
Pro Rege

Volume 11 | Number 2

Article 3

December 1982

Communal Scholarship: What is It? An Introduction to the Question

John Van Dyk
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Van Dyk, John (1982) "Communal Scholarship: What is It? An Introduction to the Question," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 11: No. 2, 9 - 17.

Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol11/iss2/3

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.



A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

Communal Scholarship: What Is It?

An Introduction to the Question*

John Van Dyk
Professor of Philosophy



John Van Dyk is Professor of Philosophy at Dordt College and occupies a chair in the Dordt College Studies Institute. A graduate of Calvin College and the University of Michigan, he has a Ph.D. in Medieval Studies from Cornell University.

Introduction

As academicians we generally agree that communal scholarship ought to play a significant role in Christian higher education. Indeed, no Christian college or university would willfully oppose communal scholarship. One would think, then, that in view of the unanimity of opinion about its importance, communal scholarship would be a common, widespread, and well established practice on all levels of Christian higher education. The surprising and distressing fact is, however, that this is not the case. Closer observation reveals not only

that in spite of much talk and lip service there is actually very little communal scholarship going on, but also that there is no communal understanding of communal scholarship. Communal scholarship, in other words, means different things to different people. As a result, there is much confusion. Such confusion undoubtedly contributes to the absence of communal scholarship: a lack of a clear and common understanding of its nature obviously inhibits the practice of communal scholarship. Moreover, the absence of a common conception of communal scholarship prevents us from articulating useful criteria for the

*This article is an adaptation of a discussion paper presented at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto on November 4, 1981, and at Dordt College on February 18, 1982.

evaluation of whatever communal scholarship does in fact exist.

This article assumes that we agree on the importance of communal scholarship. Its aim, therefore, is restricted to an examination of the confusion surrounding this topic, an attempt to find some directions, and a sketch of some possible courses of action.

The confusion

A basic and minimal component of communal scholarship is the idea of "engaging in scholarship together." Confusion, uncertainty, and disagreement emerge, however, when we ask questions such as the following: Is the term "communal scholarship" synonymous with "joint scholarship"? How do we recognize the presence or absence of "working together in scholarship," that is, what situations qualify as instances of "working together in scholarship"? When, in fact, do we *have* communal scholarship? What characterizes communal scholarship? Is all Christian scholarship by its very nature communal scholarship? Is communal scholarship essentially a matter of *how* we do scholarship, rather than of *what* we do?

From simple observation it can be argued that the diversity of understanding of communal scholarship ranges from what we might call the very strict to the very loose. Very strict definitions of communal scholarship would insist that scholars and teachers actually work together not merely in the same location but also on the same project. Such definitions assume that communal scholarship is a specifically identifiable activity, clearly distinguishable from other kinds of scholarship. Loose definitions, on the other hand, would describe communal scholarship as Christian scholars doing their work within the context of certain institutions or of certain educational and philosophical perspectives. Such definitions imply that communal scholarship is more or less automatic and occurs instantaneously as soon as an academic institution is established

and faculty members begin their work. Conversely, the loose view also implies that the absence of communal scholarship is a virtual impossibility, since all scholarship on a given Christian campus can be regarded as communal scholarship.

Compounding the confusion is the question about the relationship between the concepts "communal scholarship," "academic community," and "academic institution." Of these the last one seems easiest to specify: an academic institution is a specific, usually localized, societal structure endowed with the tasks of research and of implementing formal education by way of an organized curriculum. Those who are engaged in this task—administrators, faculty, and students—comprise the academic community. But the term "academic community" obviously encompasses more than those involved in any one specific institution; it includes, for example, faculty from other institutions. For us Christian educators, the concept "academic community" usually refers to at least two sets of academics, namely, all those who are involved in Christian higher education—the academic arm of the body of Christ—and all those who are working in the same general area of research, regardless of religious affiliation or philosophical perspective.

The question now arises whether the distinction between academic community and communal scholarship is meaningful. It probably is for those who define communal scholarship in the strict sense. For them communal scholarship is a circumscribed activity in which the academic community from time to time engages. Proponents of the loose sense of the term, on the other hand, since they do not require communal scholarship to come to visible and explicit expression, will in all likelihood see no essential difference between communal scholarship and the Christian academic community in general. For them mere participation in the Christian educational enterprise is enough to count as communal scholarship. That is, membership in the academic com-

munity automatically constitutes participation in communal scholarship.

It is important to see that both the strict and loose definitions ultimately destroy genuine communal scholarship. After all, if one defines communal scholarship in a strict sense, then one can argue that such scholarship need not be present on a Christian campus at all. Each individual member of the faculty on such a campus may well be working effectively in his particular discipline, in independence from any one of his colleagues. Such an institution may well be accomplishing its aims without any explicit, overt, "strict" communal scholarship. Of course, proponents of the strict view will admit that at times it may be useful to work together in specific ways on special projects. Or there may be an occasional need for interdisciplinary activity here and there. But such occasions may well be the exception rather than the rule. To adherents of the strict view, in short, communal scholarship is not an essential, perhaps not even significant, component of Christian higher education; its presence or absence is to be determined purely on pragmatic grounds.

The loose definition, meanwhile, eliminates the need to cultivate communal scholarship as well. Communal scholarship, proponents of the looser sense would argue, is merely a matter of scholars working within the context of a certain perspective or spirit, or, more minimally, simply working on a given campus. Thus communal scholarship is assumed to be more or less automatic, to be regarded as a natural and spontaneous ingredient in all Christian higher education. It requires no attention or discussion.

In either case, then, whether one takes communal scholarship in a strict or in a looser sense, genuine communal scholarship suffers. The vision of its place in the academic community is blurred. Even if the categories of communal scholarship in a strict and in a loose sense do not, in fact, accurately reflect the current ranges of opinion and confusion, it surely cannot be denied that both the lack of clarity and the diversity

of understandings have been and continue to be powerful factors inhibiting, if not thwarting altogether, the effective and normative development of communal scholarship among us. It is true as well, unfortunately, that the confusion of tongues about communal scholarship has led to a kind of sloganeering use of the term. It would not be amiss to consider declaring a moratorium on the use of the word until a measure of clarity has been attained.

Some directions

The concept "scholarship" requires some attention. In the first place, we observe that the term, as it stands, is ambiguous. Not only can it refer to (for our purposes irrelevant) matters such as grant monies and scholarly ability, but also to either the activity or the result of study and research. In what follows I confine my use of the term "scholarship" to the *activity* of being engaged in academic research.

We note, in the second place, that scholarship is *human* activity. It requires the presence and engagement of scholars. Thirdly, scholarship can be characterized as scientific, reflective activity, focused on what we may roughly describe as fields of investigation. Fields of investigation, in turn, comprise an encyclopedia. Lastly, scholarly activity is directed towards the goal of attaining insight. Thus, in summary, we may define scholarship as human, scientific (*wissenschaftlich*) activity focused on fields of investigation and designed to acquire insight.

An important feature of scholarly activity is its movement from one level or from one point of insight to another. Scholarship, therefore, exhibits motion, direction, and aim. There is no such thing as motionless, directionless, or aimless scholarship—at least, there ought not to be. Secular scholarship, too, though it may have lost sight of proper aims and has enmeshed itself in contradictions, polarizations, dualisms, and fragmentation, nevertheless pursues a

variety of goals, such as, for example, the acquisition of technological power. Christian scholarship, illumined by the liberating light of the Word of God, is able, in principle, to reestablish the right kind of direction towards the right kind of goal. The movement of Christian scholarship, in other words, can be an obedient, normative one.

What determines the context for normative, obedient Christian scholarship? Two factors come to mind at once: the idea of coherence and the nature of the Christian community. Both of these merit closer examination.

As believing Christians we confess, in contrast with the contemporary world of dualisms and reductionisms, the coherence and interrelatedness of the created order. God's handiwork, we affirm, does not consist of a loose conglomeration of unrelated parts; rather, the creation is a cosmos, an ordered, structured, coherent whole. Our confession and experience of coherence and interrelatedness, let us add, ought to lead to an integrated understanding of the various fields of investigation, that is, of the encyclopedia.

The confession of coherence and interrelatedness is fundamental to our understanding of communal scholarship. It prompts us to describe the movement of obedient, normative scholarship as aimed, so to speak, at the discovery, elaboration, and implementation of insight into (a) the coherence and interrelatedness of a diversified created order, (b) the coherence of our understanding of the created order, more particularly, the coherence of the encyclopedia, and (c) the coherence and integrality of life itself. The fields of investigation on which Christian scholarship focuses, therefore, may not be left in isolation from each other. Indeed, no field of investigation may be regarded by Christian scholarship as unrelated to other fields of investigation. Our confession of a coherent and interrelated created order implies that Christian scholarship must strive on the one hand to place every field of investigation in

the context of and in relation to every other field of investigation, and, on the other hand, to relate the insight into the coherence of both the created order and the encyclopedia to concrete patterns of Christian (communal) life.

Since, from a Christian perspective, all fields of investigation touch each other, all investigative activities, too, touch each other in some way. Given the additional premise that Christian scholarly investigative activity always moves, normatively speaking, toward the ultimate goal of discovering and implementing insight into coherence and interrelatedness, it would follow that Christian scholarship cannot be anything but communal scholarship. Hence the question whether or not we ought to have communal scholarship can no more be asked than the question whether or not we must have *Christian* scholarship. By the same token, if it is asked why there is, in fact, so little visible communal scholarship on Christian campuses, I am afraid we must answer that there is, and has been, so little genuine *Christian* scholarship. Our failure, as Christian academicians and Christian educational institutions, to achieve integrated and integrative insight, or even to be moving towards such insight, has deceived us, I believe, into thinking that vigorous communal scholarship is not important, or not necessary, or not possible.

I move on to the second contextual factor determining communal scholarship, namely, the nature of the Christian academic community. This factor further confirms the thesis that all genuine Christian scholarship is by the nature of the case communal scholarship. Little needs to be said here. We regard the Christian academic community, localized in various institutions, as the academic arm of the body of Christ. Such an arm can function effectively only if its parts—muscles, bones, the elbow, wrist, fingers, and so on—work together in harmonious partnership, in pursuit of the same goal, each doing its task in relation to all the others. We recall at this point Paul's ad-

monitions and injunctions to display unity, to be a body, to be members of one another, to work in concert and in concord for the coming of the Kingdom of God. To regard one's scholarship as a personal and private possession conflicts sharply with the spirit of Paul's words, and, in the final analysis, represents little more than crass individualism.

It should be clear, on the other hand, that Christian scholarship, conceived as communal scholarship, does not preclude individualized effort or specialized study. But such individual research must somewhere along the line be caught up in the movement of Christian scholarship towards insight into coherence. Specialized study, itself in need of mutual and communal critique and support, must not always remain specialized. If it does, then it ultimately loses its relevance and meaning, and contributes to fragmentation and loss of insight. There ought, therefore, to be present in all Christian scholarship, even in individual, specialized, and perhaps esoteric work, a sense of direction and goal, as well as a sense of urgency to relate one's research to the wider context, a context which itself moves beyond the borders of *Wissenschaft* and enables God's people to discern, understand, and implement the will of the Lord in the complexity of contemporary culture.

Procedure and evaluation

If we agree that Christian scholarship is by its very nature communal scholarship, then we must ask how such scholarship is to proceed and how it is to be evaluated. The question of procedure can be treated by briefly considering, first, the need for a community of scholars, and, secondly, the modes in which the communal nature of Christian scholarship becomes visible and subject to evaluation.

It requires little or no argument to see that a community of Christian scholars is indispensable if Christian communal scholarship is to proceed. This does not mean that

scholars must work together in one place. The community of scholars spans the globe. The problem we face is that at present the members of the community are scattered along the highways and byways of the earth, so to speak. We all ought to commit ourselves to do our utmost to call the members of the scholarly community together, whether by way of international journals, international organizations (such as the International Council for the Promotion of Christian Higher Education), international conferences, or whatever. Normatively speaking, a worldwide interacting network of Christian scholars is required in order to carry out an effective program of keeping the academic community informed about projects in progress, of tabulating resources, of identifying problems and needs, and of selecting topics and setting priorities.

Next, let us note that the communal character of Christian scholarship comes to explicit and visible expression in certain recognizable modes. I mention a few: (1) purposeful planning to promote mutual growth of insight; (2) mutual critique; (3) types of scholarship targeted for audiences who can respond and participate in the movement towards the deepening of insight; (4) interdisciplinary and inter-institutional programs of cooperation; (5) programs of reflection, particularly on the foundational level, on the interrelatedness of the created order and the encyclopedia, and on the interaction between theory and practice; (6) the placing of specialization within wider contexts and relationships; and so on. Modes such as these are extremely significant in that they allow us to observe the actual practice and procedures of communal scholarship.

This brings us to the question of evaluation. How shall we assess the presence and effectiveness of communal scholarship? For starters, let us declare that the question "Is our scholarship Christian and therefore communal?" must be centrally and continuously placed before the entire Christian academic community. A self-critical and

mutually critical attitude must prevail. Of course, such an attitude must be firmly anchored in a context of love and must desire to edify and to seek the Kingdom first. Without a self-critical and mutually critical attitude, however, our best intentions are bound to fail. All too soon we tend to revert to familiar, comfortable, individualistic patterns. Ongoing evaluation is therefore of critical importance. Now, since the modes in which communal scholarship expresses itself differ, our criteria for evaluation will differ. Perhaps we can begin by working out a set of personal questions, designed to call us to our obligation to act communally. The following questions loosely follow the list of modes articulated above: (1) Is my scholarship designed for mutual growth? Is it geared to expanding our understanding of coherence and to help us implement such an understanding? If so, how? (2) Has my scholarship been subjected to careful critique by colleagues either within or without my specific field? (3) To whom is my scholarship targeted, and what am I doing to solicit feedback and participation? (4) In what specific ways am I coordinating and planning my research with colleagues from other institutions? (5) To what extent have I placed my scholarship within the framework of a coherent encyclopedia, particularly at the foundational level? (6) If my research is specialized, is the specialization commensurate with larger contexts and relationships? Is it indeed responsible scholarship in terms of more widely understood priorities? And how will this kind of scholarship enhance the ability of God's people to live integrally before the face of the Lord?

Communal scholarship is essential not only to the individual scholar but also to every Christian academic institution as a whole. Hence a Christian academic institution has the task of encouraging, promoting, and facilitating communal scholarship. Particularly important to such work is the articulation of a creed or clear statement of purpose to provide the framework and direction of communal scholar-

ship. Effective administrative leadership, too, is indispensable. All of us should recognize, meanwhile, that communal scholarship is not voluntary or optional in the sense that we are free to engage or not to engage in it, any more than that we, Christian academicians, are free to refuse to engage in *Christian* scholarship. The question of accountability, therefore, looms large, and requires careful attention.

Stumbling blocks

Thus far we have spoken largely from the standpoint of normativity, of what ought to be. Serious discussion of communal scholarship, however, must take into account the debilitating effects of the fall into sin on the Christian academic enterprise. A wide variety of spirits create serious obstacles blocking the way to fruitful Christian communal scholarship. The forces of individualism, synthesis, pragmatism, positivism, and Marxism, to name a few, continue to have their destructive effects, blinding otherwise committed Christians to the real meaning of what they are doing. Communal scholarship is derailed, furthermore, by sinful human tendencies towards pride, ambition, and opinionatedness, by unwillingness to bend or to accept constructive critique, by arrogantly maintaining that only one's own views represent the truth, and regarding—if not treating—the other person's position with contempt and disdain. Ultimately, the love of oneself is *the* great stumbling block. Besides, scholars, Christian scholars included, are frequently plagued by personal and personality problems. Such traits as defensiveness, inflexibility, competitiveness, and high or low self-esteem obstruct the way to communal scholarship.

Other factors play a role as well. Christian scholars are generally very busy people who do not have the time to be concerned about communal scholarship. Many of them are engaged in highly specialized work of such a nature that they see no way, in the foreseeable future, to place their research in

a larger context. The sheer magnitude of the task of "reforming scholarship," moreover, intimidates us and coaxes us to settle down into old and familiar ruts. Then, too, the diversity of the created order and the concomitant diversity of the scientific enterprise seem to place the acquisition of meaningful insight into coherence and integrality beyond our grasp. And not least among the difficulties is the ongoing problem of working out philosophical models to accommodate integrality.

A serious issue is the fact that not every Christian scholar agrees that the development and implementation of insight into coherence and interrelatedness is indeed the goal towards which Christian scholarship ought to be moving. Radical disagreement on this point radically impairs both the commitment to communal scholarship and the establishment of a vibrant Christian scholarly community. A sense of coherence as goal of all Christian scholarly activity is a *sine qua non* of communal scholarship, it seems to me. Perhaps the only *sine qua non*. Consequently, a wide range of disagreement on other matters may be permitted. There is too often a tendency to interpret communal scholarship as cooperation among Christian scholars who agree on practically everything along the line, from detailed philosophical and theological postulations to a preference for bacon and eggs. It is my belief, however, that a measure of scholarly disagreement, even on what may be mutually regarded as important matters, can be a healthy force which nudges us onwards, playfully and joyfully, along the way towards insight into coherence. In all likelihood, genuine Christian communal scholarship is thwarted not so much by authentic scholarly disagreement and dispute as by personality conflicts and by some of the sinful human tendencies mentioned above.

I mention one other stumbling block. It is the competitive spirit of self-protection and a survival mentality about to grip Christian academic institutions, as they face growing pressures exerted by prospects of declining

enrollments and financial insecurity. This spirit powerfully counteracts efforts to establish community and severely inhibits the willingness to work together. Such a spirit is not of the Lord: it substitutes the coming of the Kingdom of this or that institution for the Kingdom of the Lord.

These and other obstacles combine to form a formidable roadblock to communal scholarship. They instill in us a spirit of despair ("It can't be done!") or of complacency ("It doesn't need to be done!"). They make talking about communal scholarship considerably more attractive than doing something about it.

Conclusion and proposals

A glance at the history of Christian scholarship—the writing of such a history might be a good project to undertake—elicits two, somewhat contradictory reactions. On the one hand, there is much cause for gratitude. The individual and collective insights and contributions of dedicated Christian scholars unquestionably reflect the fulfillment of the promise that the Lord is with His people always, and that by His Spirit He leads them onwards into truth. On the other hand, there is plenty of reason for self-criticism and reproach. Failure, incompetence, ineffectiveness, disagreements, self-righteousness, conflict and confrontation, name-calling—the list goes on. We do well, it seems to me, to take stock at this point in history and to ask ourselves: Where is our scholarship now, and where is it going? Not very long ago at a (secular) academic conference I heard a speaker say: "The world of scholarship is composed nowadays of a lot of people saying and writing a lot of words about a lot of things that make no difference." Can that be said of us? We talk much about the reformation of scholarship, about erecting signposts of the Kingdom, about subjecting every square inch of life to the rule of Christ. And when we say these things we quickly point to our many achievements. But perhaps the question that needs to be

posed is not "How much have we accomplished?" but, rather, "Given the rich blessings with which the Lord has blessed us—brilliant and energetic scholars, committed supporters, world-wide communications, money, a bankrupt secularism with which to contrast meaningful Christian insight, opportunities galore—given all these blessings: why have we accomplished so little?"

A question like this evokes a barrage of excuses. And indeed, as we saw, there are all kinds of reasons why Christian scholarship continues to limp along. Above them all, however, hovers another: we have not taken communal scholarship seriously enough.

Suppose, for a moment, that the Christian academic community *would* take communal scholarship very, very seriously. Suppose, furthermore, that the usual obstacles and objections—no time, no money, too much hassle, too much disagreement, etc.—are set aside. Then what would a program, a coordinated effort, to take communal scholarship seriously look like? Well, here is one scenario. It comprises three concurrent programs, as follows:

a. a program of ongoing discussion designed to clarify the nature, prerequisites, and implementation of communal scholarship

This program would have the participation of a variety of people from a variety of institutions, under the leadership of a central committee. Some of the questions to be considered would be the following:

- (i) what is communal scholarship?
- (ii) what prevents its implementation?
- (iii) what conditions must be met before meaningful communal scholarship can be promoted on a world-wide basis?
- (iv) what is the relationship between communal scholarship and the question of long-range planning? That is, what role does communal scholarship play in the answer to the question of where Christian scholarship should be 10, 20, or even 50

years from now?

b. a program of evaluation

Genuine communal scholarship does in fact exist here and there. An evaluative investigation of the character and success of such existing programs would be undertaken. Furthermore, program (a) above would introduce the issue of communal scholarship into current institutions and faculty evaluation procedures, as follows:

(i) every faculty member would be required to include in his self-assessment a description of the extent to which and the ways in which his scholarship does or does not exhibit a communal character. Questions such as those suggested on page 14 above could be used.

(ii) in every job description and appointment evaluation instrument would be written a set of criteria designed to determine the extent to which and the ways in which communal scholarship has or has not been exhibited.

(iii) every Christian academic institution would examine and assess its total program of communal scholarship, particularly its success or failure.

(iv) departments would reflect on the presence and absence of intra- and inter-institutional cooperation.

(v) a process of world-wide evaluation of communal scholarship internationally would be initiated, perhaps through an organization such as the International Council for the Promotion of Christian Higher Education.

c. a program of specific activities geared to promote world-wide communal scholarship, such as the following:

- (i) the production of an enthusiastic and energetic circular or journal exclusively devoted to communal scholarship. Such a circular would, among other things, take inventory of (a) major projects in progress and (b) resources available.

- (ii) the organization of a series of national and international conferences which would articulate priorities and goals, and focus on the planning and co-ordination of Christian scholarly activity throughout the world.

A global scenario of this sort looks formidable, if not impossible, at this stage in the history of Christian scholarship. It may be well, therefore, to suggest a less ambitious, more locally focused program, one which could be implemented on practically any Christian college campus. Its contours would appear as follows:

- a. consider a series of meetings designed to address some important questions:
 - (i) what kinds of communal scholarship have been practiced or are being practiced on our campus?
 - (ii) what factors on our campus inhibit or prevent communal scholarship?
- b. identify areas within the curriculum where communal scholarship would be particularly appropriate. Think, for example, of the following:
 - (i) co-ordination between the philosophy department and the more philosophical courses offered in various departments.
 - (ii) co-ordination between the history department and course offerings in the history of mathematics, history of psychology, political history, history of art, and so on.
 - (iii) co-ordination of courses generally treating a similar topic, such as courses in American history, American literature, and American philosophy.
 - (iv) innovative development of interdisciplinary course offerings designed to address the larger and more pressing and complex problems in the world. A course dealing with the issue of world hunger, for example, would require input from the economics, political science,

- biology, and other departments.
- c. prepare and make use of syllabi of individual courses in order to identify points of contact and overlap.
- d. provide time, and if need be, funds for summer or interim communal work.
- e. present the results of communal scholarship to the faculty for evaluation and to the appropriate committees for implementation.
- f. design co-operative study and writing projects with a view to publication or other ways of disseminating Christian insight.

These are but some of a number of possible scenarios. No sooner do we sketch one, however, or the obstacles begin to rush in. Yet we can see all sorts of encouraging signs. The tide appears to be in favor of communal scholarship. Witness, for example, the Dordt College Studies Institute, the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship, the stress on the community of scholars at academic institutions such as the Institute for Christian Studies and the King's and Redeemer Colleges, and the increased frequency of significant conferences. Most promising are the movements towards international academic cooperation and interaction. The recent shift from ICICHE (International Conference of Institutions for Christian Higher Education) to ICPCHE (International Council for the Promotion of Christian Higher Education) may well signal a most significant, perhaps unique, opportunity. The question we face is this: are the trends toward communal scholarship going to limp along on a strictly ad-hoc and accidental basis, or has the time come for careful, realistic, yet confident planning and co-ordination within a context of long-range goals?

The need for communal scholarship has always existed and will continue to exist. The talk about communal scholarship has not suffered greatly either. But what may be brand new at this time is the appearance of an open door. And if it is the Lord who has opened a door, who are we to close it?