedents and guides that might shape our research and our teaching. We regularly acquiesce on modern ethical disputes, for multiple reasons.

The challenge for the Christian academic isn't really to integrate faith and discipline, although that's been the shorthand for many years. Faith and knowledge are inseparable. The challenge is to bring our academic discipline under the Lordship of Christ. The challenge is to apply a biblical, Christian faith to our academic practices, as we do with other aspects of our lives. It's a discipleship issue. In every area of life, Christians modify thought and behavior to conform to the known will of God as expressed through the community of faith and guided by the Holy Spirit; this act of discipleship must be exercised by scholars in their professional work, as well. Discipleship is not easy; the harsh skepticism, professional credentialing, individualism to the point of isolation, and antagonism towards the Church only makes it harder. Nonetheless, discipleship is our calling—our only calling, it seems to me—and this means taking seriously the claims of our Lord Jesus Christ upon our work.

The project to “integrate faith and the academic disciplines” asks for a concerted, articulate effort to extend our commitment to Christ into our scholarship. It also asks for a concerted effort to articulate how scholarship informs our understanding of and response to the Lordship of Christ. For some disciplines, this can be easily articulated in the content: a history, say, of revivals in twelfth century France, or a sociological study of poverty in Appalachian coal miners. This topical focus requires no shifting of assumptions, no methodological changes; it's just a matter of asking questions that Christians might ask. For all disciplines, though, the call of discipleship can and should be explored in the philosophical and theological assumptions of the discipline as a whole and in a particular project as a part of that whole. Likewise, in terms of outcomes, the call to discipleship can and should be explored in the ethical consequences,

attributes of wisdom which might be gained from research, or actions which remain faithful to our calling.

Often faculty challenge this: “so are you telling us that we have to become philosophers and theologians?” With the implication that that ain’t happening. I like the answer offered by Steve Jensen’s essay, “Faith Integration and the Irreducible Metaphors of Disciplinary Discourse.”⁴ Using the language of discourse analysis, Jensen observes that disciplinary competition is at the heart of the academic enterprise, as each discipline strives for legitimacy and authority. While each discipline regularly borrows from other disciplines, those who do interdisciplinary work don’t subordinate their discipline (in my case, history), to another discipline (for this example, theology.) Rather, they recognize the strengths and limits of the various disciplines, use them within their limits, and subordinate the package to something which transcends all disciplines, such as wisdom or, as I suggest above, discipleship.

“Integration” is not an overlay; it is not a Christian veneer over an otherwise secular project. Just the opposite; it reworks the foundation. That said, “integration” also does not mean that we must all become credentialed philosophers and theologians. Integration asks neither for additional credentials, nor for simply laying hands on academic production and blessing it. Integration asks for discipleship. For many scholars, this will probably include reading in philosophy and theology, or reading some of the many books and articles Christians have written about our disciplines. It might include writing some ourselves. It might include actively seeking out and attending conferences that pursue the meanings and values of our disciplines from Christian perspectives. It might include reading or writing for the discipline-specific journals

⁴ Steven Jensen, “Faith Integration and the Irreducible Metaphors of Disciplinary Discourse,” *Christian Scholar’s Review*, XXXIV:1, Fall 2009, 37-55.

that value biblical perspectives. It ought to include studying the Bible and seeking illumination from our Lord in prayer. It might include feeling the pleasure and creativity of God in our work. It ought to include asking critical questions of our disciplines and our faith and thoughtfully, prayerfully considering the values and agendas of our teaching, our creativity and performance, and our research. It certainly includes repentance. As is true of all discipleship, nobody expects us to be exhaustive, but it is appropriate that faculty grapple with the issues seriously and in a manner faithful to the Lord who calls us.

A substantial collection has already been written on the integration of faith and disciplines. A variety of bibliographies are available from InterVarsity's Grad and Faculty Ministry webpage: <http://www.intervarsity.org/gfm/features/bibliographies> lists a general bibliography for Christian academics, one for women in the academy and one for historians. A bibliography for Christians in business can be found here: http://www.intervarsity.org/gfm/mba/resource_item.php?id=1804. A series of discipline-specific bibliographies can be found in the side bar at the Union University website <http://www.uu.edu/books/>. Other bibliographies are available of course, as well. I have a bibliography (of well over two hundred sources) that I can email to you easily enough.

If nothing else, these bibliographies accentuate the presence of an active, energetic Christian community interested in these issues. They encourage faculty to join in dialogue as we work to reinvigorate a biblical faith at the foundation of our disciplines.