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Nicholas Wolterstorff

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Fifty Years Later



by Nicholas Wolterstorff

I remember well the founding fifty years ago of Dordt College; I grew up sixty miles north in Edgerton and heard all about it. I also remember well its founder, B.J. Haan. My personal family and my extended family were all great admirers of B.J., as he was familiarly called. I had already graduated from Calvin and was in graduate school when Dordt began. Had I been ten years younger, I might well have been sent to Dordt and become one of its early graduates. Who knows what difference that would have made!

Since my memories extend across the fifty years of Dordt's existence, I decided that what I would do in this presentation is take the occasion of this fifty-year anniversary convocation to reflect on these fifty years. I do not intend to reflect on

Dr. Nicholas Wolterstorff is the Noah Porter Professor Emeritus of Philosophical Theology at Yale University.

the changes and growth in Dordt's student body and faculty, its campus, and all that—I don't know enough about those things. Rather, I intend to reflect on the academic project of Dordt, both the project itself and its acceptance in the wider world. What I will be presenting is, as it were, a State of the Project Report.

What was and is that project? Let me first put it very simply: It is the project of *Christian learning*.

The classic picture in the modern West of properly conducted learning, shared by the great bulk of scholars, Christian and non-Christian alike, is that one engages in academic learning just as a generic human being—not as a Christian, not as a Jew, not as an American, not as a woman, not as a Dutch-American or African-American, not as a twenty-first-century person, but just as a human being. When one enters the halls of learning, one is to shed oneself of all particularities and practice one's discipline as a generic human being. One is to neuter oneself – for the time being. The assumption is that particularities are biases, prejudices; they block objectivity. So one leaves them in the entry. One can put them on again when one leaves for home.

The project of Christian learning rejects this picture. It says that we engage in learning as who we are. We do not and cannot strip off our particularities. In particular, if one is a Christian, one engages in learning *as a Christian*; for that is what one is. That is one's identity.

I hope that these comments remove some of the blandness from the phrase "Christian learning." It is not a bland project at all; it is a radical project. When those who embrace the classic modern picture hear the phrase "Christian learning," they think of it as bad learning, biased learning, prejudiced learning. For them, the phrase is

not bland but offensive.

Where did our forebears get this idea of Christian learning? They got it from the Dutch neo-Calvinist version of the Reformed tradition—in particular, from Abraham Kuyper. Certain views that Kuyper had about the nature of academic learning and the nature of the intellectual side of the self played a role in his idea of Christian learning; but it was principally a certain religious vision that was at work, a vision of religious wholeness. Kuyper hated with every bone in his body any suggestion that Christ's redemption had to do only with some part of reality and that Christian faith has to do only with some part of life. Christ redeems the entire cosmos, not just souls. His grace is shed on everyone, not just on Christians. Faith is to infuse one's entire life, not just some religious part. Fallenness runs throughout our existence. You get the picture: at every point, wholeness. The

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That was the project for which Dordt was founded. And that's where the project came from. Now for the State of the Project Report. How has the project fared over these fifty years? At this point we have to remember that the project has been the project not only of Dordt but also of Calvin College, King's College, Redeemer College, and yet others. Let me start by asking how the project has fared in the wider world. Has it grabbed the imagination of anyone beyond the walls and

constituencies of a handful of colleges influenced by the neo-Calvinist tradition?

The project has fared very poorly in its country of origin, the Netherlands. The project of Christian learning has almost no presence on the Dutch intellectual scene today. Why that is the case is a topic that I don't have the time to discuss. In North America, the situation is strikingly different. Unlike the Netherlands, on this continent fifty years ago almost no one had heard about the project. People in the big universities certainly had not. Likewise, people in the Protestant Christian colleges had not.

One may find it surprising that people in the other Protestant colleges did not know about the project. If their project was not that of Christian learning, what was it? In the mid-1950s, many of the Christian colleges were simply disoriented. They didn't know what they were doing; they had no coherent philosophy. Those who did know what they were doing worked, for the most part, with a two-story picture.

It went like this. In the various disciplines—theology excepted—one simply engaged in competent learning. Competent learning, it was assumed, would be compatible with the Christian faith. If some piece of learning was not compatible with the Christian faith, that incompatibility existed because incompetence had seeped in somewhere. Using competent learning as one's base, one then developed design arguments to establish that there is a God, and historical arguments to establish the reliability of the Bible. That done, one then added Christian theology and ethics on top of competent learning in the other disciplines.

That was the picture. The thought of Christian learning was nowhere in view. Learning was considered to be either competent learning or incompetent learning. If some secularists refused to accept the design arguments for God's existence and refused to accept the historical arguments for the reliability of the Bible, that refusal indicated that they were biased. At that point, they were not doing competent scholarship.

Today, fifty years later, the situation is profoundly different. The Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities presently has more than one hundred members. There can be no doubt that

the dominant perspective among them is that of Christian learning. And if one takes the Christian colleges in general, Catholic as well as Protestant, I think everyone would agree that, among those colleges that take their religious bearings seriously, the Reformed and the Catholic perspectives are today easily the dominant ones. I want to beware of being triumphalist here. However, the extent to which, over these fifty years, the project to which Dordt dedicated itself has gained acceptance in the Christian college movement is extraordinary.

To get the full picture, we must add to these developments in the Christian college movement the extraordinary flowering, over the past fifty years, of Christian professional organizations in the various academic disciplines and professions. Naturally I know philosophy best. The Society of Christian Philosophers was founded in 1978. It now has some 1300 members worldwide, many of them at the very top of the profession. Not all members of the Society think of themselves as engaged in Christian philosophy; but most of them do. Similar developments, though somewhat less dramatic, have occurred in a good many of the other disciplines and professions.

What about awareness and acceptance of the project outside the Christian colleges and outside the Christian professional organizations? Unfortunately, I cannot on this occasion develop this point as it should be developed. Let me confine myself to observing that the emergence of the Christian professional organizations means that Christian learning has begun to find its voice on the American academic scene generally. That is certainly true in philosophy. Very few philosophers are unaware of the emergence of Christian learning as a prominent component within present-day philosophy.

We are living through fascinating developments on this score. Here is what Stanley Fish, the well-known rascally literary critic, wrote in a recent issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*:

Announce a course with “religion” in the title, and you will have an overflow population. Announce a lecture or panel on “religion in our time” and you will have to hire a larger hall. And those who come will not only be seeking knowledge; they will be seeking guidance and inspiration, and many of them will believe that

religion—one religion, many religions, religion in general—will provide them. Are we ready? We had better be, because that is now where the action is. When Jacques Derrida died I was called by a reporter who wanted to know what would succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy. I answered like a shot: religion.

Of course, to take religion seriously in the academy is not yet to acknowledge the legitimacy in the academy of a religious voice—a Christian voice, for example. One might take religion seriously just as an object of study. But my experience tells me that more and more academics are beginning to admit that, given radical changes in how we understand the academic enterprise, and given the prominence of religion in the United States and around the world, the religious voice can no longer be excluded.

Let me close with some remarks about the project itself—not now about the acceptance of the project but about the project itself. I think the project has begun to produce some truly excellent work. Rather than spelling that work out in detail, I want to move beyond expressions of praise and hope to self-criticism. I think we have not always thought and talked about the project as well as we could have, and that our reluctance or inability to do so has hindered its progress. Lest there be any doubt on the matter, let me say that I am myself intensely committed to the project. I have devoted my life to it.

We in the colleges of the Reformed tradition have often used the language of “integration” to describe the project—not as often as people in the other Christian colleges, but nonetheless often. The project, we have said, is to integrate faith and learning. I have come to think that the metaphor of integration is a poor choice of metaphor. It suggests that the scholar is presented with two things, faith and learning; and that these two must somehow be tied together. The two-story metaphor has been discarded; no longer do we think in terms of placing faith on top of learning. Still, the assumption of duality remains. The idea now is that we tie them together somehow—find the right baling twine and the right place to attach it.

I submit that the project of Christian learning, rightly understood, rejects the assumption of duality that underlies the metaphor of integration. Here is an example of the point: the dominant ideology behind philosophy of art of the past two centuries is that art is an exception to the fallenness of our society; art has redemptive significance. How am I to integrate that ideology with my Christian faith? It can't be done. I have to reject it, not integrate it; and having rejected it, I have to rethink philosophy of art and aesthetics so that it becomes faithful to my Christian conviction. What emerges, if I am successful, is not an integration of two separate things but just one thing: a philosophy of art faithful to Christian conviction. I have never found what seemed to me the absolutely right metaphor. However, better than the integration metaphor is the metaphor of seeing through the eyes of faith. When you look at something, you look at it with your eyes; you don't look at it and then also at your eyes.

Second, we have sometimes used language which suggests that the Christian scholar starts over. This idea goes back to passages in Kuyper where he talks of Christian learning as the *expression* of Christian conviction. However, that is not how learning goes; learning is never pure self-expression. In my own case, I as a committed Christian engage a philosophical tradition that is now 2500 years old. That's what I do; I engage that tradition. I engage it as who I am, a Christian. I don't start over. Nobody starts over.

That distinction leads me to a third point. I have come to think that one of the most important things we who are committed to this project can do is recover the Christian tradition and articulate a Christian narrative. By recovering the Christian tradition, I mean this: we have too much acted as if there were almost no Christian learning before Kuyper. We have shown ourselves to be in that way painfully modern. Thereby we dishonor our Christian predecessors and profoundly impoverish ourselves. You and I are the inheritors of two thousand years of rich Christian learning; it is time for us to become far more serious about recovering it.

By articulating a Christian narrative, I mean this: we have allowed the secularists to tell their secularizing story on all kinds of matters. Instead

of contesting their narratives, we have uncritically accepted them. For example, we have accepted a secularizing story about the emergence of the idea of human rights and of religious liberty. The truth is that these are not secular Enlightenment inventions; they come from the cradle of Christianity. The Church Fathers were already talking about natural human rights. Your and my Christian forebears gave their lives for the cause of liberty. The

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Christian community today is desperately in need of accurate alternative narratives. Lacking those, we are always on the defensive.

Fourth, in our talk about Christian learning, we rather often insist, suggest, or imply that Christian learning is different learning; we then find ourselves plunged into all those tired arguments about whether there is a Christian physics, whether there is a Christian logic, and the like. For some among us, especially mathematicians and physical scientists, this way of thinking and talking has been oppressive. Faithful as they try to be, they don't see all that much difference within their own discipline. As a result, they are made to feel stupid or non-devoted by colleagues who are telling them that Christian learning has to be different learning. Why let difference be the criterion? Why allow ourselves to be caught in the situation of finding some non-Christian agreeing with us and then having to say, "Oops, I'll have to do it over again so that there's a difference?" Why not praise the Lord for the fact that they got it right? What element in Christian thought or Christian theology would lead to the conclusion that everybody who is not a Christian is entirely blind to reality? I suggest that fidelity, not difference, is the fundamental consideration. Christian learning is the project of fidelity within the field of learning to God in Jesus

Christ and the Christian scriptures. The faithful Christian scholar lets other people worry about difference.

Finally, I have come to think that often we make it too hard for ourselves. We overlook, or dismiss as unimportant, some of the obvious marks of fidelity. For example, I have slowly over the years come to the conclusion that one of the ways in which the Christian scholar shows his or her fidelity to Christ is how she treats her fellows in the discipline—and how she treats her predecessors. There is a lot of abusive talk among academics. The Christian scholar should have nothing to do with that talk. We should follow Paul's instruction, and honor all. We should disagree, yes, but remember that we are disagreeing with a creature who, like us, bears the image of God.

That's my State of the Project Report. I have suggested that there is room for improvement in how we think and talk about the project. But the project of Christian learning, to which Dordt dedicated itself two score and ten years ago and to which I also dedicated myself two score and ten years ago, is alive and thriving. The blessing of God has been upon it. May it continue so.