Culture-Creators and Critical Thinkers

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CULTURE-CREATORS AND CRITICAL THINKERS

In early November, Dordt’s English department and Andreas Center hosted the fall conference “Culture, Criticism, and the Christian Mind.”

“We wanted to put on something that would be engaging and relevant,” says Howard Schaap, an English professor at Dordt. “It was amazing to have Alissa Wilkinson—who was at Sundance not long ago—talking to Scott Teems about writing as a Christian for Narcos and to hear Bradford Winters talk about the morality of Berlin Station. When it was all over, we sat back and said, ‘Yes, that was exactly what we had in mind. That was fun.’”

The conference was the latest in a series of bi-annual conferences co-sponsored by the Andreas Center. Through these conferences, the Andreas Center seeks to live out its mission to do “Christian scholarship in public for the common good of the academy, the church, and society.”

The November conference theme was chosen, in part, after the prominent journal Books & Culture closed up shop after a run of 21 years. Some see the end of the journal as the end of an era, particularly as a generation of Christian scholars and public intellectuals retires.

“Who will step into the gap?” asks Dr. David Henreckson, director of the Andreas Center. “Social critics remind us constantly of the shortcomings of American Christianity. We need new signs of hope—occasions to form new friendships and intellectual communities that faithfully pursue artistic and scholarly excellence.”

The conference hosted a variety of talented speakers from different Christian institutions. John Wilson, former Books & Culture editor, talked with Wes Hill, an author, about the state of Christian scholarship. The audience eavesdropped as these two articulate old friends discussed their mutual love of books.

“With all conferences, there’s an element of unpredictability—of ‘chemistry’—in the way things come together,” says Wilson. “But in this case, the chemistry was great.”

In the second plenary, Vox film critic Alissa Wilkinson, Berlin Station showrunner Bradford Winters, and Rectify writer Scott Teems offered a glimpse into their work in the television and film industry. Having experienced open and respectful conversations about their faith, they discussed the misperception that the industry is adversarial toward Christians. For the final plenary, James C. Schaap spoke with author Randy Boyagoda about his forthcoming novel: a story of complex familial relationships that is both comedic and deeply moving.

Other events during the conference included a podcast recording on T. S. Eliot’s essay “The Idea of a Christian Society,” film screenings of Berlin Station, and a documentary on Hal Holbrook who spent 63 years in a one-man show as Mark Twain. Conference breakout sessions featured topics such as the writings of Cormac McCarthy, the films of Terrence Malick, and race and the church.

Evenings were filled with concerts and a poetry open mic night.

“I was grateful to see our concept—creating conversation and inviting a broad range of voices, formats, and activities—become reality,” says Bob De Smith, Dordt English professor. “It led to wonderful conversations and lasting connections.”