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## Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness (Book Review)

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reducing greenhouse emissions will destroy wealth building: “If one understands our current political and economic systems and energy regime as complicit in the production of vulnerability and marginalization [i.e. victims of environmental decline including global warming]—not to mention climate change itself—one cannot expect business as usual to do anything but perpetuate, if not deepen, the production of vulnerability” (53).

Part II—“A Christian College Takes Some Initial Steps”—begins with a chapel meditation by Sir John Houghton, a leading world climatologist from Oxford, who formed and headed the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. This meditation was part of the Evangelical Student Summit held at Wheaton in January of 2007. Houghton’s deep devotion and confessional grounding in the scriptures come immediately to the fore. The chapter ends with the text of a little-known but wonderfully expressed hymn based on Proverbs 6 by William Cowper in 1779.

Student Ben Lowe contributed two chapters about the greening of Wheaton College: “An Unlikely Tree Hugger” and “A Bigger Vision.” Reading his narrative gives one a very good glimpse of Wheaton’s story with all its intellectual, social, confessional, and institutional challenges. As Lowe describes his personal journey of becoming committed to Creation care, he shows unusual depth of Christian conviction, creative thinking, and enthusiastic leadership for building a campus community that would support these kinds of changes at Wheaton. For example, he helped found the first student chapter at Wheaton of *A Rocha*, an international Christian conservation agency, and served on Wheaton’s first Environmental Stewardship Advisory Committee (ESAC). Lowe was no doubt one of the key people behind the whole movement at Wheaton. He has since graduated and works for *A Rocha USA* and recently authored the book *Green Revolution, Coming Together to*

*Care for Creation* (Intervarsity Press, 2009).

One of the best chapters, in my estimation, is written by Vincent. E. Morris, who serves as Wheaton’s Director of Risk Management. Morris is no typical MBA; he also holds degrees and experience in theology and youth ministry. A short passage that captures his passion and understanding and that no doubt served to convict President Litfin reads, “[C]reation care is not like other kinds of theological positions. We do not choose between it and other priorities. We each demonstrate a level of creation care—or lack of it—every day. We all must eat and use energy [. . .] and generate trash. We ‘take a position’ on creation care simply by living. We cannot remain neutral on the subject, as we might on the proper mode of baptism. Everything we do every day personally and institutionally at the college demonstrates our care for creation or lack of it” (107). Litfin appointed Morris to organize and chair their new Environmental Stewardship Advisory Committee. The chapter ends with three draft appendices: a “Theological Basis Statement,” a “Stewardship Cost-based Decision Matrix,” and a “Consumption-based Decision Matrix.” This chapter could well serve as a guideline for any college seeking to position itself to walk more stewardly on the planet and to be more prophetic to its students.

The closing chapter by J.K. Greenberg, a Wheaton geologist, is a soul-gripping chapter that not only summarizes Wheaton’s “greening” experience but also calls gently and compassionately for Christians everywhere to reaffirm humankind’s first calling, to care for and keep the garden and to be partners in life to mitigate the “groaning” creation. I agree.

#### Endnote

Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-6.

Opitz, Donald, and Derek Melleby. *The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007. 144 pages. ISBN-978-1-58743-210-1. Reviewed by Ryan G. Zonnefeld, Assistant Professor of Education at Dordt College.

*The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness* is written to Christian students nearing completion of high school or just beginning collegiate studies. It provides students with an inspiring, solid, and approachable call to integrate faith and learning. Readers who are unfamiliar with this integration, whether attending public or Christian colleges or universities, will appreciate the guidance provided in developing a worldview that encompasses learning as part of service in the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. The recommendations for further reading found at the end of each chapter are helpful for those seeking to delve further into the topics presented.

For first-year students at a Christian college, particularly those who have attended Christian elementary

and secondary schools, the rudimentary scope of this book provides little new knowledge or understanding. Indeed, the “outrageous idea” that God cares about our learning is one which these students have been bathed in for many years. Students with this background, such as the majority of those attending Dordt College, would benefit more from reading texts such as *Deepening the Colors: Life Inside the Story of God* by Syd Hielema or *Engaging God’s World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* by Cornelius Plantinga.

Based on the contexts above, *The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness* has a place for students for whom a worldview that encompasses life and learning is new. Opitz and Melleby have experience working with students

transitioning to college and understand how to present this *outrageous idea* by creatively inviting readers to join them on a story-filled adventure. The authors openly admit that “[T]he subject matter explored here is too rich, too deep, and too personal to be mapped. It is more like a sign staked in your life to point you toward this adventure that we are calling *academic faithfulness*” (7). Opitz and Melleby challenge college students to “put everything that we are and have in service to the King” (9), including learning. They emphasize that developing a Christian perspective on what is being learned is a key element of *academic faithfulness*: “The outrageous idea of this book is that God cares about our academic work” (11).

The book is effectively organized into eight chapters, each building on the previous one and gaining in momentum as does a fly wheel. The opening chapters set the stage by examining the commonly held perceptions that college is “beer and circus” or “grades and accolades.” The “beer and circus” perception addresses the expectation of college life as one of autonomy and careless exploration that often lead to “disengagement from the central purposes of higher education” (17). On the flip side, a second expectation for college students is “grades and accolades.” The authors do not deny the importance of this expectation, but they effectively argue that “grades and accolades” can become an idol in and of themselves. Opitz and Melleby urge students not to conform to these cultural expectations but to develop a different view, one that focuses on a central purpose “to grow in discernment and wisdom” (35) that sets a pattern for the rest of their lives.

The next few chapters of the book provide the reader with the knowledge and insight that are needed to combat the aforementioned perceptions. This is accomplished by presenting the reader with the idea of *worldview*. While there are countless books on worldview that delve more deeply into the topic, Opitz and Melleby draw from these sources and synthesize the basic tenets into an approachable understanding of worldview that remains theologically and philosophically sound. A worldview is described as “a set of spectacles through which we see everything” (43). In other words, worldviews “describe for us the reality that we will experience, [ . . . ] prescribe to us how we ought to live in that reality [ . . . ] [and] proscribe certain possibilities” (44). The authors challenge students not to take their worldview for granted or to mistakenly think that worldviews are easily shed or changed. A limitation of their discussion, however, takes shape in their argument that the influence of social institutions is so great that it is uncommon for persons to question their worldview and that “tinkering with deep assumptions is precarious” (44). In my experience, college students do indeed question their worldview and, in turn, come through with a deeper understanding of their deeply held beliefs.

The flywheel continues to build momentum in chapters five and six, where the authors encourage students to see the Christian mind as rooted in, and in need of,

relationships. This is presented not as a new idea but as a foundational reminder to readers that in order for one to have a true sense of calling and vocation, one’s relationship with God must lie at the center. Only when that relationship is cultivated can students critically examine the theories that underlie their disciplines of study. For readers who see this as a daunting task, the authors encourage them by saying that “it takes time to develop a Christian perspective, and a lifetime to contend with the ravages of sin” (74).

To develop this Christian perspective, two strategies of learning are presented: fish-eyed learning and four-i-ed learning. In the same way that each eye of the fish looks in different directions while looking forward at the same time, fish-eyed learning seeks to keep “one eye in the Word and the other on the matter at hand” (78) in a manner that helps clarify one’s worldview like never before toward integrating faith and learning.

The second strategy, four-i-ed learning, has four stages. It begins with the biblical idea of *integration*, where learning is presented not just as an avenue toward a job or self-improvement but as “a way to love God and neighbor, a way to care for the creation and develop healthy communities” (86). The second stage of four-i-ed learning is recognizing *idolatry*. Unfortunately, Opitz and Melleby argue, many college students are not equipped to recognize idolatry and mistakenly “think of academic work as neutral, and [ . . . ] faith as irrelevant to the task. Our culture is so disinterested in radical loyalty to God that we don’t recognize idolatrous ideologies, unbiblical worldviews, and incoherent values systems” (87). Ideologies and worldviews in textbooks are too often accepted at face value. Students must analyze these ideas and carefully deconstruct them in light of their biblical worldview. This analysis leads to the third stage: *investment* in a worldview that sees the “need to study and work, not for success, but instead as an expression of faithfulness and service” (91). This investment is brought to full expression in stage four, *imagination* of “looking beyond *the way things are* toward *the way things may be*” (93). The authors warn students, using the words of Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, that without imagination and radical dreams, the story begins to close as does our hope.

With fish-eyed and four-i-ed learning strategies in place, the final two chapters stress the importance of going beyond reading *about* academic faithfulness to actually embarking on the journey. Too often Christian students do not address the greatest needs of the world because they don’t see their effort as being big enough to make a difference. Opitz and Melleby remind readers that faithful steps may be small, but making a difference is not the goal; *faithfulness* is our mission: “God will bring success in time, and it will be colossal and complete” (127). Again, the goal is a faithful life, a life where *academic faithfulness* is not work—it is life . . . it is worship. Indeed, life in the academy is not preparation for life in the real world. It can be, . . . it *is* life in the real world.