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Carl E. Zylstra

Dordt College

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Faith-Based Learning: The Conjunction In Christian Scholarship



by Carl E. Zylstra

Recently, in order to continue our college's membership in one of the Christian college associations to which we belong, I signed a form declaring that Dordt College is an institution that practices, "the integration of faith and learning." The reason signing that form may have been at least a little less than honest is not because Dordt College doesn't stand for Christian scholarship but because I'm still not convinced we can arrive at Christian scholarship by trying to combine faith and

Dr. Zylstra is the President of Dordt College. This article is based on the text of his 1997 Convocation address.

learning. As I said in my inaugural address last year, "This is not a college where we combine biblical scholarship and academic study. . . [or] combine faith and learning."¹

Now certainly Dordt College is committed to Christian scholarship. We are convinced that, as the Bible says, every thought must be made captive to Jesus Christ (II Corinthians 10:5), the one without whom no corner of our world has been created (John 1:1), a world in which there is not now one square inch about which he does not say, "This is mine." (I Corinthians 15:25-27).

In fact, at the beginning of this academic year we need once again to reaffirm our dedication to the principle that all scholarship and learning must be imbued with solid biblical principles and dynamic Christian faith. In that sense I have no problem with all this talk about faith and learning, about faith and scholarship. Rather, as the title of this article would indicate, it's the conjunction that bothers me.

During the past year I've been taking notes on this subject, being especially intrigued at the release this summer of Notre Dame professor and American historian George Marsden's new volume on *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*.² On the one hand, it's wonderful to read Professor Marsden's bold assertion that Christian faith and learning ought to have the right to be brought together in the world of contemporary scholarship. At the same time, I'm troubled that even as distinguished a Reformed scholar as George Marsden would still use the somewhat misleading conjunction *and*³ or the only slightly

preferable word *to*' as his links between the two terms faith and learning.

Now an aversion to such a conjunction of "faith and learning" or even "faith to learning" is nothing new on this campus. A little more than a year ago during a gathering here at Dordt College, one of our communication professors, Dr. Daryl VanderKooi, challenged the president of the Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities to abandon use of the description "Integration of faith and learning" as the title for a series of publications put out by the Coalition. As Dr. VanderKooi expressed it, once anyone starts using the word "and" to relate two terms, we've conceded that the two things (in this case faith and learning) really are two discrete and essentially separate entities.

More recently one of our engineering professors, Dr. Charles Adams, made the same point on a KDCR radio commentary in which he lauded the central theme of Marsden's book but cautioned that the flaw of trying to try to combine faith *and* learning or even relating faith *to* learning may finally undercut the integrity of the whole project of Christian scholarship.⁵

And then, at this year's opening meeting of our faculty and staff, our Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dr. Rockne McCarthy, related an episode from this past summer in which the dean of evangelical Christian philosophers, Dr. Arthur Holmes, retired professor from Wheaton College, also emphasized the same principle. According to Holmes, it wasn't until he had been challenged by early Dordt College Professor Nick Van Til to stop trying to combine faith *and* learning that he himself really made progress in developing authentically Christian academic thought.

Yet, if we no longer want to talk about faith and learning, what is the alternative? After all, we cannot talk about Christian higher education without both talking about our faith and also talking about our scholarship.

First, we surely don't want to pick up the term "or." Posing a choice of faith *or* scholarship would be to rule out truly Christian scholarship even before we begin. That, of course, is exactly what the secular higher educational establishment does. And that's the spirit against which Professor

Marsden wants to protest. Marsden considers it a tragedy that the history of American scholarship is littered with the remains of colleges and universities which somewhere along the line decided that if it came down to a choice between faith or scholarship, they would choose scholarship.⁶ For instance, when confronted with a choice between hiring a recognized scholar or a person of faith for their faculty, most colleges and universities, says Marsden, have opted to go with scholarship. As the rector of a European university admitted to me, "We'd love to hire Christian scholars. But we have decided that we want to be known as a top tier university and there simply are not enough Christian scholars of that caliber to fill our needs. So we hire the most renown scholars we can find, no matter what their faith."

Throughout its relatively brief history, Dordt College has tried to resist that trend. If there is no faculty candidate of biblical faith available, then from our point of view there simply is no candidate available at all. At least as far as Dordt College is concerned, that really is, as they say, a "no brainer." Or as both of my predecessors in this office put it to me at various times, "If it comes to a choice between hiring someone we really shouldn't hire and hiring no one, go with no one."

So, we can't accept the formula faith *and* learning. And we reject the alternative phrasing, faith *or* learning. Can we perhaps be content with the other common conjunction—what about faith *but* learning?

When I was a boy, preachers used to tell this story about an 18-year-old young man who joined the armed forces. The boy's mother was really concerned that once his comrades in the service discovered the boy's Christian faith they would tease and harass him so much that he would lose his faith. So before he left home, the mother talked with her son a lot about how to deal with those times when people would ostracize him because his faith wouldn't seem to fit in with life in the Army.

After two years the young man was discharged from the army and his mother asked him, "How'd it go son? Did people give you a rough time because you were a Christian?" "No sweat, Mom," the boy replied with some pride. "I got

through my entire two years of enlistment without anyone ever finding out that I was a Christian."

Like such a young person, the world of contemporary higher education will allow us a place at their table provided we also keep quiet about any influence our faith may have within our study and service. In most of academe it's just fine to be a scholar *but* also be a Christian too. Just don't let your Christianity interfere with your scholarship.

That's why a Reformed Christian philosopher can be welcome to teach in a major university provided he is willing to teach in the divinity school where, presumably, scholars are expected to bring their Christian beliefs along with them. Or, even in general academic culture, it's fine to believe in a deity *alongside* your scholarship as long as such belief remains alongside your scholarship. In his response to one of Marsden's earlier writings, James Q. Wilson of Princeton University puzzled as to why Marsden would think that Christianity is unwelcome in the world of higher education since he (Wilson) knew a lot of people who teach in universities but who are Christians too.⁷ And I'm sure he does. But does their being Christian make any difference in their teaching and scholarship?

Here is where Marsden proves helpful. After all, it's not often that a volume about Christian scholarship appears that captures the attention of the higher education establishment and at the same time expresses so vividly a Reformed biblical perspective on what education is all about. And we ought to be extremely grateful that Marsden has thrown down the gauntlet on our behalf, asking, in effect, the bold question: In a world of gender studies, ethnic studies, and cultural studies, just why shouldn't orthodox evangelical Christians also have every right to articulate an orthodox evangelical Christian point of view regarding their fields of study?

We cannot, then, be content with the patronizing benevolence of postmodern skeptics who are willing to let us get by with some sort of schizoid view of life which holds to "faith *but* scholarship." Neither can we accept the secularist insistence which requires that we choose between "faith *or* scholarship," and that the price of our admission into the salons of the academy is the abandonment of our faith. Nor, clearly, can we be satisfied with the conjunction of "faith *and* learning," for that

simply leaves far too much of an impression that what we're trying to do is mix together a couple of things that really don't fit together very well at all, almost as if faith and scholarship resemble vinegar and oil dressing. You can shake them up together for a while in a Christian college, but you'd better pour it quickly before it resumes its natural state and separates once again.

Instead, we must become convinced that the vision of biblical scholarship never will be truly fulfilled as long as we insist on framing our task as that of merging together two disparate streams of the human enterprise, namely faith and learning.

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We are not out to combine faith and learning as if they are two separate endeavors that somehow need to be melded together. On the contrary, our task is to hold every instructor, every student, and our entire academic community to the vision of learning that grows integrally out of faith in Jesus Christ. As we begin our task again this year, we must set out on another year of learning which so expresses that Christian faith that we are stirred and moved to carry out the Holy Spirit's work of reshaping our world for the glory of the God who made it all.

Call it hubris if you will, and in our worst moments presumption it may be, yet as we begin another year in this Christian college, we have a valid reason for gathering these scholars and students together at such great cost and effort only because we are committed to faith-based scholarship that is Christian at its very core. We are convinced that God has called us as administrators and faculty to provide it and we truly believe that God has called us as students to pursue it. That must be the spirit in which we begin our work again today.

For that vision, then, what conjunction can we use? To be fair, Marsden himself seems somewhat uncomfortable with the phrasing of faith and learning, using at times the concept of faith-informed scholarship.⁸ And that is something of an improvement. Such terminology at least points toward faith so penetrating our scholarship that it shapes and forms what we students and scholars actually do.

At the same time, the notion of faith-informed scholarship leaves me with the image of my grandson sitting on the floor with a can of Play Doh and using cookie cutter molds to press the clay into shape. Faith shaping scholarship may be a concept that gets us started. But it really doesn't provide a picture of faith in a Lord of heaven and earth—a faith that so shapes who we are that all our learning and scholarship simply has to result from our love for Jesus Christ and our absolute dependence on His Word as the measurement of everything we do, our scholarship included. Somehow we must learn to express the truly integral character of biblically formed faith as the ground work for all fully developed scholarship.

It could be that the medieval philosophers had a better handle on this issue than do we. Think of the slogan, *credo ut intelligam* ("I believe in order to understand"). It's true that some would have limited that sentiment to justifying the validity of theology as a science—or even to argue that theology should control science. Still, the phrase is a good start. Perhaps an even better motto, however, also from the medieval times, would be the equally well known, *fides quaerens intellectum* ("faith seeking understanding"). That slogan which has been called the hallmark of Augustinian thought⁹ certainly became the guiding spirit by which Calvin, Kuyper, and others have burst beyond the confines of theology in order to explore all of creation in the light of the biblical faith.

Those centuries old slogans capture a spirit that makes today's prattle about the integration of faith appear as superficial as it really is. Those earlier scholars were not afraid to boldly claim that the only way to understand the world that God had made and over which he rules is to believe in the God who made this world in the first place and to place our trust in his Son Jesus Christ who has

come to redeem it. Nor were those pre-modern scholars hesitant to assert that faith in a creator God and trust in a redeeming Lord demands a life-long commitment to knowledge of the world that he has made and in which his kingdom comes.

Maybe what we need is a wider selection of conjunctions. When I was learning English grammar, we usually were taught about the three conjunctions we've already covered today (and, or, but), none of which really seems to work for describing the role of faith in Christian scholarship. However, today, according to the contemporary American Heritage Dictionary on my shelf, we are welcome to include words like "as" and "because" in our list of conjunctions. So, as did the medievals, perhaps we need to start using the conjunction "because" as our connection between the two terms, so that we wind up talking about learning *because* of faith. For once we've moved to relating the terms with a conjunction such as "because" we can abandon the futile exercise of trying to balance two somewhat coordinate ideas. Instead we can illumine the relationship as one where learning is based on, grows out of, and takes form according to the faith which underlies it.

It may be that some would resist such a move to what grammarians call a subordinating conjunction like "because." Perhaps use of such a conjunction sounds as if we're moving back to a more medieval concept where all scholarship is subordinate to theology. Yet that's not really the point. The term "because" only describes the essential nature faith plays in setting the foundation for all scholarship. And as every builder knows, the nature of the foundation finally shows itself in the shape of the structure that is built on it.

To borrow a phrasing with some currency today, why not stop talking about faith and learning altogether and instead insist that what we are about is faith-based learning. In the world of philanthropy and social service, describing certain charities as religious seems to have faded in favor of describing them as "faith-based" institutions, a description applied to relief and charity agencies that are based on one or another particular faith (Christian, Jewish, or perhaps some other) while also clearly carrying out significant and important social functions (helping the poor, serving the abused or neglected, and so forth).

Wouldn't such a formulation work for Christian colleges too? Cannot we describe ourselves as a "faith-based" college where we pursue faith-based learning, that is, learning built upon our biblically informed faith? It's not so much that we are trying at every step to impose a particular theological slant on all we discover and learn. If we did so, the skeptics of academe would have a right to complain about the results of such tinkering with meaningful scholarship. Slapping a Christian veneer on an otherwise indistinguishable educational enterprise would be about as meaningful as going through a community of newly built houses, painting a Bible verse on the front door of a few, and then declaring that those are the Christian homes.

What we need to do is build a structure of scholarship and learning upon the foundation of biblically informed faith. Such a structure, in turn, will reveal by its very shape and character, the nature of the foundation of faith on which it is built. What this college needs to be doing, then, is creating a community of faith out of which and in which is built the very structure of learning needed to honor the Lord in whom we place our faith, a structure of learning from which we can go out to serve our God as people who truly live our faith in everything we do. Our learning is shaped by and results from our faith. Rather than a place that pastes together faith and learning, let us resolve that again this year we will strive to be a truly

faith-based college which is filled with the learning that comes because of our faith.

Let this, then, be a year in which we resist the temptation to think that our education has become Christian because we've slapped a few Bible verses onto the end of a research paper.

Let this be a year in which we avoid traps similar to those my graduate school colleagues and I fell into when, in our study of educational theory, we simply grabbed the latest research from human developmental psychology, laminated it onto issues of Christian faith maturity, and called it Christian scholarship.

Let this be a year in which we are so grounded in our common faith in Jesus Christ and so shaped by His Word that as we study and learn together, every aspect of our scholarship simply has to arise out of and take shape according to that faith.

Let this then be a year in which we pray together, study together, engage in service projects together, live together, play together, love together, learn together, and in it all glorify God together. Indeed, may this be a year in which every aspect of our college life truly is worthy of the name of Jesus Christ.

That will surely be more than enough to keep us busy this year—and until Jesus comes again. So let us now begin. And to him alone will be all the glory.

Soli Deo Gloria.

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