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COMMUNITY, ETHICS, AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH ON CAMPUS

by James W. Thompson

On the great seal of the University of Tübingen, which has been in use since the founding of the university, is the figure of Jesus Christ standing on two books, the Old and the New Testament. In his left hand is the globe, and with his right hand he makes the gesture of teaching. The inscription on the ribbon surrounding him reads: ego sum via, veritas et vita, "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). The seal suggests that all learning is grounded in the authority of Jesus Christ, the true teacher. The Bible is recognized as the foundational document of the university.

The great universities which were established in the Middle Ages were all founded on the conviction that the Christian faith is the foundation for learning. When the university was exported to the new world, no one doubted the Christian character of the institutions of higher learning. Even many of the great public universities of the United States have the inscription, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

The Christian motivation for the establishment of universities was expressed in classic form in the charter of the University of Tübingen, and undoubtedly the same understanding was to be found in other universities. According to the charter of the University of Tübingen,

. . .it is our good intention, in order to help dig the fountain of life, from which the ends of the world may draw inexhaustibly comforting and wholesome wisdom for the liberation from evil, for the protection against human stupidity and blindness, chosen and decided to found in our city of Tübingen a high common school and university.²

A synthesis between the church and the university existed throughout the Middle Ages. Indeed, the university existed for an unambiguously moral purpose: to "draw inexhaustibly comforting and wholesome wisdom for the liberation from evil." In this synthesis the heritage of classical higher education could be made subservient to the Christian faith. The "liberal arts" from classical antiquity could be combined with the truth of revelation to form a Christian tradition of higher education.

In the medieval synthesis the problem of "the Christian and the campus" was not especially acute, for the campus existed to do the work of the church. Indeed, it has been observed that Christians placed their own stamp on the higher education that emerged in the Middle Ages. In these Christian universities, the fundamental needs of human life became priorities: liberation from illness, the battle against injustice, and salvation for eternal life. From these priorities were derived the vocations of the physician, the lawyer, and the clergyman. According to G.

Ebeling, this vocational concept had no predecessor in antiquity. Here education was placed in service to life. Today, however, the tension exists between Christians and institutions of higher learning. The synthesis which united higher education and the church collapsed with the Enlightenment, as the separate disciplines increasingly found their autonomy in methods and results which ignored tradition and revealed truth. The latter part of the twentieth century has resulted in the increasing secularization of learning. The natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities have been liberated from past traditions. Allan Bloom comments that "the humanities took over the whole burden of instructing us about man, especially in morals and esthetics."⁴ One might quarrel with Bloom and argue that the social sciences have become our moral instructors, for their research often contains claims about what it means to be human.

Bloom argues that the area of morality in particular has been undermined by the modern university. One of the central theses in Bloom's polemic is his struggle with the students' belief that truth is relative and that the highest moral good is openness. This belief, according to Bloom, is the consequence of the failure of colleges to cultivate among students a sense of shared goals and a common vision of the public good.⁵ The preferred term of this new culture, he says, is "lifestyle," a term which "justifies any way of life, just as 'value' justifies any opinion."⁶ The loss of moral foundations, he argues, results in universities which, like Heidegger's Freiburg and Cornell in the

1960s, lose all moral high ground and choose to serve the constituency as it wants to be served.

The Christian liberal arts college reflects the attempt to preserve the synthesis between revealed truth and the truth of human wisdom. However, the history of Christian higher education suggests that this synthesis is not easily maintained, for there are forces which result in the tension here also between the academy and the church, between faith and reason. Here also the different disciplines work with the methods and results of the enlightenment. The Christian university cannot be insulated from its culture, for its professors are the products of the same graduate schools which dominate the western cultural heritage, and they teach the same disciplines with the same methods that are recognized in the respective guilds. One is not to assume that the presence of Christian symbols, departments of religion, or daily chapel is adequate to overcome the tension between the Christian and the campus. In both the Christian and the public university, the Christian lives in the tension between Christ and culture, faith and reason. Here the Christian struggles with the old problem of Christ and culture.

An Old Tension

The tension between the church and the university is a very old one indeed. It is present in Paul's apparent disregard for the "wisdom of this world." Here Paul places the wisdom of revelation and the wisdom of the world in sharp opposition to

each other. Paul's discomfort with "worldly wisdom" becomes a major theme among the early church fathers, who experienced the tension between the two worlds of experience. In the late second century Athenagoras contrasted Christian education with that which was offered in the schools, and he argued that Christian education was distinguished by its purpose in building character, a life that corresponded to the Sermon on the Mount.⁷

The most powerful rejection of ancient higher education was given by Tertullian, whose words have often been quoted:

What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from the 'porch of Solomon,' who had himself taught that 'the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart. . . . With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides.⁸

The early Christian struggle with the academy is also reflected in Augustine's Confessions, where he indicates his appreciation of elementary learning, but doubts the value of his learning from Homer and other ancient writers. For Augustine, the essential weakness of higher education was that it was not directed to the true and the good, but glorified evil and gave room to the obscene.⁹

Jerome's struggle with classical education is reflected in an incident which he recalls, which occurred during a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He recalls that, even after he had become a Christian, he had loved Cicero and Plautus, but that the Bible had remained a strange book. During this pilgrimage he was

overcome with a fever, and he was near death, he believed.

During this illness he had a visionary experience. He recalls,

As I was suddenly carried away in the spirit, I was hauled before the judgment seat of the judge, and a light broke through that was so bright that I dared not open my eyes. When I was asked about myself, I answered that I was a Christian. But the one who sat at the judgment seat said, 'You are lying, you are a Ciceronian and not a Christian; for where your treasure is, there is your heart also.'¹⁰

Jerome begged for forgiveness and began a new life. He swore, "O Lord, if I ever take in hand worldly books and read them, I will have denied you." The vision reflected a crisis in Jerome's life, a decision to reject worldly books.

The pagans were aware of the tensions between Christian faith and higher education. We think, for example of Celsus' parody on the Christians:

Let no one who is instructed, or who is wise or prudent (for such qualifications are deemed evil by us); but if there be any ignorant, or unintelligent, or uninstructed, or foolish persons, let them come with confidence. By these words, acknowledging that such persons are worthy of their God, they manifestly show that they desire and are able to gain over only the silly, the mean, the stupid, with women and children.¹¹

Other ancient writers chided the Christians for their insistence on faith instead of knowledge. Galen equated the Christians' insistence on faith with superstition. Christians are like quacks who warn men against the doctor, "Take care that none of you touches science (episteme); science is a bad thing, knowledge (gnosis) makes men decline from the health of the soul."¹² A common criticism by pagans was that the Christian insistence on belief resulted in the glorification of ignorance.

The tension between Christianity and ancient higher education is also reflected in early Christianity's possession of a totally alternative educational program of its own. Learning was, of course, deeply appreciated in the early church, for Christianity was undoubtedly a "scholastic religion"¹³ which required a considerable amount of literacy. However, the learning which is advocated in Scripture is focused entirely in the Scriptures. Indeed, the author of Hebrews employs the technical language of Greek education when he distinguishes between the milk and the solid food, which is to nourish Christian believers. While his contemporaries distinguished the milk of elementary education from the solid food of higher education, for the author of Hebrews this education is rooted exclusively in the Christian tradition. He challenges the readers to train their intellectual faculties, just as the athlete trained himself physically. The final result of this education will be the capability "to distinguish good and evil" (5:14). Similarly 2 Tim 3:16 describes the paideia, or education of the Christian, but it is exclusively rooted in the inspired writings. This conviction that the only necessary education is to be found in Christ is expressed forthrightly in the Didascalica Apostolorum, from the third century. It says bluntly, "Have nothing to do with pagan books," and then gives surprising grounds for the injunction.

What concern does the Christian have with the errors they contain? He has the word of God. What else does he want? The Bible not only provides for the

super-natural life but for all cultural needs too.
 . . . Is it history that he wants? There are the Books
 of Kings. Eloquence, poetry? The prophets! Lyrics?
 The Psalms! Cosmology? Genesis! Laws, morality?
 The glorious law of God! But all these outlandish books
 that come from the devil--they must be hurled away.¹⁴

The Emerging Synthesis

As deep as the tension might be between Christian education and the higher education of antiquity, a synthesis finally emerged, for Christianity, as a scholastic religion, could not ultimately reject higher education. Indeed, those who questioned its value were deeply indebted to its traditions. We are well aware of the parallels between Paul himself and classical literature. His rejection of worldly wisdom in 1 Corinthians did not prevent him from drawing on an old story about the dispute among members of a body with each other, which Livy once told the plebeians when they no longer wanted to live among the
¹⁵ patricians. The author of Hebrews may assume a body of knowledge which alone teaches one to distinguish good and evil, but he writes with the skills which were derived from the higher education of his time. Clement of Rome may hold up the paideia en Christo, the education in Christ, as the alternative to worldly wisdom, but he too demonstrates his deep indebtedness to worldly learning in chapter 20 of his letter to the Corinthians, when he describes the cosmic harmony which should serve as a
¹⁶ model for a divided church. When the synthesis is complete, universities founded by the church have become the repositories of both kinds of education--the classical and the Christian. For

a period there is no problem of the Christian and the university. Christ and culture lived alongside one another.

The justification that was commonly given for the comfortable relationship of Christian paideia and pagan wisdom was that worldly learning could be placed in the service of Christ. Rich treasures could be obtained from classical education to assist the Christian in understanding the biblical revelation. The ancient fathers recognized also that much in human wisdom was in agreement with the word of God. Clement of Alexandria led the way for the adoption of worldly wisdom by the church with his insistence that mathematics and astronomy could serve the Christian in his search of the Scriptures, which has the ultimate goal of teaching one how he should live.¹⁷ For Clement and for his successors, there is much in ancient learning which agrees with the Scripture. The Bible remained the source of authority, but he tested all knowledge against the truth of Scripture.

In the synthesis which followed, there was much in pagan learning which was appropriate for Christian teachers, who attempted, with Clement, to maintain the primacy of revelation while examining all knowledge and assuming the unity of revelation and reason. The university thus had a point of orientation which appeared to offer the Christian a consistent world view.

The synthesis was never a simple matter for the Christians, for there was always an uneasy relationship between the Christian

and education. In view of Paul's comments about worldly wisdom, Christians frequently had to defend themselves for their involvement in worldly learning. Undoubtedly, some were more "Ciceronian than Christian." We have many examples in the first few centuries of those whose primary commitment was to knowledge rather than faith. Moreover, education in antiquity had a divided soul. The Christians could be comfortable with Socrates and his argument that the purpose of education was to discover the good and noble, but very uncomfortable with those who advocated a purely instrumental view of education. One side of the ancient conversation argued that education should build character, and the other side argued that education serves primarily to develop competence and skill. The Christians could adopt the Socratic view of education, with its claim that education leads to morality, and reject those who argued for the instrumentalist view of education.

The Decline of the Synthesis and the Place of the Christian

The synthesis between faith and reason--Athens and Jerusalem--was never an easy one. Today it is nonexistent. Revelation lost to reason in the Enlightenment, and the Socratic tradition has disappeared in the twentieth century, according to Allan Bloom. In the absence of the Socratic tradition, the university becomes, in Robert Bellah's words, "like a universal filling station where students go to get the knowledge they 'need.'" ¹⁸ Until very recently, says Bellah, the public universities spoke of education as the process in which the

individual is transformed and becomes a human being. The state university spoke of religion and morality,¹⁹ perpetuating the old synthesis between classical learning and the Christian faith. In the place of the old synthesis, the university struggles to rediscover its goals and any center of value.

In this new situation, the struggle in the ancient church between Athens and Jerusalem offers important models for the Christian on campus, for we still experience the tension between Athens and Jerusalem. If Jerome struggled with the question of whether he was more "Ciceronian than Christian," the Christian today lives with disciplines which require that he ask about his central allegiance. One easily lives within the world of his own discipline. It frames the questions that are asked and provides values. Deep in the Christian heritage is an uneasiness with the worldly wisdom which omits the knowledge of the divine mysteries. This uneasiness should extend to our own time, placing Christians in tension with the university's world.

The church will not abandon higher education and the questions it raises. With his belief in creation and the unity of all knowledge, the Christian will actively push the frontiers of knowledge and share in the preserving of traditions from the past alongside his intellectual peers. At the same time, this conviction about the unity of knowledge will preclude the Christian's compartmentalizing his learning from the Christian faith. One may argue over the success of Clement of Alexandria's commitment to placing human wisdom in the service of revelation,

but his fundamental intent was sound. Human wisdom is to be placed in the service of the Christian faith.

If early Christians lived in tension with classical higher education, it was because they were a minority group within a culture which did not take their claims seriously. Nevertheless, they maintained their own identity with a well-defined vision of their own. As a community of worship, learning, prayer, and proclamation, they were committed to the truth that would enrich human life and, in the words of the author of Hebrews, "distinguish between good and evil." For them, all education contained a distinctively moral purpose. Where they borrowed from their culture, they borrowed those elements that were consistent with their moral purpose. When they rejected the higher education of their time, one of their chief reasons was that this higher education did not "distinguish between good and evil."

George Williams has suggested that Christians in higher education should be distinguished by a "sectarian ideal of the gathered church" where committed believers come together for fellowship, mutual correction, and support. I am impressed by the potential of this suggestion, for it allows an interdisciplinary dialogue between Christians over the implications of their research. Christian scholars can reflect together on their response to the gods of higher education, and they will probably see goals beyond those which reign in higher education. The gods of academic freedom and pure research will be subservient to the

larger issues of the building of character and the public good. Natural scientists, social scientists, theologians and professors from the liberal arts can reflect together on the moral implications of their work. Christian professors of literature can ask John Gardner's question about moral fiction. In a period when the university has little ethical and moral discourse associated with research, Christians can pursue truth together and continue to relate their professions to the aim of "distinguishing between good and evil." Where the disciplines of the university have little conversation with each other, Christians from various disciplines can continue to ask important questions about the moral meaning of their work.

This interdisciplinary research is possible among committed Christians in both the Christian and the public university. The Christian university, of course, has the structures in place and the statement of purpose to encourage this meaningful dialogue between the disciplines. However, more is needed than this Christian character in order for the Christian university to fulfill its moral purpose, for it too is caught between Athens and Jerusalem--the ideals of the academy and of the Christian tradition. The Christian university will be tempted, like other universities, to serve its constituency the way it wants to be served without taking seriously the larger public good. Therefore the Christian university exists to do more than function as the "filling station" for skills in the marketplace. Indeed, the Christian university could exist to restore the concept of

"universitas" to higher education and to place knowledge in the service of a moral purpose.

The public university also offers possibilities for Christian professors and students to exist as a sectarian sub-culture living in tension with the university's goals. Here a community not only asks the difficult moral questions, but is also distinguished by its common life, moral commitments, and the moral questions it asks in its research. Its god is not openness or autonomy without a higher purpose. With these moral commitments, which are largely unacceptable to the wider university community, the Christian community will be a minority group within the academic community, a sectarian movement.

With the close of the Constantinian era, the church today struggles with Tertullian's question about Athens and Jerusalem in a more profound way than it has for centuries. Tertullian's question is to be taken seriously, especially today, for the models of higher education have left their Christian roots. The task of Christians on campus is to recall their most fundamental commitments, recalling that they are more "Christian than Ciceronian."

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