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For the cover of this annual issue of The Cresset devoted to Christian higher education, art editor David Morgan has chosen a beautiful, big, classically Victorian painting. One thing you have to say for my friends the Victorians—they weren't afraid to take the large view. Frederic Church, though an American Victorian, stands in for a lot of them in making the very grand painting reproduced here. Thinking about the painting as if I were a painter, I contemplate the white space in front of me, about four and a half feet by seven feet, a goodly space if you are confronting a canvas. Now, what goes on it? Well, if you're Monet, some lilies would probably be nice. Or, if you're an expressionist, something on the order of "How I felt last Tuesday after seeing my old flame and remembering our history." If you are Picasso, one large nude woman, or, better yet, two or three. But if you are Frederic Church? Well, how about Panama, or Niagara Falls, or, say, Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. Big. Not just visually big, but historically and spiritually and emotionally big.

On the large space in front of him, Church has created a yet vaster space. The panorama is so large that we viewers are nearly lost in it. Land, trees, sky, clouds, rocks, shadow play through the space in a dynamic swirl of light and dark. Yet we have no difficulty finding its center, for the painter believes that we will recognize it with a thrill that has nothing to do with the mere presence of highlights from the paint. Jerusalem, my happy home. Jerusalem the Golden. Jerusalem, God's home and our hearts' resting place. As a subject for a painting, the Holy City of millions of faithful could not possibly be more apt to the sublime, and Church gives it everything he's got.

We know from our informed and nuanced readings of their work that the great Victorians were not always personally as confident as they appear. Yet it is the confidence of the vision and the belief in the undertaking that are so powerful here. The modern mind, should it even begin to think about painting Jerusalem, is defeated before it starts, just imagining the difficulties. Would it be too imperialist? how to show the divisions and shortcomings? where should one stand? too much light? donkeys or camels?

In some respects, much talk these days about church-related higher education strikes us as on the donkeys or camels level. If we had confidence that both faith and understanding were important, that living a life devoted to understanding in the light of faith was paramount, that guiding the young by examples of that life could be worth everything—if we had that confidence, would we not simply forge ahead without worrying so much about whether we were doing it right? Alas, we cannot will ourselves back into the frame of mind that painted 28 square feet of painting, or published 800 page volumes without doubting that such undertakings were "worth it." But every so often, we ought perhaps to dare to see the big picture and to see ourselves as part of it, even though we may be only the tiny figures in the foreground.

The writers in this issue are distinguished scholars and churchmen. They know what the big picture might look like, and they want to make at least some sketches so that we can see it too, or see it from their perspective. Reading through this many pages will take patience—another Victorian virtue—but you will be rewarded. At least you may go back to your work with a sense of its relation to the sublime, and that is a goal well worth some summer hours.

Peace,

GME
WALKING POST

Even with sleeves rolled,
a steady rhythm of patrolling,
the Long Binh air is nearly liquid
in midnight stillness.

A slight stir of tepid breath
leaks from the kitchen generator
of the Officers' Club
and from me exhaling
another Marlboro.

For some minutes I have sat,
beads of sweat tracing my spine,
until dread pushed me
back to action.

Giddy with plans for R&R—
imagining meals on white china,
red flowers in a cool room,
an easy walk along the beach,
maybe dancing—
nothing wasted, nothing careless.

World enough
in time
imposed,
sure.

Edward Uehling
Tertullian’s Enduring Question

Nicholas Wolterstorff

Professor Wolterstorff’s essay was originally delivered at the Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts Eighth Annual National Conference, “Athens and Jerusalem: Sacred Learning and Secular Culture” held at the University of Notre Dame in October of 1998. The author has used his own translations of Tertullian and Clement throughout.

What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens,” asked Tertullian in memorable, bitingly eloquent, words:

the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic? Our principles come from the Porch of Solomon, who himself taught that the Lord is to be sought in simplicity of heart. I have no use for a Stoic or a Platonic or a dialectic [i.e., Aristotelian] Christianity. After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel, no need of research. Once we come to believe, we have no desire to believe anything else; for the first article of our faith is that there is nothing else we have to believe. (Prescriptions against Heretics 7)

Tertullian’s aim, in his Prescriptions against Heretics was to persuade his readers to stay away from heresies. Just before the passage quoted he had been inquiring into the root of these “doctrines of men and of daemons.” Philosophy is the root— that repository of “worldly wisdom, that rash interpreter of the divine nature and order.” Heretics are “equipped by philosophy.” “From philosophy come those fables, those endless genealogies and fruitless questionings, those words that spread like cancer,” which we find in the heretics. Heresies are “generated for itching ears by the ingenuity of that worldly wisdom which the Lord called foolishness . . .” Lift a heretic and you’ll find a philosopher.

It was to hold us back from the futile and deceiving speculations of the heretics, says Tertullian, that the apostle Paul “testified expressly in his letter to the Colossians that we should beware of philosophy. ‘Take heed lest anyone beguile you through philosophy or vain deceit, after the tradition of men,’ against the providence of the Holy Spirit. Paul had been at Athens, and in his argumentative encounters there had become acquainted with that human wisdom of the philosophers which attacks and perverts truth, being itself divided up into its own swarm of heresies by its mutually antagonistic sects.”

Having located the root of heresy in philosophy, Tertullian then poses his rhetorical question: “What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic?” Be done, he says, with Stoicized Christianity, with Platonized Christianity, with dialectic Christianity. Were Tertullian living in our own day his list would be much longer: be done with Kantianized Christianity, with Hegelianized Christianity, with deconstructionist Christianity. Be done with them all. The stance of the Christian toward all attempts at “worldly wisdom” must be unrelenting opposition:

Would to God that no “heresies had ever been necessary in order that those who are approved may be made manifest!” We would then never be required to try our strength in contests about the soul with philosophers, those patriarchs of heretics, as they may fairly be called. The apostle Paul already foresaw the ensuing conflicts between philosophy and the truth. He offered his warning about philosophy after he had been at Athens, had become acquainted with that loquacious city, and had
there gotten a taste of its huckstering wiseacres and talkers. It will be for Christians to clear away those noxious vapors, exhaled from philosophy, which obscure the clear and wholesome atmosphere of truth. They will do so both by shattering to pieces the arguments which are drawn from the principles of things—meaning those of the philosophers—and by opposing to them the maxims of heavenly wisdom—that is, such as are revealed by the Lord; in order that both the pitfalls with which philosophy captivates the heathen may be removed, and the means employed by heresy to shake the faith of Christians may be destroyed. (On the Soul 3)

There is danger confronting those Christians who set out to shatter the arguments of the philosophers: they may themselves be seduced by those arguments and become heretics. The danger cannot be avoided; some in the community must oppose heresy by uncovering its roots in philosophy and then attacking that. But to those who suggest that a training in philosophy should become a more or less standard part of the education of Christians, Tertullian’s answer is unequivocal—as indeed are most of his answers to most of his questions! Addressing the soul, he says:

I call you not as one formed in the schools, trained in the libraries, nourished in the Attic academies and porticoes, belching forth wisdom. I address you simple, unskilled, uncultured and untaught, as those are who have you and nothing else; I address you as a person of the road, the square, the workshop, that alone. I want your inexperience, since no one of small experience feels any confidence. I demand of you that you consult only the things you bring with you as a human being, the things you know either from yourself or from your author, whoever that may be.

Tertullian’s question, “What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens?” remains as much alive today as it was in 198 A.D. when Tertullian posed it. It’s not one of those questions which the Christian community has settled and from there gone on to other matters. It remains an enduring question for the Christian academic. It is, in fact, the enduring question: what does the Christian gospel have to do with the enterprise of scholarship—in particular, with the scholarship of those who are not Christian?

The question would not have endured if Tertullian’s answer, or some alternative, had been universally accepted. It would now be of interest only to antiquarians. In proclaiming that Jerusalem’s business with Athens is combatting those philosophies spawned by Athens which inspire the heretics who disturb the church, Tertullian was staking out a position within a multifaceted debate which agitated the ancient church. In particular, he was staking out a position in opposition to that articulated by his near-contemporary, Clement of Alexandria. I think that you and I, at the dawn of the third millennium after Christ, can still learn something by reflecting on that debate conducted by our forebears in the faith.

The picture presented by the passages from Tertullian which I have cited is unremittingly that of disjunction and opposition. Between pagan philosophy and Holy Scripture there is no choice but to choose. “Choose ye this day whom you will serve.” To be a Christian is already to have chosen. The Christian lives by Holy Scripture, in opposition to pagan philosophy. To the suggestion that some Christians should advance beyond their acceptance of Holy Scripture to engage in philosophical speculation, Tertullian’s answer is crisp: “After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel, no need of research. When we come to believe, we have no desire to believe anything else; for the first article of our faith is that there is nothing else we have to believe.”

There were those, Clement included, who were citing the New Testament injunction, “Seek, and you shall find,” to justify the project of becoming learned Christians. Tertullian’s answer is eloquently dismissive:

The reasonable exegesis of this saying turns on three points: matter, time, and limitation. As to matter, you are to consider what is to be sought; as to time, when; and as to limitation, how far. What you must seek is what Christ taught, and precisely as long as you have not found it, precisely until you do find it. And you found it when you came to believe. You would not have believed if you had not found, just as you would not have sought except in order to find. Since finding was the object of your search, and belief the result of your finding, your acceptance of the faith bars any prolonging of seeking and finding. The very success of your seeking has set up this limitation for you.
Your boundary has been marked out by him who would not have you believe, and so would not have you seek, outside the limits of his teaching.

If we were bound to go on seeking as long as there is any possibility of finding, simply because so much has been taught by others as well, we would always be seeking and never believing . . .

I have no patience with the man who is always seeking, for he will never find. He is seeking where there will be no finding. I have no patience with the man who is always knocking, for the door will never be opened. He is knocking at an empty house. I have no patience with the man who is always asking, for he will never be heard. He is asking one who does not hear . . .

But even supposing that we ought to be seeking now and ever, where should we seek? Among the heretics, where everything is strange and hostile to our truth? . . . Instruction and destruction never reach us from the same quarter. Light and darkness never come from the same source. So let us seek in our own territory, from our own friends and on our own business, and let us seek only what can come into question without disloyalty to the Rule of Faith. (Prescriptions against Heretics 10-12)

If we are to see the full pattern of Tertullian’s thought, we must understand the import of those final cryptic words. With rhetoric of hammering force, Tertullian has been arguing that it is incoherent to suggest that Christians should engage in “seeking the truth.” To be a Christian is to accept the teachings of Scripture; in and by accepting those teachings, one ends one’s search for the truth. And as to the more specific suggestion that, in seeking the truth, Christians should not neglect to look into the pagan philosophers, Tertullian’s response is that this is not only incoherent, but altogether futile and muddle-headed.

It was not Tertullian’s position, however, that Christians are to refrain from all forms of intellectual endeavor; he was not an exponent of bare faith alone. His own writing is evidence to the contrary. It is appropriate for Christians to try both to understand better what already they believe and to defend that with intelligence. Provided you honor the Rule of Faith, says Tertullian to his fellow Christians, you may “seek and discuss as much as you please, and pour forth your whole desire for curious inquiry if any point seems to you undetermined through ambiguity, or obscure from want of clarity. There is surely some brother, a teacher gifted with the grace of knowledge, someone among those skilled intimates of yours,” who can assist you in this, while steering you away from inquiries that stray from the Rule of Faith (Prescriptions 14).

§ 2. The picture drawn by Clement was unmistakably different. For Clement, the fundamental relation of Christianity to pagan philosophy was not opposition but supersession. Pagan philosophy is not anti-Christian but sub-Christian. Or to speak more historically: just as the law and the prophets served for the Hebrews as a preparation for Christ, so philosophy prepared the Greeks. In Clement’s own words: “philosophy was given to the Greeks directly and primarily, until the Lord should call the Greeks. For this was a schoolmaster to bring the Hellenic mind, as was the law, the Hebrews, to Christ. Philosophy, therefore, was a preparation, paving the way for him who is perfected in Christ” (Stromata I,5). Using a different cluster of metaphors to make the same point, Clement says that philosophy “was given to the Greeks as a covenant peculiar to them—being, as it is, a steppingstone to the philosophy which is according to Christ” (Stromata VI,8).

As his words suggest, Clement’s reason for embracing this positive picture of Greek philosophy was, at bottom, theological. Sometimes he appeals to the general principle that, according to the teaching of Scripture, all that is good comes from God. Since it seemed obvious to him that there was truth in Greek philosophy, he drew the conclusion that Greek philosophy, insofar as it has a grasp of the truth, comes from God. In other passages, thinking not about the good in general but about truth, Clement appeals to his understanding of what the prologue to the Gospel of John teaches about Logos. Having described Logos, in verse 9, as “the true light that enlightens every man,” John goes on in verse 14 to say that Logos “became flesh and dwelt among us.” The conclusion Clement drew was that that very same Logos which became incarnate in Jesus Christ is at work in all humanity leading them toward truth. This is how he puts the point in one passage: “into all human beings whatsoever, but especially those who are occupied with intellectual pursuits, a certain divine effluence has been instilled; wherefore, even if reluctantly, they confess that God is one,
indestructible, unbegotten, and that somewhere above in the tracts of heaven, in His own peculiar appropriate eminence, He has an existence true and eternal from whence He surveys all things” (Exhortation VI). There were those in Clement’s day who said that it was through human understanding that philosophy was discovered by the Greeks. Clement rebukes them: “I find the Scriptures saying that understanding is sent by God” (Stromata VI,8).

One version of the supersessionist view would be that Christianity has so far superseded its two main antecedents, Hebrew revelation and Greek philosophy, that there is no longer any point in paying attention to those superseded antecedents. That was not Clement’s version. Beyond a doubt “the teaching which is according to the Savior is complete in itself and without defect,” he says, “being ‘the power and wisdom of God’; the addition of Greek philosophy does not make the truth more powerful.” Or to put it the other way round: the absence of Greek philosophy would not render the perfect Word incomplete, it would not cause the Truth to perish (Stromata I,20). Nonetheless, the study of Greek philosophy remains of great utility for Christians.

For one thing, it is useful for warding off heresy and sophistry. The learned Christian “can distinguish sophistry from philosophy... rhetoric from dialectics, and the various sects of barbarian philosophy from the truth itself. How necessary, then, is it for him to who desires to be partaker of the power of God to treat of intellectual subjects by philosophising!” The philosophically learned Christian, “a man of much counsel, is like the Lydian touchstone, which is believed to possess the power of distinguishing spurious from genuine gold” (Stromata I,9). Alluding to the Tertullianists of his day, Clement observes that “some, who think themselves naturally gifted, do not wish to touch either philosophy or logic; nay more, they do not wish to learn natural science. They demand bare faith alone, as if they wished, without bestowing any care on the vine, right away to begin gathering clusters. (Tertullian, as we saw above, does not “demand bare faith alone” of all Christians.) Now the Lord is figuratively described as the vine from which, accordingly to the word, we are to take pains to gather fruit with the art of husbandry.” In husbandry “we lop, dig, bind, and perform other operations... So also here, I call him truly learned who brings everything to bear on the truth; so that, from geometry, music, grammar, and philosophy itself, culling what is useful, he guards the faith against assault” (Stromata I,9).

It is clear, however, that Clement did not regard the utility for apologetics of the study of Greek philosophy as exhausting its serviceability for Christians. Indeed, that for him was not its most important use. Though the truth proclaimed by our Savior is the truth necessary and sufficient for salvation, it is not the whole of truth. It is then the calling of Christian intellectuals to go beyond apologetics and incorporate the truth proclaimed by Christ into a larger picture—a more comprehensive “philosophy,” if you will. For this purpose, the learned Christian takes fragments of truth from wherever he finds them. Truth as such is the one ever-living Logos. The various sects of barbarian and Hellenic philosophy each vaunts itself as having got hold of that whole truth. In actual fact, however, none has done more than tear off a fragment. Yet “the parts, though differing from each other, preserve their relation to the whole... Be assured, then, that he who brings the separate fragments together and makes them one again will contemplate the perfect Word, the truth” (Stromata I,13). “The way of truth is one. But into it, as into a perennial river, streams flow from all sides” (Stromata I,5).

§3. Disjunction or supersession, opposition or incorporation. Who was right about the relation of Christianity to pagan learning? And who was right about the Christian intellectual? Does the Christian intellectual study the learning of non-Christians solely to discern the error of its ways, confining the scope of his own positive inquiries to the content of the faith itself? Or does the Christian intellectual, convinced that Logos has dispensed portions of truth to all humanity, study such learning not only to discern the error of its ways but also to harvest such fragments of truth as are to be found there, with the goal of combining those, along with the more clear, ample, and fundamental truths of the Gospel, into a larger synthesis?

You will have discerned that the dispute between Clement and Tertullian was a multifaceted
dispute: a cluster of issues was under discussion, not just one issue. From that cluster I have time, on this occasion, to pick out just one for discussion—one of the most important, however, namely this: how should Christians interpret pagan literature and philosophy? What should be their goal and strategy of interpretation? Or more generally: how should one interpret the textual tradition which one has inherited? Clement espoused one goal and strategy, Tertullian, another. Neither party won the debate in the second century; neither party has won the debate to this day.

Though Clement believed firmly that, as the consequence of the activity of Logos, there is truth to be found in the Greek philosophers, he did not deny that the truth to be found there is mingled with falsehood. Neither did he deny—indeed, he ardently affirmed—that something decisively new had taken place in world history when the Logos which enlightens all who come into the world was enfleshed in Jesus Christ. Unlike every philosophy, be it Greek or barbarian, the teaching of Jesus “is complete in itself and without defect, being the ‘power and wisdom of God.’” Accordingly, when confronted with the teaching of some philosopher which contradicts the teaching of our Savior, the Christian does not spend time mulling over which to accept. Everything incompatible with the teaching of our Savior is in error; none of it is a fragment of the truth. Clement was not Hegel born out of season. History is not a vast ongoing series of supersessions, continuing until such time as Geist is fully manifested in the abstract thought of some philosopher. Though Christianity supersedes both Hebrew revelation and Greek philosophy, nothing will supersede Christianity. Our Savior did not teach us the whole of truth; he did teach us nothing but truth; there was no falsehood mingled in. And the truth he taught us is the most important truth, taught with a clarity never to be superseded in this present existence. The teaching of our Savior is thus a touchstone for the Christian interpreter.

Just as Clement did not deny that the truth to be found in the Greek philosophers is mingled with abundant error, and either of secondary importance or lacking in full clarity, so too he did not deny that the Greek philosophers, unlike our Savior, exhibited a multitude of vices. The most fundamental of their vices was that they were, in Clement’s words, “thieves and robbers.” Echoing the then-current view that the Greek philosophers had somehow gained direct access to Hebrew prophecy, Clement says that “before the coming of the Lord they received fragments of the truth from the Hebrew prophets, though admittedly not with full knowledge, and they claimed these as their own teachings, disguising some points, and treating others sophistically by their ingenuity” (Stromata I,17). Nonetheless, Clement insists that “sentence of condemnation is not ignorantly to be pronounced against what is said on account of him who says it (a point also to be kept in view in the case of those who are now alleged to prophesy); rather, what is said must be scrutinized to see if it conforms to the truth” (Stromata VI,8).

There is, thus, a definite sobriety about the Christian intellectual of Clementine persuasion as he interprets the Greek philosophers. He does not place them on a pedestal; he recognizes their moral failings. He does not idolize them as the fount of all and only wisdom and clarity; he recognizes that such truth as they grasped is either of secondary importance or but a hazy and hesitant apprehension of what our Savior taught us. Nonetheless, there’s truth in the Greek philosophers—truth even about God. And the Christian intellectual interprets principally for that truth, so as to incorporate it within a larger synthesis. The Christian interpreter notes, for example, that because of the “divine effluence” at work in the Greek philosophers, they correctly “teach, even if reluctantly, that God is one, indestructible, unbegotten,” and so forth (Exhortation VI).

Anybody who takes in hand Aquinas’ Summa theologiae will at once discern Clementine hermeneutics at work. Having posed a question—for example, “Whether the Existence of God is Self-Evident?”—Aquinas opens his treatment by citing objections to the answer for which he will argue. These objections almost always are, or incorporate, citations from the tradition. Having stated objections from the tradition to his thesis, Aquinas then announces “On the contrary:” and as the introduction to his own argumentation he cites a passage from the tradition which is on his side in the dispute. Finally, after he has laid out his own argument for the answer he prefers, he returns to the opening objections. Though on a few occasions he pronounces an objection mistaken, almost
always he instead argues that what was cited as an objection need not be, and indeed, *should not* be, so interpreted. When appropriate clarifications, qualifications, and distinctions are made, what appeared to be an objection is seen instead to be getting at an aspect of the full and complex truth.

The strategy, as I say, is clearly Clementine. Though there are indisputably errors in the textual tradition bequeathed to us, nonetheless the bulk of that tradition presents to us a finely articulated apprehension of the truth. And rather than dwelling on the errors, Aquinas regards his interpretative task and challenge to be discerning that particular facet of the truth which is presented by the text at hand, thereby showing how that text properly interpreted fits together with other texts which might have been supposed to contradict it. In thus interpreting the textual tradition, Aquinas typifies the medieval tradition in general; the medieval Western tradition was dominantly Clementine in its interpretative practice.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, in our own day, has argued for recovering the Clementine tradition—though I am not aware of his anywhere calling attention to the Clementine ancestry of the interpretative strategy which he defends. (He does call attention to its medieval ancestry.) Confronted with a text, the initial goal of the interpreter, so Gadamer argues, should be to interpret so that what the text says on the subject (*Sache*) under discussion turns out true. Only if that goal is frustrated, only if there is no reasonable way of interpreting the text so that it comes out true, should we interpret for the opinion of the author on the subject under discussion. The strategy of interpreting for authorial opinion is legitimate only as a fall-back. Here is what Gadamer says in one passage:

> Just as the recipient of a letter understands the news that it contains and first sees things with the eyes of the person who wrote the letter—i.e., considers what he writes as true, and is not trying to understand the writer’s peculiar opinions as such—so also do we understand traditionary texts on the basis of expectations of meaning drawn from our own prior relation to the subject matter. And just as we believe the news reported by a correspondent because he was present or is better informed, so too are we fundamentally open to the possibility that the writer of a transmitted text is better informed than we are, with our prior opinion. It is only when the attempt to accept what is said as true fails that we try to ‘understand’ the text, psychologically or historically, as another’s opinion. (*Truth and Method*, second revised edition, p. 294)

§4. My claim that the medievals, for the most part, practiced the Clementine strategy of interpretation, combined with my description of Gadamer as arguing for “recovering” the Clementine strategy, suggests that somewhere along the line the Clementine strategy went into decline. And so it did. But before we get to that, let me return to the second century to characterize Tertullian’s alternative strategy of interpretation.

Contrary to what one might have expected, Tertullian did not deny that there is truth to be found in the Greek philosophers. It’s definitely a concession on his part rather than an emphasis; and he doesn’t do anything with the concession. Yet there it is. In his *Apology* he says, for example:

> We have already said that God fashioned this whole world by His word, His reason, His power. Even your own philosophers agree that *logos*, that is, Word and Reason, seems to be the maker of the universe. This *logos* Zeno defines as the maker who formed everything according to a certain arrangement; the same *logos* (he says) is called Destiny, God, the Mind of Jupiter, and the inevitable Fate of all things. Cleanthes combines all these predicates into Spirit, which, according to him, permeates the universe. Moreover, we, too, ascribe Spirit as its proper substance to that Word, Reason, and Power by which, as we have said, God made everything. (*Apology* 21)

But if this is Tertullian’s conviction, why are disjunction and opposition the themes of his interpretative strategy? Why not, as with Clement, supersession and incorporation?

Tertullian is less explicit on the matter than one would like. Nonetheless, I think one can see how he was thinking. Whereas Clement urged his readers to forget about the persons who are philosophers and concentrate on extracting what is true from what they taught, Tertullian had his eye on the very thing that Clement urged his readers to overlook—the particular philosophers themselves, and the distinctives of their patterns of thought in which the particularities of their allegiances, convictions, characters, and so forth get expressed.
When we have the full pattern of Plato’s thought in view—or Aristotle’s, or some Stoic’s—and then compare it with the full pattern of the Rule of Faith, what leaps out is difference. Plato’s thought, in its distinctive totality, is not a hazy and hesitant adumbration of what finally becomes clear in the Christian Rule of Faith—along with fragments of truth which can nicely be synthesized with the Rule. Plato’s thought in its totality has a contour of its own; it has its own integrity. It’s not a patternless assemblage of fragments. As such, his thought is not sub-Christian but anti-Christian. Be it granted that the Christian discerns that here and there Plato is hazily and haltingly getting at something which is stated with clarity and affirmed with confidence in the Gospel. Be it granted that the Christian here and there discerns fragments susceptible to being synthesized into a larger Christian philosophy. But to approach Plato thus is to ignore the integrity of his thought. Let Plato be Plato, rather than a failed approach to Christianity. And let Christ be Christ.

Tertullian was clearly suggesting that we cannot account for the fact that the full pattern of Plato’s thought is different from that of the Gospel solely by observing that the Logos dispenses its illumination more fully in Christ than in the minds of the Greek philosophers. Perhaps it does. But human beings are not passive recipients of shafts of illumination thrown off by Logos. In the construction of learning there’s always a self at work. What goes a long way toward accounting for the difference between Platonic thought in its integrity—or Stoic, or Aristotelian—and Christian, is that pagan selves are different selves from the Christian self: different allegiances, different commitments, different loves, different orientations, different virtues. Further, the ways in which pagan selves are different from the Christian self are not in addition to their thought; those differences shape their thought. It’s with his eye on the differences of pagan selves from the Christian self that Tertullian asks, “where is there any likeness between the Christian and the philosopher? between the disciple of Greece and the disciple of heaven? between the man whose object is fame and the man whose object is life? between the talker and the doer? between the man who builds up and the man who pulls down? between friends of error and foes of error? between one who corrupts the truth and one who restores and teaches the truth? between truth’s thief and truth’s custodian?” (Apology 46).

Some might reply that the first of each of these disjunctions is scarcely fair and accurate as a description of all Greek philosophers—not of Socrates, for example. Maybe not. Nonetheless, says Tertullian, “who can know truth without the help of God? Who can know God without Christ? Who has ever discovered Christ without the Holy Spirit? And who has ever received the Holy Spirit without the gift of faith? Socrates, as none can doubt, was guided by a different spirit—his daemon” (On the Soul 1).

To most of us, the Clementine strategy of interpretation practiced by the medievals seems very strange. And not only strange. It seems to us that the integrity of author and text are violated when one interprets with the aim of fitting all texts together into some grand synthesis. Aristotle was not just supplementing Plato, Nietzsche was not just complementing Pascal. Each was a unique person working out a unique pattern of thought and expression. You and I relish the inscapes of each of those unique patterns of thought and expression, and the differences among those inscapes. So much is this the case that it has become common practice in this century even to resist trying to interpret the various texts of a single author so that they constitute a unity—indeed, to resist trying to interpret single texts of an author so that they constitute a unity. Where once upon a time interpreters unquestioningly accepted the challenge to show how the various Aristotelian texts fit together, Werner Jaeger taught us instead to acknowledge dissonance within the Aristotelian corpus, the explanation offered being that Aristotle’s texts, written across the span of his career, represent stages in his struggle to free himself from the intellectual grip of Plato. And where once upon a time interpreters struggled mightily to extract a unified teaching from Kant’s First Critique, Norman Kemp-Smith taught us instead to acknowledge dissonance within the First Critique, the explanation offered being that the Critique was written across a twenty-year stretch of time during which Kant was struggling to break free from his earlier metaphysical way of thinking into his new critical way of thinking.
Before the rise of deconstruction, in which Tertullianist interpretation goes berserk, it was, however, in biblical interpretation that one saw the Tertullianist strategy followed most relentlessly. Once upon a time the Bible was regarded as one book, containing a unified, inexhaustibly rich, body of teaching. Then it came to be seen not as God’s one book but as an anthology of sixty-six human books—give or take a few depending on one’s preferred canon. Not long thereafter, many of the books came in turn to be regarded as anthologies: deuter-Isaiah, trito-Isaiah, and so forth. And then these sub-anthologies came in turn to be regarded as anthologies of pericopes. An anthology of anthologies of anthologies, along with the traces of fumbling editorial efforts to blend these anthologies together.

I judge the Reformation to have been the principal, though certainly not the only, cause of the decline of Clementine, and the rise of Tertullianist, interpretation. The Reformers no longer regarded the texts they inherited, excepting a few unalleviatedly heretical texts, as all together embodying a finely articulated, highly complex, body of truth, it being the task and challenge of the interpreter to extract that truth by drawing the right distinctions, making explicit the tacit qualifications, properly disambiguating the ambiguities, honoring the inherent hierarchies of decisiveness, and so forth. To the contrary: the Reformers regarded the bulk of the texts they inherited as riddled with error. Best then to be done with them and return to the church fathers, and behind those, to God’s own text, the Bible, in which there was no error at all.

But if the Reformation thus played a fundamental role in the great reversal of interpretative strategy, I judge it was the Romantic movement which secured the victory of the Tertullianist strategy of interpretation in the modern world. For it was the Romantics who taught us the importance of history, the dignity of the particular, and the organic unity of what is truly a text. It’s because of our Romantic inheritance that you and I feel in our bones that Clementine interpretation, be it practiced on philosophical texts, biblical texts, or whatever, dishonors the authors and texts of the past, violating their integrity, by riding roughshod over their particularities in the concern to pluck out whatever can be incorporated into a vast synthesis in which everything has its own little place—that synthesis being constructed, of course, by ourselves. Clementine interpretation feels to us like an act of abusive arrogance.

§5. Revulsion is not reasoned objection, however. The question remains open: which goal and strategy of interpretation is right, the Clementine or the Tertullianist? And in particular: how do you and I, as Christian intellectuals, interpret all those texts which are not Christian? Do we interpret them for what is true in what is said—now and then polemicizing against some of the errors we notice? Or—if we bother with them at all—do we interpret them for the particular contour of thought, allegiance, and sensibility there expressed? And if we do the latter, to what end? Do we follow Clement or Tertullian?

As preface to the answer I wish to propose, let me call your attention to one fundamental point of agreement between Clement and Tertullian. Perhaps you noticed that whereas I spoke of the goal of interpretation for Clement as discerning what is true in what the author said, I described the goal of interpretation which Gadamer espouses as trying to interpret the text as saying what is true. Those are very different goals—though the descriptions are closely similar. Clement first interprets the text, with the aim of discerning what the author said; then, interpretation finished, he sorts out the true from the false with his incorporationist goal in mind. Gadamer, by contrast, conducts interpretation itself in accord with the rule of trying to have the text turn out true on the matter under consideration. In this respect, Gadamer is closer to the medievals than the medievals were to Clement. Both Clement and Gadamer advocate what I called the “Clementine strategy of interpretation.” Neither is much interested in what Gadamer calls the particular “opinions” of authors; both interpret for truth. But their way of getting there is very different; they represent different versions of the Clementine strategy. Clement, to say it again, first interprets for what is said and then looks for truth therein; Gadamer interprets so as to have it come out true and judges that to be what’s said.
On this point there is full agreement between Clement and Tertullian; and I, in turn, agree with them. One can interpret a text with the aim in mind of having it come out true—or, be it noted, with the aim in mind of having it come out false, or boring, or interesting, or shocking, or bland, or disunited, or aesthetically satisfying—or whatever. Instead of construing a sentence literally, on which interpretation it may be bland, one can construe it metaphorically, on which interpretation it may be arresting; instead of construing it ironically, on which interpretation it may express an important truth, one can construe it literally, on which interpretation it may express a silly falsehood. And so forth. One can do this. But to interpret thus is to ignore the fact that texts are engagements among persons, in which one person performs an act of discourse and another tries to discern what act that was and to respond appropriately. If one insists on never doing anything else with texts than use them as occasions for engaging in one’s own play of interpretation, on never using them to engage another human being over what she said, then one is—so it seems to me—in a profound way dishonoring that other human being. I insult you if, whenever you say something to me, I subject your words to a play of interpretation rather than attempting to discern what you said and to respond appropriately.

It may be said that one scarcely dishonors the person if one engages in Gadamerian interpretation—that is, engages in a play of interpretation with the goal in mind of having the words come out true. Isn’t this, on the contrary, the most respectful of all modes of interpretation—more respectful than if I interpret for what you said, for your “opinion,” which, after all, may or may not be true? I think not. You interpret my speech so as to have it come out true, and you succeed in that. But the truth which emerges is not what I said; it’s not what I meant, not what I had in mind. Is that to respect me? I fail to see that it is. It’s to display your own ingenuity as interpreter.

In short, I am a firm advocate of the priority of what I call “authorial-discourse interpretation.” I concede the propriety on occasion of what I call “performance interpretation”—that is, interpretation of a text so as to have it come out true, or unified, or rife with aporia, or whatever. But authorial-discourse interpretation ought to have priority, as I describe more fully in my own 1995 work, *Divine Discourse*. To which it’s worth adding that those who advocate performance interpretation regularly question interpretations of their own texts by insisting that interpreters have not grasped *what they said*.

So suppose we interpret texts for what the author or editor said, rather than so as to have them come out some way that we prefer. Should we who are Christians, when interpreting the texts of non-Christians, interpret so as to discern, and then appropriate, what’s true in what is said, perhaps taking note along the way of errors, or should we interpret so as to grasp the particular contour of that person’s thought, then noting its difference from the contour of Christian thought? Should we read Plato for what’s true and to be appropriated in Plato, or for the distinct and alien contours of his thought?

My answer is: we should do both. Neither by itself is sufficient.

The first part of my reason is that there is both truth in what Plato thought, and a particular contour to his thought distinct from that of the Christian Gospel. Both are there, awaiting the interpreter’s discovery.

The foundation of Clement’s practice was his insistence that truth is not the exclusive possession of Christians—not even truth about God. Nobody is entirely blind to reality; most (maybe all) are not even blind to the reality of God. The Christian will no doubt feel that the non-Christian’s apprehension of God is for the most part deficient in one way and another, and to one degree or another. She will not—not usually, anyway—find herself learning something about God that she didn’t already know, or that she couldn’t have known by reading biblical exegesis or Christian theology. But when it comes to other matters, she will often find herself genuinely learning things. I am myself hesitant to embrace Clement’s explanation for all of this. Perhaps some of it is rightly ascribed to the Logos of which John speaks. But I would say that much of it is the outcome of the workings of the nature with which we human beings are endowed: our perceptual, rational, introspective, memorial nature. Either way, though, we are, of course, ultimately to ascribe truth to God.
On the other hand, Tertullian put his finger on something which Clement consistently over­looked or neglected. Plato’s thought has a definite contour distinctively different from that of the Christian Gospel, a contour shaped not just by the way various experiences acted on various parts of his innate generic belief-forming nature, but by the way those experiences acted on the blend of Plato’s innate generic nature with the contingent particularities of his allegiances, commitments, convictions, and so forth. It’s not just our hard-wiring, but our hard-wiring plus our programming, that accounts for what we come to believe.

It was especially Augustine, among the church fathers, who emphasized and developed this point about the ways in which our particular contingent selves shape our learning. It led him to supplement Clement’s motto, faith seeking understanding (fides quaerens intellectum), with the more complex motto, I believe in order to understand (credo ut intelligam). Faith not only seeks understanding; it is a condition of the understanding it seeks. A full exploration of what Augustine meant by this, and how he argued it, would require a lengthy paper by itself. Here it must suffice to say that it was Augustine’s conviction that our affections—our loves and hates—have a profound impact on our understanding. If, for example, one loves some part of earthly reality in an idolatrous way, that will skew one’s understanding of God and of God’s relation to humanity and the world. It may even lead to one’s denial of God. Augustine was convinced, accordingly, that the right ordering of the affections which faith secures is a condition of progressing in the understanding of God, and of reality generally.

To look at the full pattern of Plato’s thought is to see a pattern of thought different from that of the Christian Gospel; that was Tertullian’s point. To focus on what is true in Plato’s thought is to see adumbrations of, and supplements to, the Christian Gospel; that was Clement’s point. Both were right. What should be added is that often the pieces cannot be cleanly abstracted from the whole; what Plato meant by the piece is often bound up with the whole, and the whole isn’t true. That’s an implication of the Tertullianist point, that Plato’s thought is not a mere assemblage of true and false items. On the Clementine side of the matter it’s to be noticed, however, that in some such cases, though what Plato said is strictly false as he meant it, nonetheless, one can see what it was in reality that he was trying to get at. He had his eye on something real, though he didn’t see it with full clarity nor describe it with full accuracy.

That was the first part of my argument for the conclusion that we need both Clementine and Tertullianist interpretation: what Clement had his eye on, and what Tertullian had his eye on, are both there. To establish that both are there is not yet, however, to establish that both should be of concern to the Christian scholar. Something more has to be said before we can draw that conclusion.

At this point Clement and Tertullian were, in my judgment, each partly right and partly wrong. Let me begin my unravelling by speaking of the goal of Christian learning, as distinguished from the strategy.

Tertullian believed that the positive goal of Christian learning does not extend beyond the attempt to deepen one’s understanding of the Christian Gospel. It’s worth noting that just as Augustine agreed with Tertullian that our affections and loyalties pervasively shape our learning, so too he agreed with Tertullian on this point. Augustine’s mottos, faith seeking understanding and I believe in order to understand, are almost invariably understood by contemporary Christians as affirming the development of sociology in Christian perspective, psychology in Christian perspective, economics in Christian perspective, and so forth. They are almost invariably understood, in short, along Clementine lines. I think it decisively clear, however, that that is not how Augustine understood them. For Augustine, faith seeks to understand that which already it believes—a thoroughly Tertullianist point!

Never was this Tertullianist-Augustinian conviction formulated with greater precision and elegance than by that very Augustinian theologian Anselm, in his Proslogium. So rather than citing Augustine, let me cite Anselm. Before he sets out his proof for God’s existence, Anselm addresses God with the words, “I long to understand in some degree thy truth, which my heart believes and
loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe—that unless I believed, I should not understand. And so, Lord, do thou, who dost give understanding to faith, give me, so far as thou knowest it to be profitable, to understand that thou art as we believe; and that thou art that which we believe.” Then, the proof finished, Anselm again addresses God: “I thank thee, gracious Lord, I thank thee; because what I formerly believed by thy bounty, I now so understand by thine illumination, that if I were unwilling to believe that thou dost exist, I should not be able not to understand this to be true.”

To my claim that Augustine sided with Tertullian, and against Clement, on the positive goal of Christian learning, it might be replied that Augustine emphasizes, as Tertullian did not and Clement did, the utility of pagan learning for this project of faith seeking understanding. The famous passage from On Christian Doctrine, in which Augustine speaks of the Israelites appropriating the gold of the Egyptians, comes to mind. But Tertullian did not deny—as we have already seen—that there is truth in the pagan philosophers. More importantly, it is to be noted that Augustine, after calling attention to the gold and silver to be found among the pagan philosophers, concludes the passage with these words: “These, therefore, the Christian, when he separates himself in spirit from the miserable fellowship of the philosophers, ought to take away from them, and to devote to their proper use in preaching the gospel.” No hint here of the broadscoped Christian learning which Clement favored!

I am well aware, then, of disagreeing with the greatest father of the ancient church when I say that, on this issue, I side with Clement and against Augustine—and Tertullian. I do not believe that positive Christian scholarship is to be confined to understanding better what already we believe. We are allowed, and sometimes required, to seek to understand what is no part of faith, what goes beyond faith: butterflies and quarks, plate techtonics and contemporary sculpture, epistemology and leprosy.

Before I leave my defense of Clementine interpretation, let me emphasize one point which has already become clear: disagree as they did on the goal of positive Christian learning, Clement, Tertullian, and Augustine agreed on a fundamental point of strategy: whatever be the segment of reality that one is engaged in trying to understand, one consults whatever sources might be of help. And pagan philosophy may well be among those sources. Clement, Tertullian and Augustine were all agreed that there is, to use Augustine’s metaphor, gold and silver to be found in the pagan philosophers. And should one find some relevant truth in some pagan philosopher, one does not then regret that those who are not Christian are nonetheless in touch with reality. One gives thanks to God, the author of all good things.

I have been speaking in defense of the goal and strategy of Clementine interpretation, though with an important qualification. Yes, we do look for truth in the texts of non-Christians; with this, no one disagreed, though indeed it’s much more heavily emphasized by Clement than by Tertullian, or even by Augustine. Yes, we do appropriate such truth not just for the end of understanding better what already we believe but for the end of understanding the reality in which we find ourselves—God and God’s creation. And Yes, because of the faith and love which shapes our lives, the learning which emerges will have its own distinct Christian contour. This last is the qualification. It’s a Tertullianist-Augustinian point; not a point Clement makes.

But now to defend Tertullian’s favored goal. Tertullian’s strategy, so I have argued, was to interpret for the distinctive contour of Plato’s thought, so as to take note of how different that is from the contour of Christian thought. (You recognize, of course, that I am here using Plato to stand in for the totality of non-Christian thinkers.) The question before us now is this: why interpret thus? Why not glean from Plato such truth as is to be found there which is useful for one’s own incorporationist purposes, and then move on? Why care about the contours of Plato’s thought?

A bland answer comes to mind: this too is part of the reality which the Christian intellectual is allowed to study. To this an aesthetic observation might be added: it’s interesting. And a moral observation: if the Christian is going to engage in that practice of our common humanity which is scholarship, then he is thereby under obligation to honor his fellow participants by understanding
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as well as he can how they are thinking and where, to put it colloquially, they are “coming from.”

All true, I do not doubt. Especially the last point. It’s a point I make to my students once a week, thereabouts. Thou must not bear false witness against other scholars, be they ancient or contemporary. Thou must not take cheap shots. Thou must not sit in judgment until thou hast done thy best to understand. Thou must earn thy right to disagree. Thou must conduct thyself as if Plato or Augustine, Clement or Tertullian, were sitting across the table—the point being that it is much more difficult (I do not say impossible) to dishonor someone to his face.

Tertullian’s goal was different from all of these, however. The difference represented opposition for Tertullian. It was to bring opposition to light that Tertullian thought we should interpret for the distinct contours of pagan thought and take note of how those differ from the contours of Christian thought. Apples are different from oranges; but they’re not in opposition. Tertullian saw Platonic thought as not just different from Christian thought but in opposition. Human culture, whatever else it may be, is a conflict of religious visions and loyalties, a struggle over God and the good, a contest for allegiance. And Tertullian believed with all his heart that for the health and fidelity of the Christian community, that struggle has to be engaged by its scholars and intellectuals. There are a thousand and one things going on which threaten to distract and lead astray those who follow Christ. It’s the responsibility of the scholars and intellectuals of the community to dig beneath the clutter so as to spy the fundamental dynamics at work. Typically those fundamental dynamics prove to be powerful comprehensive systems of thought at work—philosophies. I would myself add that they may instead prove to be patterns of social organization which are only in part the application of the ideas of intellectuals. Be that as it may, however: It is then the responsibility of the scholars and intellectuals of the community to take the measure of those philosophies and join combat.

This, if I understand him at all, is what Tertullian was saying. And I agree. Culture is a struggle for allegiance. Christian learning must accordingly be Tertullianist learning. Tertullianist as well as Clementine—Clementine as well as Tertullianist.

§6. The question which you and I as Christian scholars and intellectuals can never be finished with pondering is how to speak and act with Christian integrity within that practice of our common humanity which is scholarship and learning. We do not, or should not, go off into our own corner to think; we participate in the practice of our common humanity. But we are not under the illusion that it is possible to participate in that practice as generic human beings; accordingly, we struggle to participate there with Christian integrity.

If nothing else, I trust my discussion has made clear that we are not the first generation to have thought about this question. Our forebears in the second century were already discussing it with a profundity both provocative and instructive. To forget or ignore their contribution would not only be to shortchange ourselves, but to dishonor them.
Science and Religion: antinomy, dependence or coordination?

Michael J. Buckley

Father Buckley’s is the second of the addresses given at the Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts Eighth Annual National Conference, “Athens and Jerusalem: Sacred Learning and Secular Culture” held at the University of Notre Dame in October of 1998.

On April 1, 1993—April Fools’ Day, no less!—the distinguished scientific journal, Nature, censured Cambridge University for accepting a million pounds from the novelist Susan Howatch. The writer had given the money to establish the “Starbridge Lectureship” in theology and natural science. The journal coldly commented that such a conjunction—that of natural science and theology—was absurd and only indicated the shameful length to which British universities would go to attract money from the private sector. The Journal greeted with irony and distance the University’s contention that there must be an interaction between theology and science in an effort to obtain “greater understanding of our current existence.” Ms. Howatch is simply wrong. It is not the case that scientific conclusions and religious persuasions are, as Ms. Howatch contended, “no longer seen as opposed but complementary, two aspects of one truth.” Nonsense, judged the journal. At very best, the inevitable conflict between them forces upon their adherents the supposition of two truths. The only academic justification of such a chair at Cambridge would have been research in the psychology of religious belief. Presumably, the journal was suggesting inquiry into the influences that bring human beings to believe such peculiar things. “What other academic purpose can there be?” concluded the editorial, sounding for all the world like Tertullian as an anti-body: what concourse can there be between the Stoa and the Porch of Solomon, or—perhaps more appositely—between the Cavendish Laboratories and the King’s College Chapel? Professor Wolterstorff has already contrasted the ideal types represented by those who taught and argued in the distinguished “painted porch” of Athens or in colonnaded portico situated along the east side of the Temple enclosure in Jerusalem. Allow me—inspired by this querulous British editorial—to take one instance from such learned and contrasting companies and speak about the relationship between science and religion. I hope to propose three conflicting settlements and argue finally for the third.

antinomies

Americans should not find the strictures of Nature so strange. They bespeak a view that was prominent in the United States earlier in this century and continues to inform much of the popular mind regarding the relationship between science and any assertion of the Mystery that God is. One can recall what perhaps the greatest of 20th-century American philosophers, John Dewey, maintained in his Terry Lectures of 1934: “The growth of knowledge and of its methods and tests has been such as to make acceptance of these [religious] beliefs increasingly onerous and even impossible for large numbers of cultivated men and women” (Dewey 30). Any postulation of the existence of “supernatural” realities such as God or even the use of the term “god” with any meaning other than “ideal values” is doomed or dying before the increased hegemony of the scientific method:

[These] new methods of inquiry and reflection have become for the educated man today the final arbiter of all questions of fact, existence, and intellectual assent. Nothing less than a revolution in the “seat of authority” has taken place. . . There is but one sure road of access to truth—the road of patient, cooperative inquiry operating by means of observation, experiment, record and controlled reflection. (31-32)
One can find similar statements in Sigmund Freud, Ernest Nagel, or A. J. Ayer—that the growth in the productivity and the self-validation of some form of the scientific method has made it inevitable that the culture will outgrow those religious beliefs that project what is traditionally known as God. If the term "god" is kept—as is the case often in the first and always in the second settlement—its significance is so thoroughly altered that Harry Austryn Wolfson with quiet irony found its proponents “busily engaged in the gentle art of devising deities” (Wolfson 271). Within an intellectual culture given something of its character by scientific sobriety, objectivity, and evidence, religious claims seemed of little cognitive seriousness.

One has only to recall discussions among theoretical physicists early in this century. From the celebrated Solvay Conference of 1927, Werner Heisenberg records a conversation with Wolfgang Pauli and Paul Dirac:

One of us said: “Einstein keeps talking about God: what are we to make of that? It is very difficult to imagine that a scientist like Einstein should have such strong ties with a religious tradition.”

“Not so much Einstein as Max Planck,” someone objected. “From some of Planck’s utterances it would seem that he sees no contradiction between religion and science, indeed that he believes the two are perfectly compatible.” (82)

Planck was said to hold this position because of his belief that science deals with objective truth, while religion is concerned with subjective values. Neither Pauli nor Heisenberg will accept this subject/object dichotomy. In a later essay, Heisenberg accepted the question directly from Pauli: “Do you believe in a personal God? I know, of course, how difficult it is to attach a clear meaning to this question, but you can probably appreciate its general purport.” Heisenberg answers the question by first redefining the meaning of “God” as “the central order of things or events.” He then rephrases the question accordingly: “Can you, or anyone else, reach the central order of things or events, whose existence seems beyond doubt, as directly as you can reach the soul of another human being? I am using the term ‘soul’ quite deliberately so as not to be misunderstood. If you put your question like that, I would say yes . . . The words “personal God”—like “soul”—refer to the central order, to the “inner core of a being whose outer manifestations may be highly diverse and pass our understanding” (215-16). One can resolve the antimony between religious belief and scientific knowledge by radically redefining and domesticating the reality of God—another instance of the “gentle art of devising deities.”

Nature does not rise to the level of sophistication of these conversations, but its conclusion is not that much different. Nor does it differ much from the report emerging recently from the National Academy of Science, as reported by Ernan McMullin. This distinguished body has publicly maintained that religion and science are, in principle, mutually exclusive realms of human thought, and hence of no possible relevance to one another.

Science as foundational

Since this myth about the antinomic relationship between science and religion has become so common, there is little need to stay with that assertion here. Rather let us pass on to another, perhaps more recent, development. In the New York Times Book Review for February 12, 1989, the distinguished novelist-journalist, Dan Wakefield published a piece engagingly entitled, “And Now, a Word from our Creator.” Wakefield traced the remarkable abundance of recent “works in which God—who for so long seemed absent, if not ‘dead,’ as a subject of concern in serious fiction, as in the culture at large—has returned as a force or a ‘character’ in the action.” In these literary works, “God is not only present . . . but even sometimes has a ‘speaking part.’” Wakefield argues that this presence which God has been accorded in contemporary literature is not only surprising, but significant. It indicates a radical change in the literary and educated culture.

To these literary hierophanies, Wakefield joins those in contemporary physics. “Only a generation ago, we enlightened intellectuals believed science has not only disproved, but replaced God; now science is one of the major factors making the idea of God a serious subject again . . . It is the
scientists who seem to be taking the lead away from the theologians" (1,28-29).

Chet Raymo, a physics professor and popular science writer, advanced a similar thesis in a recent essay: "Scientists are wresting from philosophers and theologians the biggest question of all: why is there something rather than nothing?" Raymo cites as representative the physical chemist, P.W. Atkins' *The Creation*, Paul Davies' *The Cosmic Blueprint: New Discoveries in Nature's Creative Ability to Order the Universe*, Robert K. Adair's *The Great Design: Particles, Fields and Creation*, and Harald Fritzsch's *The Creation of Matter: The Universe from Beginning to End*. He could have added many others. The novelist, John Updike made this radical redefinition of the relationship between science and religion the context for one of his more recent novels, *Roger's Version*. Stephen Hawking suggests a coordination between science and philosophy in the attempt to "discover a complete theory," one that will enable human beings to discuss why it is that they and their universe exist. "If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—for then we would know the mind of God" (175). Whether this deity would deserve the designation "God" in any sense recognized by Christian tradition and theology constitutes a further question. Another example of "the gentle art"?

Perhaps no book embodies this remarkable reversal more influentially or advances its claim more emphatically than *God and the New Physics* by the distinguished English theoretical physicist, Paul Davies. Davies' work is not necessarily the best in the field, but it has assumed an importance that is both symptomatic and influential. It has become paradigmatic. As such, it deserves the attention of theologians.

Davies seizes his turf and stakes his claim with candor: "It may seem bizarre, but in my opinion, science offers a surer path to God than religion." And then, perhaps more modestly: "Right or wrong, the fact that science has actually advanced to the point where what were formerly religious questions can be seriously tackled, itself indicates the far-reaching consequences of the new physics" (ix). Paul Davies accepts something from this current of thought and then counters it. What he accepts is the warning: "No religion that bases its beliefs on demonstrably incorrect assumptions can expect to survive very long" (3). Then how can one be sure of the correctness of one's beliefs? By the use of contemporary science as the foundational or fundamental approach to the reality of God. This is something of the point of the whole book. Where Davies will differ from Dewey or from Freud and even more from Ayer is in this: science does not invalidate all assertions about God. In fact, even more than religion, science can ground the search for a supreme being that can be called "God."

One should contextualize this project with something to which Davies does not advert: it is not quite the novelty that *God and the New Physics* contends. It has been done before. In fact, one can find it thematically throughout the history of physical and cosmological speculations from Plato's *Timaeus*, in Aristotle's *Physics* (with its carry-over into the *Metaphysics*), through the heady days of Boyle and Newton and the physicotheologies they inspired, to the cosmological writings of Alfred North Whitehead. In an extraordinary paragraph in the 28th query at the end of the *Opticks*, for example, Newton proposed a project for mechanics or natural philosophy not unlike that of Davies: "The main Business of natural Philosophy is to argue from Phaenomena without feigning Hypotheses, and to deduce Causes from Effects, till we come to the very first Cause, which certainly is not Mechanical" (369). In the 31st query, he indicates how this natural philosophy would provide the foundations for a moral philosophy that he elsewhere equates with religion. For Davies, then, to propose a god that comes out of physics is part of an honorable and lengthy tradition of wisdom. His project is not new. What is new, as his title indicates, is his physics—although even here one might want to make a few distinctions.

Having isolated the claims and the heritage of Davies' project, it is equally important to note its problems: "For the greater part of human history, men and women have turned to religion not only for moral guidance, but also for answers to the fundamental questions of existence: How was the universe created and how will it end? What is the origin of life and mankind? Only in the last few centuries has science begun to make its own contributions to such issues" (5).
Prescinding from the accuracy of the last remark, one must assess carefully the kind of questions Davies judges to be religiously fundamental. They do not deal with the interpersonal self-disclosure of God that is called “revelation,” nor the knowledge or love of God in a community for which such faith and love is definitional; they do not touch upon our relations one to another within that call to love and service to the human race; they say nothing about the finding or the experiencing of God in one’s life or in the lives of the gathering of people into community; they do not deal with personal experience or personal relations, with holiness and a commitment to the marginalized, etc.—in all of which Christianity and its questions principally consist. Further, to use a different set of coordinates, these questions say nothing about what Baron von Hügel has isolated as two of the three elements of religion: first, the institutional and traditional; second, the affective, experiential, and mystical. Hügel included a third, the speculative and rational dimension of religion, but Davies insistently turns this into the “how” questions of the universe: How was the universe created? How will it end? How did life originate? How did humankind originate?

Catholic theologians would uniformly maintain that such questions belong to the inquiries of the various sciences. Augustine or any number of patristic commentators on Genesis have convincingly indicated that Scripture deals in metaphors, figures of speech, and narratives not to answer the question “how” but to deal with the questions of “what” and “why.” But Davies has taken these “how” questions and made them the fundamental problems of religion. It is no great wonder that contemporary science is then expected to answer them and in this way to take the lead in the religious search for God.

Sometimes, however, the “how” question slips over to God, and then the situation gets even more sticky. Davies argues, for example, that God cannot be both timeless and personal because “it is hard to see how a timeless God can act in time” (134). Indeed it is. To know how a thing works, one has to know what it is. To expect to know how God acts in human time and creates in his eternity supposes some grasp of the divine essence. To know the “how” of God’s action, one would have to know what God is. Classically Catholic theology, however, has insisted that God is incomprehensible, i.e., inexhaustibly intelligible, beyond definition—and so always disclosed to human beings as infinite mystery. Thomistic theology has insisted that we can only know that God is and what God is not, and that some things can be truly said of God—“Quia de Deo scire non possimus considerare de Deo quomodo sit, sed potius quomodo non sit” (Aquinas13). True assertions can be made about God, but precisely how they are true, how these analogical predicates are realized or reconciled in the divine nature, we do not know. Catholic theology is far more reticent (agnostic or skeptical, if you will) than is Davies.

We know, for example, that God creates, because there are creatures. We really do not know how God “pulls it off.” Catholicism has found no great scandal in this admitted ignorance. In quantum mechanics something analogous lies behind the pervasive uncertainty principle in dealing with the subatomic, and Sir Brian Pippard has written that when we try to get behind the big bang and ask why the pistol was fired and what it is that is not the universe but that from which the universe sprang, “we are completely tongue-tied; only verbs without tenses and nouns without extension are permitted, and discourse is limited to mere ejaculation: Mind! Love!” (795). If this is true of the subatomic, how much more should one expect it to be true of human discourse about God?

Such are Davies’ project, heritage, and fundamental questions. What are its results? One negative result has been noted already. A more positive example can be taken from chapter five of his book, God and the New Physics. Davies contends that “according to the theologians, life is the supreme miracle, and human life represents the crowning achievement of God’s cosmic masterpiece” (58). (I must confess, I know of no contemporary Catholic or Protestant theologian—or medieval, for that matter—who holds that life is “the supreme miracle.” If that title were given by a theologian to anything, I suspect it would be given, analogically, to the Incarnation. But let us prescind from this for a moment.) Davies proceeds to give a wonderfully lucid summary of contemporary explanations of life, moving from reductionism through vitalism to holism and the emergent
qualities at the collective level of structure. He then suggests that the origin of life is illumined by Prigogine’s research on the occurrence of “dissipative structures” and that life could be attributed to Miller-Urey’s “primeval or prebiotic soup” and the external influence that would have upset the thermodynamic equilibrium and so occasioned a self-organization of the components that resulted in DNA. Fine. But this is followed by the question, “Does the study of life—its origins and function—yield any evidence for the existence of God?” At best, he answers that it “provides strong evidence for some sort of purpose in the universe.” Any statement beyond this would be the return to a “God of the gaps” (70-71).

Davies turns to physics, then, for a clear and illuminating discussion of the fundamental structure of matter (chapters 11-14). He concludes that “perhaps future developments in science will lead to more direct evidence for other universes, but until then the seemingly miraculous concurrence of numerical values that nature has assigned to her fundamental constants must remain the most compelling evidence for an element of cosmic design” (189). But physics cannot carry this any further. Why not? Davies will later contend, “I don’t believe that physics can tackle questions about, for example, purpose or morality” (227).

Davies’ finding strong evidence of purpose in the biological phenomena and in the cosmological constituents of the universe somewhat parallels the thinking of great theologians. Bonaventure’s *Journey of the Mind to God*, for example, opens with this recognition that creatures indicate God’s power, wisdom, and goodness, and thus the various sciences can be integrated with theology and serve the mystical ascent. But Bonaventure would never argue from this anything like Davies’ claim that “science offers a surer path to God than religion.” For Bonaventure, religion has its own evidence in Christ and in religious experience.

**a judgment about foundations**

What is Davies actually left with? Fascinating hints and suggestions of purpose, but nothing more. Contemporary science finds in the universe “strong evidence for some sort of purpose.” Where could one go with this? It seems to me that it might function in two ways: (1) It could offer a harmonious correlation—in service to personal integration—between what one finds in the world through science and what one’s religious view encompasses. (2) It could raise the religious question for those whose lives are dedicated to scientific inquiry—a question raised but not answered by physics: Is there, then, really purpose in the universe?

Both of these functions might allow one to argue further that science (like almost every discipline human beings engage in) yields questions with which it can go no further—hints and suggestions of something more to reality which is beyond the methodology of physics and biology, or of literary criticism or history for that matter. In this way it opens the door eventually to some metascience which deals with the hints and issues that it has raised, but with a different methodology. Aristotelian metaphysics—or “theology,” as he termed it—was conceived as such a metadiscipline. Perhaps a theology in which philosophy was an integrated, albeit autonomous discipline should attempt something of the same. All of these possibilities will be considered in the final third of this paper. My point in mentioning them here is to point out what is not done in this new scientific functionalism.

This effort to found religion and religious beliefs upon scientific discoveries and processes strikes me as just as benighted as the contrasting dismissal of the religious upon the same evidence. The enthusiasm greeting this remarkable development appears unwarranted. It brackets as of no cognitive cogency such data specific to religion as the experience of the sacred within life and of the absolute claim made by truth upon conscience, the longing for God in love and the lives of holiness that bear witness to the validity of this longing, the encounter with the Gospels and with limit experiences that raise the questions of human meaning, and above all, the personal word addressed to human beings and the transformation of subjectivity by the Spirit of God. Rather it makes biology or physics or any science as such the foundation of religious assertions, the basis of its hesitant inference that there is a “friend behind the phenomena.” God has become at best a functioning and
useful hypothesis, as one can find in Descartes, Kant, and even George Steiner. But, as the sev­enteenth and eighteenth centuries have shown us, it is only a question of time until what is at best provisional hypothesis fades quietly away. As science insists upon its own integrity of methods, these religious assertions become quite literally baseless. God evanesces as the gap God was to fill closes of its own accord. Newton eventually gave way to Diderot.

Even in Davies, what looks like a very strong foundational claim at the beginning of his book actually melts into a much milder assertion towards its end. Why does science offer a surer path than religion in the search for God? Not because it even attempts answers to the questions which lie at the foundation of religion, like the existence of God: “It would be foolish to suppose that the fundamental questions concerning the existence of God, the purpose of the universe or the role of mankind in the natural and supernatural scheme have been answered by these advances [in science],” he finally concludes. It is rather because “science does have something to say about religious matters” (218). And what are those religious matters? The nature of time, the origin of matter and life, causality and determinism.

These refined physical concepts constitute “religious matters,” writes Davies, because they form the “very conceptual framework in which the religious question are posed” (218). As a culture changes in its understanding of time and causality and life, it inescapably alters the framework in which the properly religious questions are cast. This seems a much weaker claim than Davies’ original one. Parallel to the anthropic principle, one might want to distinguish between a Strong Davies Claim and a Weak Davies Claim. The SDC lodges in such a statement as “Science offers a surer path to God than religion.” The WDC would be the more mild: “Science does have something to say about religious matters.”

Davies seems here to be making a valid and an important point: human understanding of religious realities—as of all reality—is conditioned by the conceptual structures influentially present in the common culture. These structures are often taken so much for granted that they are not even noticed. There is a constant dialogue in process between (a) human subjectivity, individual or communal, with its prior conceptual content and structures, and (b) that which confronts this subject as the object of inquiry and interpretation. Contemporary hermeneutics has disclosed some of the factors dynamically active in this interchange, and, as I have described elsewhere, the scholastics were aware that “whatever is received, is received according to the mode of the one receiving it” (Buckley, 1979,693).

Human beings of a particular culture think in a certain way, within a characteristic frame of reference or intelligibility that makes some things plausible and others absurd. John Dewey repeatedly made the point that culture is the matrix of credibility. Olympian gods, a flat earth, or the values to be achieved through blood-sacrifice do not obtain much credibility today. Our culture has passed beyond these—so far beyond, that assertions to the contrary would only provoke laughter. So also, touching closer to home, the heliocentric universe and the evolutionary development of all physical reality are part of our intellectual culture; they have altered our understanding of Scripture and of theology—not totally, but perhaps in some places significantly. What Davies urges is that contemporary relativity theory and quantum mechanics will play, or do already play, a similar role. This insight bears crucially upon theology. Christian theology is an attempt to understand what is given to us in the revelation of Christ. Many of the thought-forms, such as those touching upon causality and time, we use to interpret this reality are heavily influenced by our own culture. To understand this fundamental hermeneutical activity becomes critically important if one is to understand how one is understanding the gospel.

relevance: three levels of coordination

If religion, then, is neither to be opposed to science nor to be founded on science, if neither the settlement of Dewey nor that of Davies is adequate, is there anything left for the religious intellect confronting science and religion except the acceptance of the indifference of one to the other and the rejection of any positive connection between Christian revelation and human knowledge?
Perhaps a complicated kind of conversation in which each maintains its own autonomy—its methods and data, its own language and field of experience—and yet stands as complementary to the discoveries and insights of the other. What on earth could that mean? I think it could mean at least three things.

1. Cultural Cooperation. The most immediate and obvious meaning lies with the patterns of cultural cooperation and coherence that the distinguished philosopher of science, Ernan McMullin has remarked:

   The human quest for understanding requires us to draw on a diversity of different sources. Science is not merely a means to technical control or accurate prediction; religion is not just a matter of moral action or private converse between the individual and God. Each contributes to our understanding of the complex world in which we are set. The quest for understanding is thus necessarily a collaborative one in which the autonomy of the constituents must be respected.” (104)

Science and religion can and do come together to explore subjects of common human interest: pressing issues such as nuclear weaponry discussed for years among the physicists, political scientists and theologians at Berkeley, or the genetic engineering explored at Georgetown and Boston College; or—if one lifts one’s vision to a broader subject-matter—more generally, what it means today to be a human being and have a human life as these questions emerge in the general collaboration that builds together the university or the common life of the body politic; or—even more generally—the coming together to obtain what Philippians so generously designated as “whatever is true, whatever is just, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious” (Phil 4:8). This, for instance is the theme of the 1988 papal letter on the relationship between science and theological reflection.

2. Problematic Situation. Allow me to advance this a step farther, with one preliminary methodological note: The disciplined reflection upon the experience and content of Christian faith or upon the object and content of the Christian religious experience is the function of theology. Christian theology, which is at issue here, insists upon the internal presence of the philosophical disciplines as an essential moment in its own procedure. One cannot “do theology” without “doing philosophy” as a discipline with its own integrity of method and evidence, but coordinated as such a discipline within theology. As Karl Rahner has repeatedly insisted: “We are theoretically, practically and didactically justified in philosophizing here within theology itself” (10). One cannot do Christian theology without philosophy.

Now science, like any human enterprise, can affect such a theology positively in the growth both of its conceptual richness and of the knowledge available for its assimilation. Concepts such as field or energy, vector or organism or evolution and (even) the second law of thermodynamics can and do pass as analogous and heuristic structures into theology. They broaden the possibilities for standard theological reflection by making for a fuller set of terms for common human discourse, without reducing the language and methods of one to the other.

Science also provides an expanding field of facts against which the interpretation of sacred scripture and the assertions of theology must be evaluated. Do theologians have nothing to learn about the human as the imago Dei, the image of God, from contemporary cosmogenesis, from the evolution of the species, or from theories concerning the fate of the universe for our still very primitive eschatology? There is nothing strange or original about this. If theology is alive, every human project and every academic discipline feed into its content.

On the other hand, does theology offer any comparable service for science, in concepts and facts? Standard histories of science report that certain concepts and some questions first emerged and were pursued in religion or theology before they made their way into science. But that seems to me of secondary importance. A much more significant contribution might be made if theology were to take up some of the hints and suggestions latent or obvious in scientific discoveries and subsume them precisely as questions—not as the grounds for religious assertion, but as constituting something of the problematic situation for contemporary theological reflection. Let me give a couple of examples.
If the fundamental constants found in nature in all of their extreme precision and mutual balance catch one up short, and one finds oneself exclaiming like Davies about "the seemingly miraculous concurrence of numerical values that nature has assigned to her fundamental constants" (189), if one finds oneself driven in this way to wonder if purpose or design are actually present in our universe, then a methodological problem emerges—one with several possible, but alternative resolutions: (1) one can insist that the natural sciences are to be pushed to consider questions of this kind of ultimacy, as Isaac Newton or Paul Davies would have it; or (2) one can say question of ultimate purpose and meaning is one that you may not legitimately examine further at all, as with John Dewey or Claude Levi Strauss; or (3) one says this is a very important question, but you cannot examine it further in physics or in biology, but you ought to try some other place, some other disciplined reflection: is there nothing in the whole of religious experience and in the human reflection upon ultimacies that speaks to this?

If, to use another example, both Einstein and Heisenberg assess scientific inquiry as suggesting that there is a fundamental, impersonal order within the world that they can call "god," can or should theologians take that assessment seriously—not as a fact, not as a buttress or foundation for religion, but as a question?" Should they inquire whether there are grounds in their own disciplines for such an assertion, whether such a reality would necessarily be personal in a refined but real use of this word, or even more whether its primary evidence must be personal? Does not "science develop best when its concepts and conclusions are integrated into the broader human culture and its concerns for ultimate meaning and value?" (John Paul II, M 13).

There is nothing novel about this claim that science constitutes part of the problematic situation for theological reflection. Aristotelian physics gave way to metaphysics, which Aristotle actually called "theology," and Alfred North Whitehead brought his mathematical and scientific writings to their organic completion with his inquiry into the relationship between God and the world. Many areas of disciplined human reflection—such as history and literature—yield questions beyond their own internal capacities to resolve, indicating the need for metadisciplines to consider such problems. This movement to another discipline such as theology is not to search for a god of the gaps, nor is it parallel to the Davies' project to use science to provide "a surer path to God." It rather suggests the need for a disciplined inquiry whose problematic area is fed by all human projects including science.

3. Mutual Completion. Allow me, finally, to advance this matter one step farther, from a consideration of content—whether concepts or questions—to a more universal consideration of the mind investigating the content. [What follows reflects what Professor Buckley has written in the two citations of 1993. —the Editor] To understand the genius and the unique academic coordination between the religious and the intellectual, one cannot make these great areas of human engagement simply extrinsic to one another, two distinct entities related to one another additionally or influentially. The religious (or its disciplined self-understanding we may call "theology") and the academic are inherently related—not simply extrinsically coordinate, but intrinsically related. How so?

The dynamism characteristic of all inquiry and knowledge—if not inhibited, if allowed its full range and scope—is towards ultimacy, towards that completion in which a fact or a discovery, an issue or its resolution finds place in a universe or the whole of reality that makes final sense. The mind may not reach this, but is it not towards this? This assertion obviously does not suggest that quantum mechanics or geography is religion. But it does mean that any movement towards meaning and truth is inchoatively religious in as much as this care for ultimacies engages the reality characteristically religious. Once one begins on the path of honest inquiry, whether in physics or social science or aesthetics, if one allows the questions to mount cumulatively, one will come to the such questions that engage what is absolute in inquiry. It is no accident, for example, that the physics of Aristotle or Newton or Whitehead led inexorably to the issue of God.

At the same time, the tendency of religious conviction and faith have historically been towards the academic. This obviously does not suggest that all serious religion is scholarship. It does
mean that the dynamism inherent in religious faith—if not inhibited—is towards its own understanding, towards its own self-possession in knowledge, towards its coherence and unity with everything else we know. In the classic phrase of Anselm, faith inevitably does seek understanding. It seems to me no accident that the universities of Europe and the colleges of the American colonies came out of the church.

I am arguing, then, that if permitted their full development, the religious intrinsically involves the academic, and the academic intrinsically involves the religious—granted that this development is de facto always imperfectly realized at best or even seriously frustrated. This inherent unity bespeaks something of the promise of the religious affiliated university that has realized the integration of theology within its *circulus artium*: to allow—if this transpires—the dynamism native to these engagements of the academic and the religious to reach its completion in each other. Rather than truncate the dynamism of knowing through dogmatically interdicting the religious dimension of life or isolating the religious from academic demands and inquiry, such a university has unique resources to allow each its full maturation.

There is, then at Cambridge University a place for the discussion between religion and the natural sciences: one in which they are enabled to collaborate as two components within human culture, as conceptually and prepositionally mutually influential, and perhaps most importantly as the completion of the native promise of either. If this inquiry were to proceed further and deal with the specifically Catholic horizon of faith, the profound sacramental nature of matter would have to be engaged, but that would be the subject of another paper.

works cited


Musing on Tuesday’s Questions:
Luther in the context of the American Enlightenment

Richard T. Hughes

Ever since my graduate student days at the University of Iowa, two people have exercised an extraordinary influence on the way I view the world. Both these people were university professors, but there the external similarities end. One lived in the sixteenth century; the other in the twentieth. One was a Protestant reformer; the other a Unitarian. One was a theologian; the other an historian. One virtually defined the meaning of the Protestant tradition; the other spent a lifetime exploring the meaning of the American Enlightenment. One of these men was Martin Luther, the other was Sidney E. Mead, who continues to thrive today at 94 years of age.

For all their differences, Martin Luther and Sidney Mead shared much in common and, between them, they taught me some of the most important lessons I have ever learned. They taught me that human life is fraught with ambiguities and frailties, and they taught me what it really means to say that God alone is God and that all human beings are only finite mortals. Yet, as Mead wrote in a recent letter addressed to me,

Many historians, noting . . . my resemblance to Luther, would probably assume that I got [these ideas] . . . from him. Wrong. I never really read, let alone studied Luther. I got it from the early American Deistic political leaders, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Franklin, Adams, etc. . . . They believed that humankind was finite [and] that therefore no man (or woman) could ever have absolute knowledge. Therefore “truth” can be approximated only by permitting all opinions to be expressed. Implied therein is the belief that in the end we must live by faith. (1 October 1998)

I want, then, to explore three questions. First, I want to explore the way Sidney Mead understands the religion of the American Enlightenment. Second, I want to explore the implications Mead’s perspectives might hold for church-related higher education in the United States today. And finally, I want to ask how Luther’s understanding of the Christian faith and Mead’s understanding of the American Enlightenment might reinforce one another and form thereby a basis for meaningful higher education in the Christian genre.

If practically everyone knows the name, Martin Luther, it goes without saying that the name of Sidney E. Mead is much less familiar. Sidney Mead was widely known in the 1960s and 1970s as the dean of historians of American religion. Mead wrote history, to be sure, but more than that, he reflected on the meaning of the American experiment and developed an extended argument for the relation of religion to the democratic traditions of the United States. And so we begin with Sidney Mead.

“the primacy of God over all human institutions” and the finitude of humankind

Mead began that argument with the contention that American democracy rests upon a theological foundation that he often described as “the theology of the Republic.” We can best understand Mead’s “theology of the Republic” if we pay attention to the Declaration of Independence. Most Americans recognize the Declaration as a political document, but the Declaration was and is a theological document as well. Indeed, Thomas Jefferson rooted the Declaration squarely in the reli-
gion of the American Enlightenment, that is, classical Deism.

What was Deism, and who were the Deists? The Deists of the seventeenth century searched for a way to terminate the religious wars that plagued Europe in the aftermath of the sixteenth-century Reformation. The Bible, they argued, was in many ways the cause of these conflicts because the Bible was both complex and susceptible to a host of interpretations. But God had authored, they claimed, a second book, a book they called the Book of Nature. If the Bible was complex, this second book was simple. And if the Bible was susceptible to a host of conflicting interpretations, this second book taught clearly and unambiguously the essential doctrines of every major religious tradition.

We must come to see that the political affirmations of the Declaration rest squarely on the cardinal principles of the Deist creed: the twin affirmations that God exists and that His existence guarantees the moral structure of the universe. The Declaration, in fact, never invoked the God of the Bible or the God of traditional Judaism or Christianity. Instead, the Declaration appeals clearly and deliberately to “Nature and Nature’s God,” that is, the God that all human beings can know in God’s second book, the Book of Nature. Likewise, the Declaration proclaims that the universe embodies a fundamental moral structure. Jefferson described that moral structure with these words:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

When we understand the theological dimensions of the Declaration of Independence, we begin to understand what Mead had in mind when he spoke of “the theology of the Republic.” In Mead’s judgment, this theology legitimated the right of every human being to search for truth and to frame the truth as he or she saw fit. It was this same “theology of the Republic,” therefore, that legitimated the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” And “the most constant strand” in this “theology of the Republic,” Mead believed, was “the primacy of God over all human institutions.”

To this point, we have explored only half of Mead’s “theology of the Republic.” If Mead began by affirming “the primacy of God over all human institutions,” he stated time and again the corollary to that proposition, namely, the fact that “no man is God.” That affirmation, Mead wrote in an especially poignant passage,

is what I understand to be the functional meaning of “God” in human experience. Whatever “God” may be, if indeed being is applicable to “God,” a concept of the infinite seems to me necessary if we are to state the all-important fact about man: that he is finite. This is the premise of all democratic institutions. It is the essential dogma of the religion of the Republic. (Mead 9-10)

Two themes, then, stand at the center of Mead’s “theology of the Republic”: the finitude of humankind and the primacy of God over human institutions. According to Mead, this profoundly theological vision has made possible the democratic experience that Americans have enjoyed now for well over two hundred years.

the “theology of the republic” and the american churches

Yet, as Mead points out, in spite of its profoundly theological core, and in spite of its appeal to the sovereignty of God over all human life, Christians have often assailed the religious foundation on which the American experience was built as little more than rank infidelity. Why would this be true?

The reason is not hard to find. The Founders intended the “religion of the Republic” to serve as a universal religious vision which all people could embrace at some level, regardless of their particular religious persuasions. Indeed, Mead argues that the “theology of the Republic” is “not only
not particularistic; it is designedly antiparticularistic" (22).

On the other hand, many Christians in those early years of the Republic longed for a nation that would be grounded in *particularistic Christian faith*. In other words, they wished for a particularistically Christian America. The First Amendment to the Constitution, however, made it impossible for Christians or anyone else to impose particularistic faith on the Republic, either by law or by other means of coercion. But there still remained the possibility of persuasion. And so, Christians throughout the nation launched in the early years of the nineteenth century a great revival that we know today as the Second Great Awakening. Indeed, one might well interpret that revival as, at least in part, a massive attempt to Christianize the Republic by persuasion, since it would now be impossible to do so by force of law.

In addition, many Christians who sought to Christianize the Republic by persuasion sought at the very same time to discredit the cosmopolitan “theology of the Republic” that made possible a pluralistic nation. As far as they were concerned, the founders who had framed this theology were “infidels,” and the theology they articulated, because it lacked sufficient particularity, was nothing short of “infidelity.” No one represented this perspective more completely than did Timothy Dwight, grandson of Jonathan Edwards, president of Yale College from 1795 to 1817, and one of the chief architects of the Second Great Awakening. For Dwight, as for so many other Christians of that age, “infidelity” was a synonym for the religion of the Enlightenment. Accordingly, “infidelity” was a plan “for exterminating Christianity” and offered “no efficacious means of restraining Vice, or promoting Virtue, but, on the contrary encourages Vice and discourages Virtue.” In fact, “so evident is the want of morals on the part of Infidels... that to say ‘A man is an Infidel’ is understood... as a declaration that he is a plainly immoral man” (70).

This attack which Christian revivalists marshaled against the religion of the Enlightenment bore long-term effects that are with us yet. As Mead observes, it drove a permanent wedge between, on the one hand, the particularistic theologies of the churches and, on the other, the “theology of the Republic” whose job it was to legitimate pluralism and diversity in the United States. Because the fundamental issues between these two competing visions have never been resolved, Mead writes, “the two parts of the culture simply went their separate ways. Since that time, the intellectual and religious lives have flowed in separate, albeit sometimes parallel, streams, but have been separately institutionalized in the universities and denominations respectively. Universities define the intellectual life; denominations define the religious life” (124). Mead might well have added that universities are those institutions that self-consciously embrace pluralism and diversity, while Christian denominations often have difficulty getting past their own particularistic visions. This observation obviously raises significant questions about the meaning and the potential of church-related higher education, and we shall return to this question in due time.

**resolving the dilemma**

But first we must ask if Mead offers any solution to the problem he identifies. How is it possible, in other words, for Christians in the United States to resolve the tension that has always plagued the relationship between particularistic Christianity and the universalistic theology of the Republic? Mead does, indeed, offer a solution to this problem. Quite simply, he urges Christians to break through the particularity of their own traditions. Since Mead borrows this concept from the theologian, Paul Tillich, we need to hear the way Tillich frames this issue. After exploring the relationship between Christianity and the world religions, Tillich concludes like this:

Religion cannot come to an end, and a particular religion will be lasting to the degree in which it negates itself as a religion. Thus Christianity will be a bearer of the religious answer as long as it breaks through its own particularity... In the depth of every living religion there is a point at which the religion itself loses its importance, and that to which it points breaks through its particularity, elevating it to spiritual freedom and with it to a vision of the spiritual presence in other expressions of the ultimate meaning of man’s existence. (Tillich 96-7)
Reflecting on this passage, Mead wrote, “without claiming to understand exactly what Tillich meant by those words, I have my opinion of what ‘that’ is to which ‘every living religion points,’ namely, that no man is God” (Mead 9-10). In other words, that to which all religions ultimately point is finally nothing more and nothing less than the affirmation of the Infinite, on the one hand, and the affirmation that all human beings are finite, on the other.

As far as Mead is concerned, this is precisely the vision that animates the “theology of the Republic.” Thus, Mead wrote,

> When Franklin spoke of “the essentials of every religion” he added that these were “to be found in all the religions we had in our country” though in each “mix’d with other articles” peculiar to that sect. This is not to create a syncretistic common core, but to plumb for the universal which is dressed and disguised in the particularities of doctrine and practice that distinguish one sect from another. This conception enabled them to distinguish between the substance of religion, and its forms exemplified in sectarian tenets and observances. (60)

Accordingly, Mead concluded that “Tillich’s view seems . . . implicit in the whole American experience with religious pluralism” (63).

The implications of the work of Sidney E. Mead for church-related higher education

We now must ask, what implications does Mead’s analysis hold for church-related higher education in the United States? Clearly, the implications are legion. But to assess those implications, we first must recall Mead’s judgment that since the Second Great Awakening, the intellectual and religious dimensions of American culture “have been separately institutionalized in the universities and denominations respectively. Universities define the intellectual life; denominations define the religious life.”

This observation suggests two important themes. First, it brings to mind the inescapable fact that the theology that legitimated American democratic institutions—and that did so by flatly denying that any human being is God—is the very same theology that legitimated, and continues to legitimate, the American university. To state this point yet another way, the modern university, like the larger nation, is a child of the American Enlightenment.

And second, when Mead argues that in the aftermath of the Second Great Awakening, the intellectual and religious dimensions of American culture “have been separately institutionalized in the universities and denominations respectively,” he implicitly raises substantial questions about the viability of church-related higher education. For after all, church-related colleges and universities are, in some respects at least, virtual microcosms of the unresolved tension between the “theology of the Republic,” on the one hand, and the particularistic theologies of the churches, on the other. In other words, nowhere in American life can one discern more clearly the contest between pluralism and particularism than in the church-related college or university.

More than any other factor, this tension between pluralism and particularism has prompted the recurring divorce between faith and learning in America’s Christian institutions of higher learning. Clearly, then, this problem is our most pressing problem, and the problem to which we must find a viable solution.

Lamenting the “secularization” of the academy

Yet, instead of probing for viable solutions to this problem, many Christian scholars frame the issues in ways that exacerbate the problem rather than help solve it. For example, it does precious little good to demonize mainstream higher education as secular while promoting Christian higher education as fundamentally spiritual. When Christians lament “the secularization of the academy,” one is reminded of those nineteenth-century revivalists who assailed the Founders as “infidels” because their perspectives were insufficiently Christian. Martin Marty warned us years ago that when Christians preoccupy themselves with the theme of secularization, they are in danger of acting out again the struggles of the early nineteenth century, only substituting our term, “secularization,”
for that era’s judgment against “infidelity” (Marty 16, 203).

Moreover, when we preoccupy ourselves with the “secularization of the academy,” we ignore the ambiguity of the human situation and the ambiguity that characterizes all human institutions including all universities, whether public, private, or church-related. For example, who would wish to claim that public institutions of higher learning are unambiguously secular? Surely, in every such institution, one finds serious believers, representing a variety of religious traditions, whose convictions inspire the way they think, the way they teach, and the way they write. And who is to say that pluralism in the modern university does not reflect a commitment at a very fundamental level to the proposition that “no human being is God”?

At the very same time, who would wish to claim that Christian institutions are unambiguously spiritual? Who seriously believes that faculty in Christian institutions always and unambiguously teach in ways that reflect their Christian convictions? And who can believe that, in every instance, students in Christian institutions are all that different from their counterparts in so-called “secular” institutions? And perhaps most important, when Christian institutions fail to take ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity seriously, their tribalism betrays their discomfort with the affirmation that “no human being is God.”

I do not intend to suggest that there is no such thing as a “secular sphere.” The notion of “secular” essentially means the absence of the sacred or any conception of the sacred. But many Christian scholars implicitly reject this broad understanding. Instead, they particularize the concept of “secular” and use the term to mean the absence of the particularistically Christian.

Nor do I mean to suggest that there is no difference between public and Christian institutions. There is a difference, and that difference is apparent when Christian institutions embrace an openness to explicit Christian faith that may be greatly diminished in the public sphere.

But for Christian educators to preoccupy themselves with the so-called “secularity” of mainstream higher education only obscures the ambiguities that prevail on both sides of the educational aisle. We therefore need educators who are less concerned to lament the secularization of the modern academy, and more concerned to find those creative points of contact between the theological vision that sustains the modern academy—implicit though that theology may be—and the theological affirmations of the Christian faith.

post-modernism and the Enlightenment

If Christian scholars hope to build bridges between Christian faith and the larger academy—between particularism and pluralism—then we must abandon the fantastic notion that the postmodern world offers opportunities in that regard that the world of Enlightenment rationalism denies. Before proceeding with this line of thought, it is important to acknowledge some of the reasons for the postmodern revolt against Enlightenment ideology. First, the Enlightenment often affirmed its own particularities under the guise—or the illusion—of universal principles. Carl Becker placed that point beyond dispute in his pathbreaking book of 1932, The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth City Philosophers. “They are deceiving us,” Becker wrote, “these philosopher-historians [of the Enlightenment] . . . They do not know that the ‘man in general’ they are looking for is just their own image, and the principles they are bound to find are the very ones they start out with. That is the trick they play on the dead” (Becker 103-4).

But these observations hardly warrant the wholesale rejection of the Enlightenment that seems so common in many Christian centers of higher learning. Surely we would not wish to abandon the search for common ground, or to abandon the search for truth, simply because it is easy to confuse truth, on the one hand, and common ground, on the other, with the particularities of our own time and place.

It is also true that the Enlightenment in various times and places absolutized itself, and that various thinkers began to claim for empirical analysis a degree of certainty and objectivity that we now regard as illusory and self-deceptive. But why should that development discredit the Enlightenment project altogether? Surely, for some Enlightenment thinkers to absolutize the Enlightenment
project is not fundamentally different than for some Jews or some Christians or some Muslims to absolutize their particularistic religious visions.

And yet, Christian scholars often dismiss the Enlightenment as if it were a homogeneous phenomenon, standing at odds with religious conviction at virtually every turn. But this view is far too simplistic. While some Enlightenment thinkers left little room for religious considerations, others grounded their moral vision squarely in a religious framework. This is why Notre Dame’s John McGreevy has recently argued that it makes far more sense to speak of plural Enlightenments than to speak of the Enlightenment as if it were only one thing.

The truth is that important strands of the American Enlightenment provide us with a profoundly religious vision—a vision grounded in the conviction that no human being is God, that no human being has a corner on the market of truth, that the search for truth must therefore proceed, and that for all these reasons, we must live by faith.

Yet, I have heard numerous Christian scholars argue that the Enlightenment project is fundamentally inhospitable to Christian faith. Instead, they argue, Christian faith will gain a fair hearing only in a postmodern world precisely because of the presumed relativism of the postmodern project. In other words, if the postmodern project is by definition open to the claims of any non-Christian or anti-Christian agenda whatsoever, consistency demands that it be open to the claims of Christian faith as well.

But why would any Christian scholar imagine that such a project is even remotely hospitable to genuine pluralism, much less to the particularistic claims of Christian faith? Genuine pluralism, after all, draws its strength from the assertion of particularities, not from their negation and certainly not when particularistic affirmations are trivialized by relativism or subjectivism. This is why I never cease to be amazed when Christian scholars view the postmodern project as a potential ally, but castigate the Enlightenment as the root of secularization and the enemy of the Christian faith.

the call for christian particularity

Finally, in the context of Christian scholars who frame the issues in ways that exacerbate rather than resolve the tension between pluralism and Christian particularism, I want to mention Father James Burtchaell’s recent magnum opus entitled, The Dying of the Light.[rev in this issue on p.44] This book is an extraordinary one, with many helpful insights. Yet, its two principal conclusions are, in my judgment, fundamentally flawed. First, Burtchaell argues there that an alarming number of Christian institutions of higher learning have embarked on the slippery slope that leads to secularization. While that may well be true, it is nonetheless the case that in presenting this thesis, Burtchaell takes precious little account of the ambiguity of the human situation that stands at the heart of all human institutions, including church-related colleges and universities.

But Burtchaell’s second conclusion—or at least a part of that conclusion—is even more troubling. In his judgment, there is one factor that is preeminently responsible for the slide of many institutions down the slippery slope toward secularization. That factor is the determination of those institutions to embrace a broader mission at the expense of their historic Christian particularities. Surely there is considerable truth to this analysis, especially when church-related institutions soft-pedal their Christian particularities for something as vague as, say, “value-centered education.” But Burtchaell seems to make no distinction between those institutions that abandon their Christian particularities for something as vague as “value-centered education,” and those institutions that seek to break through their Christian particularities to a broader Christian witness.

Burtchaell then suggests several strategies by which schools like these can save themselves from falling headlong and completely into the abyss of secularity. None of those strategies, he suggests, is more crucial than for Christian institutions of higher learning to reclaim the particular Christian traditions to which they have historically been related.

To that assessment, I offer these reflections. First, I agree that America’s church-related colleges and universities need to reclaim their particular faith traditions. Ever since the publication of Models for Christian Higher Education, I have argued that if Christian institutions seek to be effec-
tive, they must learn to live out of these traditions and to mature academically in the context of those traditions, not in spite of them. In other words, church-related institutions must find those themes, peculiar to their own traditions, that will genuinely sustain the life of the mind, and then exploit those themes on behalf of serious and critical scholarship.

But in calling for a reassertion of Christian particularity, Burtchaell misses the paradox that if a church-related institution wishes to live out of its particularity, it must at the very same time break through its particularity. As Jesus taught us, we find our lives by losing them and lose our lives by finding them. No teaching could be more appropriate to a Christian institution that specializes in the life of the mind. But if a church-related institution does nothing more than affirm its particularity without breaking through its particularity, it becomes thereby a sectarian institution, fixated on the particularities of its own existence.

Burtchaell, however, exhibits no awareness of the power of the sectarian vision, and even scorns institutions that have sought over the years to avoid a sectarian posture. But sectarianism is real, especially in conservative Protestant institutions, and virtually cripples the ability of an institution to nurture the life of the mind. Indeed, Sidney Mead has warned that “sectarianism, whether religious or national, is a greater threat than secularism or outright atheism, because, as the story of religious persecutions reminds us, when it comes in the guise of ‘the faith once delivered to the saints’ it may legitimate terrible tyrannies” (Mead 76). Anyone who has taught in a sectarian institution of higher learning knows the truth of this statement.

The truth is, a sectarian institution can neither nurture the life of the mind, nor nourish new thoughts, nor encourage fresh interpretations, nor sponsor dialogue with a diversity of conversation partners. But Burtchaell’s book may encourage hundreds of church-related colleges and universities throughout the United States to reassert their Christian particularities without giving much thought at all to what it might mean to break through those particularities in ways that allow for a serious engagement with the substance of Christian faith, on the one hand, and with pluralism and diversity, on the other.

the theology of Martin Luther

And so, we still must ask, is there a way to resolve the tension between pluralism and Christian particularism? Or to put this question yet another way, is it possible for church-related institutions of higher learning not only to assert the particularities of Christian faith, but to break through those particularities at one and the same time?

Several theological traditions possess meaningful resources in this regard. But in my judgment, none holds more promise than the theological tradition that was framed by Martin Luther. Why would I make this claim? For one fundamental reason. Lutheran theology is not a static and self-contained orthodoxy that simply stands there, gazing at itself in all its narcissistic splendor. Nor is Lutheran theology linear or flat or one-dimensional. Nor can we rightly regard Luther’s theology as an orthodoxy at all if we understand the word “orthodoxy” in its conventional sense.

Instead, Luther offers to us a dynamic and vibrant vision, always subverting any confidence we may have in our own ability to do the good, to tell the truth, or to get the story right. This is not to say that Luther offers us no place to stand, for he does. Nor is this to say that we find no particularities in Lutheran faith, for we do. Indeed, Luther asks us to view the world from the foot of the cross. From that vantage point, the world to which we have grown accustomed is turned upside down. From that vantage point, our perceptions of God give way to the God who shatters our perceptions, our creeds and confessions of faith give way to the God who stands in judgment on our creeds and confessions of faith, and our orthodox formulations give way to the God who annihilates orthodoxies of every kind.

The truth is, when we enter the world of Lutheran theology, we enter the world of paradox where nothing is really what it seems. This is simply because Luther always asks us to view the world, not from the perspective of human reason, but from the perspective of faith in the promises of God—promises guaranteed by the scandal of the cross. Thus he writes,
Though you were nothing but good works from the soles of your feet to the crown of your head, you would still not be righteous or worship God or fulfill the First Commandment, since God cannot be worshipped unless you ascribe to him the glory of truthfulness and all goodness which is due him. This cannot be done by works but only by the faith of the heart. (Luther 62)

With this paradoxical way of viewing the world, grounded in his vision of the cross and his vision of the infinite God, Luther turns upside down many of the conventional distinctions we like to make. His treatment of the Christian’s relation to the secular world is a case in point. In an extraordinary passage in his 1520 treatise, “The Freedom of the Christian,” he suggests that the distinction we want to make between the sacred and secular spheres may be fraught with far more ambiguity than we may wish to admit. Thus, Luther writes,

It does not help the soul if the body is adorned with the sacred robes of priests or dwells in sacred places or is occupied with sacred duties or prays, fasts, abstains from certain kinds of foods, or does any work that can be done by the body and in the body. The righteousness and the freedom of the soul require something far different since the things which have been mentioned could be done by any wicked person. Such works produce nothing but hypocrites. On the other hand, it will not harm the soul if the body is clothed in secular dress, dwells in unconsecrated places, eats and drinks as others do, does not pray aloud, and neglects to do all the above-mentioned things which hypocrites can do. (54)

In a word, Luther is telling us here that the sacred and secular spheres overlap in remarkable ways and simply do not conform to the neat distinctions we wish to make from our finite angle of vision.

It is precisely because Luther has such great appreciation for the depth of human finitude, precisely because he understands the ambiguity of the human situation, and precisely because he knows that from the perspective of the Infinite, this world is full of appearances, and appearances deceive—it is for all these reasons that the Lutheran tradition possesses such an extraordinary capacity to break through its own particularity. And this is why the principles of the Lutheran vision are fundamentally in keeping with the Enlightenment vision that Sidney Mead describes as the “theology of the Republic,” why the Lutheran heritage can give us the courage to raise the most radical kinds of questions, and why the Lutheran vision can do so much to sustain the life of the mind.

conclusions

I want to close with a story. Almost nine months ago, someone put me onto a book called Tuesdays With Morrie. It’s not often that I run out and buy a book on the spot just because someone recommends it, but this time I did. And what a book!

Morrie was Morris Schwartz who taught sociology at Brandeis University for many years. Mitch Albom, who wrote the book Tuesdays With Morrie, was one of Morrie’s students at Brandeis almost twenty years ago. Morrie directed several independent studies for Mitch, as well as his senior thesis. And they always met on Tuesdays.

Mitch finally graduated and left Brandeis to seek his fame and fortune. Almost twenty years went by and Mitch seldom thought about his old professor, even though the two of them had been extremely close. Then, the newspaper for which Mitch worked went on strike. For several months, Mitch had time on his hands.

One night, early in the strike, Mitch was surfing the channels on the tube when suddenly, there on the screen, on “Nightline,” being interviewed by Ted Koppel, was his old professor, Morrie. Morrie, it turns out, had Lou Gehrig’s disease and was dying. Koppel was asking Morrie what it meant to face one’s own death, how he coped, and how he found the strength to carry on with what little of his life he had left.

Mitch was so moved by what he saw and heard that he flew back to Boston to reconnect with his old professor, Morrie. He and Morrie decided to hold class every Tuesday for the rest of Morrie’s life. But this time the subject wasn’t sociology. It was life. More precisely, the question for this class was simply this: What’s important and what’s not important when one knows that one must die

soon? Or put another way, what’s the meaning of life in the face of one’s impending death? These are the questions that Mitch and Morrie explored on those Tuesday’s before Morrie finally died. And the book, Tuesdays With Morrie essentially gives a loving and tender transcript of those conversations.

When I read the book, I cried. But even more important, I finished this book only three days before I, myself, experienced a heart attack and a life threatening bout with congestive heart failure. So there I was, for over a week, looking into the abyss from a hospital bed in Green Bay, Wisconsin. You can understand when I tell you that I filtered this entire experience through this little book and through the wisdom I had learned from Morrie Schwartz only three days before.

But more than that, this little book prompted me to reconnect with my old professor, Sidney E. Mead. Mead and I had corresponded for years, but I hadn’t seen him in over a decade. So I flew to Tucson for a wonderful visit on a beautiful Arizona afternoon just a few months ago. While I was there, I told Mead something that I had told him years ago, but something he had not fully grasped at the time. I told him that no two people had shaped my thinking more than he and Martin Luther, since he and Luther had taught me so much about what it means to be human. After Mead himself had read Tuesdays With Morrie, he wrote me a letter that contained the following lines:

I may have been amazed, as you note, when you [linked me with Luther] some years ago. But now we have common terms with which to express it—you are saying that Luther and I each have “spent a lifetime ‘musing [on] Tuesday’s questions.”’ (1 October 1998)

And so I was. Martin Luther and Sidney Mead did, indeed, devote their lives to “Tuesday’s questions,” for “Tuesday’s questions” are those questions each of us must ask when we ponder the meaning of our lives in the light of our inevitable deaths. In this way, we come to terms with what it means to be finite human beings, and what it means to stand before an infinite God. This, I think, is what Martin Luther and Sidney Mead share in common. And this is why I commend them to you as faithful guides in the vocation of church-related higher education.

works cited


A cool, bright noontime in May. Another lunch in Huegli Hall. A Younger Mathematics professor, an Older English professor, a Younger English professor/newly-appointed assistant dean, and an Older Theology professor glean time from committee meetings and grading finals to stoke their metabolic furnaces. A can of Coke Classic®, a bowl of homemade lentil soup, a plate of last night’s pasta microwaved, a tray of fresh salad with honey-mustard dressing denote truly the dietary laws observed by these four.

The talk turns to teaching mathematics: “Why,” asks Older English of Younger Math, “is my daughter’s pre-calc tutor, one of your students, a better teacher than her high school math teacher?”

“Probably,” grins Younger Math, “because my student was never taught how to teach math.”


“In a capsule, most math teachers try to teach math using logic. Basically you try to teach the student how to break the equation down into simple terms and then build it back up again. But lately we’ve been finding out that human beings don’t learn math that way. They learn by translating problems into words and stories or imagining a picture of the problem.”

“Example?” asks Younger English/New Dean, before slooping a strand of pasta through his mustache.

“O.K. Last week my older kid was helping my younger one learn multiplication facts. But not only that, she was teaching him how to help himself remember the facts. They were working on eight times eight. She said, ‘What you do is make up a story. So when I try to remember eight times eight is sixty four, I remember I ate and I ate ‘til I got sick to the floor.’”

A ruminative and melancholy silence ensues while Four Professors (holding twelve degrees from ten different schools) meditate. The example humbles them. Clearly the child’s leap of imagination is beyond their decrepit capacities. And even if they could think such thoughts, they would never dare utter them in their classrooms.

“This reminds me,” resumes Older Theology, of Cardinal Newman’s assertion that if a university would choose between having a faculty or having students, it should eliminate the faculty, because eventually the students would teach each other everything they needed to know.”

“Why don’t they do that now?” grumps Older English, scraping together last lentils with an irritable spoon.

“They do,” says Younger English/New Dean. “You’re just not around to hear it and see it. And a lot of the things that they want to know usually aren’t the things we want to teach.”

“About imagining pictures,” says Older English, swerving past his colleague’s implied rebuke, “isn’t that what Feynman did with his diagrams of nuclear interactions?” (As a residuum of adolescence spent reading science fiction, he has evolved into a science history buff.)

“I believe it is. And Einstein. And Newton. They all thought in pictures.” says Younger Math.

“So instead of trying to put more information, we ought to be trying to put more stories and pictures into our students’ heads. Is that your point?” says Older Theology.

“Could be. Possibly. You can never exclude facts. Don’t want to. But in the university we ought to be teaching more how you develop facts. How you evaluate them. How you apply them. And our students’ work ought to give them more practice in doing that than they seem
to be getting. That’s a main reason some of us”—he thumbs Older English who smirks at Younger English/New Dean—“organized our first Undergraduate Research Conference this Spring.”

“I agree,” rejoins Younger English/New Dean, “One of the effects of the computer is that students have access to too much information—a lot of it bad—and they spend a lot of their energy avoiding even more of it if they can. Their culture—that’s us—makes them swim in information. They’re like trout hiding behind rocks. They don’t have to learn to hunt for food. They just have to stick out their snouts and snag whatever streams by.”

“I bought some new software this spring,” says Older English, “and at the bottom of the invoice I found a patch of small print titled ‘Terms and Conditions.’ I never paid much attention before, but now I see statements of ‘Terms and Conditions’ on almost every invoice, receipt or other piece of paper associated with a product or service. Next year, I’m going to rename my syllabi ‘Terms and Conditions’ and teach my students how to write these statements. Clearly it’s a major form of post-modern prose. If you can write ‘Terms and Conditions,’ you can probably get a job.”

Older Theology: “So how did the conference go?”

“Fabulous. Everybody loved it,” says Younger Math, “and we’re already planning next year’s. Had over 60 of our students make poster exhibits about their in-class projects, their independent studies, their honors work. Filled the Great Hall. About half of them also gave oral presentations. Didn’t get the turnout we wanted but that’s all right. It was the first time. Got some judges, picked outstanding exhibits, and those students had lunch next day with the University’s Board of Directors. Also got a great keynote from this year’s University Research Professor.”

“Who is . . . ?” chorus Three Professors.

“Nandini Bhattacharya,” says Younger Math, looking in amazement at the English dopes. “Isn’t she in your department?”

“Of course, of course. We knew that,” says Younger English/New Dean. “We were just quizzing to see if you knew. What did she say?”

“Funny you should ask. Why I can remember her words as clearly as if they were spoken only three weeks ago . . .”

“. . . As you know, intellectual models are often based on tensions, parallels, balanced oppositions, and progressive syntheses . . . that intimate scholarship, and the very definition of scholarship. I will speak, therefore, a few words about a particular dialogue defining scholarship and knowledge today, and invite your further reflections.

“To do what I propose, I must tell you what’s been going on with me. I should say that I have been traveling. I have been doing research in special collection libraries, giving a few talks, and meeting lots of people in the course of my research and scholarship. And then, at intervals, I have been coming home, returning to campus, sitting at my own computer, sorting my mail, answering mail, seeing people . . . Living in this . . . dual, parallel time-space continuum has compelled me to consider the issue of scholarship itself in terms of fixed and static bodies: mine, for instance. So I want to invite you into what I have been thinking myself, about two different dialogical approaches to knowledge. The first approach would be to see knowledge and scholarship as a home base. It feels like where you belong, and as what belongs to you. The second approach to knowledge would be to see it as the hitchhiker’s guide to the galaxy. It feels like never knowing exactly where you are, and where you will be going next, but being excited about it nevertheless . . .

“The thing about travel, then, is that it will often throw me, as they say in that fine game of cricket, a spin ball; it will often laugh at my discomfiture. It maddens me, and it keeps me awake and interested. Not unlike some approaches to knowledge. Fifteenth and sixteenth-century navigators sailed with fictitious maps and bad tools the stormy oceans and unexplored bays of the world. Many of them came to grief. Many of them harmed other populations, and this is very important to remember also (especially just at this moment when the chorus of globalization has been not so suddenly rent by the inhuman sounds of ethnic cleansing and torture in central Europe, and when NATO countries are agonizing over whether to send in troops or to stay home) [that] . . . exploration of other contexts can have good and bad ethical and cultural implications. But I like to believe that there are some ways of traveling without inflicting harm on new peoples or trying to subvert them to our ways. There are ways of being travelers in the uncharted seas of new knowledge without being untrue to ourselves and to others. We say now that our world is a village. But really, how many times did you enter that library and feel that you were entering terra incog-
nita? How many times did your library’s particular computer screen give you the flutter of the novice pilot, and the exhilaration of spotting land? And many times, when you thought you were drowning, when you cursed yourself for choosing that “different” topic, have you not suddenly glimpsed your future, perhaps standing colossal where no one has been before? You scholars rush in, where angels fear to tread.

“But travel and exploration need not be your only models for scholarship and self-improvement. Knowledge can be your home base. When I come home, now and always, I think I know where I am. I feel relaxed, I feel safer, I feel I belong. I pick up my books or my unread journals. I rush to my office to read mail, because I know there are messages and notes and emails from friends and colleagues near and far, seeking me out. Hopefully! It is a place and a me I think I already know . . . You’ll know what I mean if you have an abiding interest—a problem, a debate, a veneration—something you sort of touch upon no matter what your topic is. It’s a loyalty, a location, a piety. It’s geo-piety, a love of your own soil. A terrific thing, a thing we must have. But I know, and perhaps you know, that it’s never all there can be. You can’t make this splendid, magnificent earth a little village. If it were, I’d be afraid of falling off, because I know I would want to go wandering and exploring in a few days. Imagine if there were nowhere to go.

“In sum, then, I find as a researcher and a teacher, a thinker and a writer, I must absolutely have in mind the two definitions of knowledge, as home and as the world . . .

“Aristotle said long ago that the premise of all fiction was recognition. All plots, or at least the complex, and therefore best plots . . . ended with what he called a turning of tables, or a reversal, and a recognition. If you think about the word “reversal” for a moment, you will easily recognize, because you knew it already, that reversal means a folding back, a turning back to a previous point, a travel. So, recognition naturally involved a return, you see, to the past, and to another place, where something had once happened. In other words, to go home to what you recognize, you must, figuratively speaking, travel. But—so very importantly—did Aristotle mean by “recognition,” going back to the same time and place? Of course not. If you could ever go back to the same time and place, it would be “cognition,” the knowing a thing the first time, not knowing a second time, or infinite times thereafter, “re”-cognition.

“So, your intellectual recognition of a mental and moral universe, where you belong, can be like going back to the place where you first picked up your values and your beliefs, but you never go back to the exact same place, because of the distance you have traveled, you scholars, in going away and then back to the old place. The knowledge that fills us with our feeling of being at home is vital, a place to begin and to revisit. But as scholars, we need that other universe, . . . as Alfred Tennyson described it in his poem “Ulysses” . . . that untraveled bourne, whereof the horizon recedes before us forever as we travel. We need to be travelers, in space, in time, in other worlds, in other minds, lives, for otherwise there is no “re”-cognition. Those hungry to know (and they include many more people than professional scholars) prove that the fixed foot and the roving foot of the compass don’t merely compare to our true and superficial selves, but together make up the whole compass, the whole self.

“There is no place like home in the world of scholarship, but scholars like you know that half your joy is in challenging yourself, in courting uncertainty, sometimes shock, difference, disagreement. The annals of learning are full of tales of those who were disbelieved, discredited, even punished for daring to push the limits or even change the premises. You know some of the names: Galileo, Rosa Luxembourg, Rosa Parkes, Charles Darwin. Posterity has vindicated and venerated them. But at some basic level, the goal is simply truth, though the truth is far from simple.

“. . . As I look at the titles of your papers and poster presentations, I sense an expansion of my senses, and an excitement similar to what I feel when the rarest, most prized book or manuscript is handed to me gingerly by some special collections librarian. I think that even though the world, the traveler’s uncharted sea, is still a challenge, you with your love of learning and of sharing it with others, continue to remind us of the possibility of genuine intellectual community, of a warm universe. In the process, no doubt, you feel guided and encouraged by your professors, your librarians, and all the staff persons who help you come a little closer everyday to the best that is in you and around you. Do not forget to return thanks also to your parents and previous teachers, who made it possible for you to start on the journey. In the world of scholarship, as in other worlds, the traveler and the cit-
izen of the world unite. By approaching scholarship as both the place where everybody knows your name, and the untraveled bourne, you have the very best of both worlds. And that is exactly what you deserve.”

“You're right,” Older English says, “that was some keynote. I wish I'd been there to hear it.”

“Well,” says Younger Math, “be there next year.”

“Might I,” says Younger English-New Dean, “suggest next year’s speaker? Angie Taraskewicz.”

“Who is . . . ?” chorus Three Professors.

“Instructor in Greek. She spoke at the induction of new members of our chapter of Alpha Lambda Delta, the national freshman honor society. She gave a fine address. If you close your eyes, you'll hear her speaking as clearly as if she were standing right here . . .”

“You are about to be inducted into Alpha Lambda Delta, a freshman honor society, which states that its purpose is ‘to encourage superior academic achievement . . . to promote intelligent living and a continued high standard of learning and to assist students in recognizing and developing meaningful goals for their roles in society.’

“To be eligible to join, you need to have at least a 3.5 GPA, and possess $15 you have no other immediate use for. In other words, this is an honor you have both earned and paid for. I congratulate you all on your success in your first year at VU, though I wonder why you’ve decided to spend fifteen good American dollars to publicize that achievement. Is it perhaps because you think your membership in AAA will make you a better person, by helping you to live intelligently, and to recognize and develop ‘meaningful goals’ for your roles in society? If this is the case $15 is certainly a small price to pay.

“But how does one learn how to live intelligently? What is meaningful? What, if anything, do these two questions have to do with recognizing and developing one’s role in society? Even better, how does one promote and teach these things? These are not new questions of course. In fact many of you who have just read Plato’s Apology in the Core will recognize these as Socratic questions. On trial himself for impiety and corrupting the youth, Socrates addresses this issue:

It’s untrue if you heard from somebody that I try to educate people and make money for it. As far as that goes, I think it a fine thing
“So what I want to know is: which is it? Are you here because you value the Recognition and prestige of national honor society membership,” and its outward signs; or because you want “to encourage superior academic achievement . . . to promote intelligent living and a continued high standard of learning and to assist students in recognizing and developing meaningful goals for their roles in society”?

“ I teach introductory Greek, so when Lauren Caywood [ΑΑΔ chapter president] asked me to do this talk, I immediately asked her what ΑΑΔ stood for and she told me it stood for allelois lampadia diadousousin which means, ‘they will pass torches to one another.’ Okay, interesting, but what does that mean?—Well I did some checking, and it turns out that this is a direct quote from Book One of Plato’s Republic.

“Socrates and Glauccon had gone down to Piraeus, the port of Athens, to see the festival of some unnamed goddess, and were about to return to go back into town, when Polemarchus and company spy them, and try to convince them to spend the night with them in Piraeus. Socrates is bent on going back into town, when Adeimantus jumps in and says: ‘Don’t you know that there is to be a torchlight race this evening on horseback in honor of the goddess?’ And Socrates says, ‘On horseback? That’s a new idea. Will they carry torches and pass them along one to another as they race with horses, or how do you mean?’ At this point Polemarchus jumps back in and says, ‘That’s the way of it, and besides there is to be a night festival which will be worth seeing. For after dinner we will get up and go out and see the sights and meet a lot of the boys and have a good talk, so stay and do as we ask.’ And on that note, Socrates and Glauccon decide to stay.

“So, according to Plato, this torchlight race (along with dinner and conversation) was the carrot that enticed Socrates to stay . . . Of course it turns out they don’t go out to see this procession on horseback. They stay inside and discuss the ideal city instead: how to live intelligently and what the goals of society should be. And this is perhaps what the founders of ΑΑΔ had in mind when they chose this phrase from Plato. It’s probably what Plato had in mind as well. Though the literature may claim to offer other exciting benefits to belonging to ΑΑΔ, the real benefits are still to come. I encourage all of you to make your membership in ΑΑΔ and the university community meaningful: talk to each other about these things. What is the just and good life? What kind of excellence is proper to a human being and a citizen?

“If you find out—by all means come tell me. In the meantime I encourage you to cultivate a Socratic sense of wonder, for wonder is the beginning of wisdom—if it leads to further thought.”

In further thought The Four appear sunk for several moments. Then:

“At the end of this term I find our conditions rather strange,” says Older Theology. “Our imaginations are not so good as a child’s but our memories are excellent. I heard a sermon last Sunday that was just great. If I close my eyes, I can hear . . .”

But he is interrupted by the sounds of dishes being cleared, lunch bags crumpling, Tupperware® lids snapping shut, and chairs scraping way from the table.

“Ah,” says Younger Math, squinting at two figures far down the hallway, “here comes my committee. Gotta go.”

“You betcha,” says Younger English/New Dean, already halfway to the recycling bin. “Schedules to make. I’d like to stay, but like my grandpa said, ‘you can’t meet all trains.’”

“Good heavens,” says Older English, staring at his watch as if it were a rattlesnake wrapped around his wrist. “Senior grades by noon tomorrow. I’ll never make it.”

The breeze caused by his colleagues’ exits ruffles Older Theology’s hair. He smoothes the deranged strands with his left hand, while, with his right, he picks up his own tray and carries it to the sink. As he washes his knife and fork, a student passing out the door next to the kitchen thinks she hears someone mutter “terms and conditions” and wonders what that could mean. Then she steps into the cool bright sunlight on her way to a library, or a lab, or a studio.
Letters from Dogwood

how plain is your plain?

Charles Vandersee

Dear Editor:

Moebie was announcing yet again that she was boiling it all down.

Postmodernism insists this can't be done, that knowledge is ever more complex and inexpressible, and we should just have fun with it. Intellectual activity should be more of a themepark rollercoaster ride, shrieky ups and downs, than a head-down dirty dig for hidden bedrock. No sooner does knowledge seem zooming upward than it plunges. Not only are the rollercoaster's origins often humble (Coney Island, for example), so are its pathways, knowledge being endlessly loopy and earthbound. It does not finally take to the sky, or at least no farther than one of those high trestles. But up there you do get a spectacular view.

Moebie, a student of contemporary cultural practices, moves well enough with all this, but she has lately been advocating "compassionate" postmodernism. This, she says, would be a pomo that meets people's needs instead of viewing from a distance.

Though apolitical, she obtained the adjective "compassionate" from one of the American political parties. This party claims, in Texas at least, with a man named Bush, that it wants to move from a sort of disdain toward people daunted by circumstances, to a token experimental benevolence. People with the help of compassionate rhetoric would become self-sustaining.

Meanwhile, Moebie in her compassionate boiling has been sorting out postmodernism from modernism. The modernist world, flourishing in the 1920s, had been a dark and confusing Eliotic jungle of rats, ashes, and bones. There began the din of construction cranes, however, promising a world transformed into a bright and confusing tangle of boomtowns and consumer goods. By contrast, the postmodern world, from which the rollercoaster rises, is an endless slick plastic plain that gradually revealed itself after World War II. On it, people are slipping and sliding.

"Plastic plain is mere and bad metaphor," I tried to explain. "People in search of knowledge are not," I said, "sliding and colliding, finding themselves one day here and one day there, undriven by all the old certainties the modernists identified but never found: home, community, ritual, recovered naivete, authority, the unified self, and Something To Believe In."

Postmodernism, I explained, is an acceptance—a sort of garish populist celebration—of intellectual confusion, rather than a hopeless striving for clarity and certainty. We are now more richly supplied with confusions than Eliot was, and, like inevitabilities generally, according to Ecclesiastes, this is good.

Moebie, however, was recalcitrant. "The plastic plain is a metaphor you need to come home to," she said. "When people are at play on a plastic plain, long vistas in all directions," she said, "they are in a different intellectual situation from people on the modernist muddy battlefield of ideas, or smelly arena of contesting ideologies. Or trudging a wasteland or garbage dump hoping to find pieces of things to put together that will remind them of machines they used to use or want." All that was the gravitas of Eliot, of the old Partisan Review crowd, and perhaps even of unsmiling John Foster Dulles. These now-forgotten names, their thin lips and strait laces!

"Crucial to this postmodern plastic plain," Moebie said, "are structures like the aforementioned state-of-the-art rollercoaster, also water slides, also heroic trellises of the sort that attract token greenery to white plastic buildings. Shrinking daily in importance are towering structures, like world trade centers, which dom-
inate human beings and intercept the sun, and massive ones like stadiums named for vast corporations. The postmodern landscape is humanized structures for the purpose of play, the old structures recognized as only virtual reality. Long vistas in all directions, not blocked by government marble or corporate signature slabs."

"Structures," she said, "that you can see through and play through. A green rolling golf course but flat and white."

Since you could see through them all, these structures, and down the long vistas between them, the great plastic plain obscured nothing. You could see the whole past stretching there, even that dump named Modernism where there seemed to be pygmy tents with names on them like Eliot, Trilling, Pound, Forster, Auden, Kierkegaard, Lawrence, Mann. On the same dump site there were more impressive structures, lean-tos, once inhabited by the likes of Freud, Joyce, Woolf, Nietzsche, and Darwin.

It was the sight of these tents and simple board huts, almost little Lego constructions, that set something moving in my mind, to which Moebie instantly responded.

"You keep saying," she said rightly, "that your students in literature classes need maps, charts, graphs, lists, travel brochures, concerning the layout of the intellectual and cultural past. You keep talking about the difficulty of teaching novels and poems when students lack a sense of past trends and movements and contestations and schools of thought."

She was about to go on in this vein, with her usual superfluity, but I interposed. "You have to admit," I said, "that I don't complain." "I accept it as inevitable," I said, "that young American people neither now nor before know the names we have used for organizing the past. They sometimes recognize persons and events, but they don't know the names of the connections." Only connect. That was poor old forgotten Forster—E. M. Forster, novelist E. M. Forster, British novelist E. M. Forster, who had had his fifteen minutes of fame, now dead in his tent. Howards End. No apostrophe.

And what Moebie was about to say is that people now can. They can connect. On her vast plastic pomo plain, where nothing obscures anything else, the whole of the past is laid out for inspection. You are not wandering in woods or marshes, or graveyards or valleys with shadows, or mists or fogs. It is all clear, with postmodernism. From the crest of the rollercoaster you can see it all, or having climbed the waterslide to the top of the chute. It might be confusing to see it all, but it can be seen clearly. You can see what resembles what, and what is near what.

And she was right; I had not thought of it this way before. Modernism insisted on getting you lost, or stuck, certainly frustrated, maybe impotent; pomo shows you the world as it always truly was, surface and nothing else, and on it an array of theme parks.

"You used to want to know it all, and couldn't," said Moebie. "Postmodernism offers you the chance to see it all." "A much more manageable project," she said, "like visiting all the screens at a multiplex." "Except," she added, "the knowledge industry has not caught on."

Even I could see where she was going. The knowledge industry is of course the schools, abetted by publishers, which we take for granted are bad and getting worse. The reason has less to do with ADD or guns or overcrowding than with lack of energy. College graduates with the most energy—with oomph, gumption, drive, adrenalin—don't go into teaching. That energy is lost to the schools. Because pupils in schools have so much youthful energy, it takes equivalent or superior energy by the teacher to make learning possible. Only energy can make and enforce demands. Otherwise as a teacher you just devise games or make bargains or be a buddy, or fall back on other laissez-faire strategies stemming from enervation. Intelligence often goes along with energy—that curious elitist fusion—but energy above all is what's required. Not authority but energy. Wear them down. No let-up.

Since pre-college education thus cannot take place, except in rare places and infrequent moments, Moebie is right to say that postmodernism, with its visual emphasis, its entertainment potential, helps us out. In secondary schools, and even in colleges, we should just walk our students out on the plastic plain, to have fun with what children always enjoy, tents and huts and the other stuff. These once, historically, had purpose and value, but are more fun seen as lumber and funky hardware. We would walk around, not grabbing knowledge till our arms and navels were tired, but just seeing how things look.

Here was compassion. Just about everything in the past is homeless in the present, but we in the present sense that at least we are where we belong, the only kind of good feeling there is. Compassion is someone making this clearer to us.
As I situated her compassion on the plain, Moebie was still determined to boil it all down, but I was ahead of her. I saw the dubiety of cultural literacy, of the E.D. Hirsch variety; it was modernism slipping and sliding on the postmodern plastic plain, all those unconnected people and dates and events and titles. So too the “multicultural literacy” of Graywolf, a Minnesota small press, a book I found last summer in a Boulder bookstore, reduced from $8.50 to $3. The Graywolf list of 1988 had things that Hirsch left out:


Instead of this pile of discrete entities—in the postmodern world, don’t most lists now look like street droppings?—I started seeing sites, enclaves, compounds, domains, where things connected, no longer discrete. Theme parks in short, gathering places. I connected.

Students would not right away need to know Brooks and Baldwin individually, which years ago they might have confused with Brooks and Warren, as these days in American Studies I discover that Frederick Jackson Turner (frontier), Frederick Douglass (abolition), and Frederick Winslow Taylor (efficiency), even taught insistently, all crunch up together, usually as Frank Lloyd Wright. Instead of B&B, on the plastic plain they need to start with a site where black people stride out of invisibility and write big on that white surface. That spot would be a theme park; the Harlem Renaissance was such a park, a connecting place. Getting there, students could see their way clear to solo black writers before and after.

Another example. Instead of trying to get them to pronounce and remember ‘Bonhoeffer,’ you would point from the crest of the rollercoaster to a fairly close bonfire on the plastic plain. This fire, World War II and Nazism, would be one of many theme parks called War, including some that you would reach only after a rather long walk, such as Trojan.

“You and I did a good job last year,” Moebie said, “in pointing out how church colleges might some day become distinctive.” “Now,” she said, “you see you have returned to that project. Church colleges will see on the plastic plain theme parks that not all colleges will manage to notice well.”

This was an unexpected insight. Even if you had a clear view of war parks, renaissance parks, and tent-hut parks of homeless modernists, you might not see certain other projects on that flat plastic surface. Even though you could theoretically see everything, owing to absence of impeding structures, you might not distinguish exactly what you were seeing. Some of the parks too close to other parks might be significant separately. Probably only a church college would see in the middle or medieval distance a place where the white plastic was briefly interrupted by an unusually elegant trellis with not the slightest greenery, called Thomism. Also distant would be the theme park called Reformation—entered through a large church door where you first had to prove you could count to 95. On the other side of the door, or nearby, would be small fires of books and flesh such as Calvinism, Puritanism, and Counter-Reformation. Nearer, Established Church and then even Antidisestablishmentarianism.

Speaking of fires, there would be Pentecostalism. There would also be a circle of talkative men in black, surrounded by deferential women bearing platters of food, and this would be Rabbinc Judaism, looking much like the Amish (but contending rather than conforming), and either shadowing or enshadowed by Higher Criticism.

You could imagine fieldglasses trained on all these parks, from the rollercoaster or waterslide, and then you would go visit them, not for knowledge or memory, old modernist scams, but just to see what they looked like. Tourism. You wouldn’t understand all their languages, but there would be inscriptions explaining what’s obsessive-compulsive to each of them, and only the church college would walk you there. The other colleges are not quite so adventurous, tiresomely and secularly stuck with Fordism and Foucault, Bill Gates and Brobdingnag.

A church college, in fact, would feel unusually agile in perceiving the fun on the plain in such clumps of people as Jesuits, Mormons,
desert fathers, revivalists, mystics, Hebrew prophets, and communitarians (e.g., Shakers, monastics). The study of minorities has always been important in world-class history and culture, as is the study of mentalities, the mind-sets that stir history-making minority behaviors. Students need minorities, perhaps especially the religious sort, in order to see well enough the predominant whiteness and flatness of the glare-prone plain.

While you were there, at these various parks, many of which are fires, you would realize, looking around you by flamelight, that you had never seen the whole white plastic plain quite this way before. Essential sites had previously been unscrutinized, and in fact its color was white only in places.

You would begin to think that you had, curiously, acquired knowledge. And that you now ought to decide what to do with it. Which is boiling things down very far indeed.

From Dogwood, faithfully yours,
C.V.

THE SECRET

What lies there does resemble her,
But that lipstick, that fake make-up—
They mock with slight disguise the signs,
The tenuous flesh, finely carved lines.
How delicately agony
And weariness practiced their craft,
Mortality’s triumphant art,
The perishable changed all right—
Subdued.

She lies in neatly posed silence;
We shuffle about, murmuring
Tentative comforts, praises, thanks.
Death constricts our throats and faces,
Our flesh-sculpting well under way
But not complete. This dark artist carves
Intently, we know, but in vain,
We hope.

Upon her lips, a dab of red
Lights, sewn in place or not, a smile
Sagacious smile, as if she owns
The mystery.

Debra Rienstra

Recent years have seen considerable discussion of the history and character of American colleges and universities that began life under church sponsorship. Of course, such discussion is not necessarily a sign of health. As James Burtchaell points out more than once in this long, penetrating book, the more the colleges and universities lost their particular identity the more they poured forth words designed to describe it in comprehensive plans and mission statements. “It was common for educators and church executives to express their concern that their college could, or might, follow others into secularity a decade or so after such misgivings had become useless. From another point of view they were not quite useless, because their real function was to provide cover and time for the new commitment to take hold.”

In *The Dying of the Light* Burtchaell seeks, for the most part, to recount the stories of colleges and universities which, though founded under church sponsorship, often developed in ways that effectively severed the tie between church and academy. He tells the story of seventeen different institutions, in only a few of which the tie remains relatively strong and intact. The institutions studied are grouped under their sponsoring denominations: Congregationalist (Dartmouth, Beloit); Presbyterian (Lafayette, Davidson); Methodist (Millsaps, Ohio Wesleyan); Baptist (Wake Forest, Virginia Union, Linfield); Lutheran (Gettysburg, St. Olaf, Concordia River Forest); Catholic (Boston College, The College of New Rochelle, Saint Mary’s of California); Evangelical (Azusa Pacific, Dordt). The selection is intended to include schools representing different historical and geographical locations in their respective denominations, and they do in fact provide considerable variety for study. In each case Burtchaell tells in some detail the history of the college, focusing especially on important moments in the development or devolution of its religious character, and bringing the stories up very near to the present. He provides no introduction other than a short preface. There is, though, a preface. There is, though, a few conclusions and refrains almost entirely from offering prescriptions for the future. A reader must draw the author’s concerns inductively out of the seventeen stories he tells.

This is a very long book, and perhaps few will read it in its entirety. Most readers are likely to read a few of the stories—perhaps especially of colleges sponsored by their own denomination—and the concluding chapter. Such a reading will be enough to give the flavor of the entire work, though it is likely to miss some details, which become apparent only through gradual repetition and reinforcement. It is also possible, though, to read the whole of the book, a task made possible in part because it reads so well and is written with great wit and irony. Thus, for example, writing of curricular changes at Ohio Wesleyan, Burtchaell notes: “Members of the Religion Department itself, however, were at pains to demonstrate that they addressed their subject with the same detachment they assumed to control other disciplines . . . . Their exposure to the student body had been greatly reduced from the traditional two required courses to inclusion with other departments in a distribution scheme; had it not been for the initiative of the board of trustees in reinstating one required course in religion . . . they might not have had the opportunity to demonstrate the new objectivity to most students.”

Or again, he often notes how far removed from reality is the rhetoric of colleges and their sponsoring churches. For example, in 1975 the Board for Higher Education of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, “after displaying enrollment and funding graphs that looked like ski runs down Mont Blanc, was able to conclude: ‘On the other hand, the board definitely looks forward to its work with joy and anticipation. It sees the number and nature of the problems as opportunities.’” I note in passing that, for one who came to his study of Concordia River Forest without any prior knowledge of LCMS schools, Burtchaell is a remarkably astute student. He articulates clearly some of the causes for decline of that once proud
denominational ties—by becoming, as it were, their own “communion.” The narratives themselves, however, suggest how naive this is. “Religion without a church is as vacant a notion as a culture without a community.” The attempt to move beyond particular ways of being religious or Christian and to find in all such ways expressions of some more fundamental religious impulse is itself profoundly anti-institutional. It is no surprise that it seldom works for long.

How do institutions seek to maintain a particular identity while becoming more pluralistic? The answer, discussed at various places but in detail in the chapter on Boston College, is by appeal to the notion of “critical mass.” It is not a silly notion in itself, but these seventeen narratives—taken together—persuasively suggest that it has been greatly abused. A critical mass at Boston College, for example, would be the amount of Jesuits—or, perhaps even, just Catholics—needed on the faculty to “carry” the identity of the institution. The small, committed core can, it is thought, sustain the unique character of the church-sponsored college, serving as a “strategic hamlet” by which the whole is marked and formed. As Burtchaell notes, the very notion, even if we grant its usefulness, already gives ground. “What this ‘strategic hamlet’ model assumes is that the apostolate would no longer be the university, but be at the university. Moreover, “critical mass” seems almost inevitably to become less and less massive. Thus, for example, in what is surely a reductio ad absurdum of the notion, when the trustees of Davidson College in 1996 decided to redefine the college’s relationship with the PCUSA, they “determined that the president was the only person on the Davidson campus who would henceforth have to belong to that church.” Thus, church-sponsored colleges lost the will to hire faculty who both belong to and sincerely support their sponsoring church. Mission statements still speak of “the college persevering in its offer of Christian values, but never of hiring those who could and would do the offering. While working on the menu they declined to hire a cook.” One caveat, however: In his understandable concern that colleges seriously seeking to cultivate their religious identity should hire faculty who belong to the sponsoring church, Burtchaell may overlook the extent of denominational fragmentation in our society and the degree to which denominational affiliation alone does not identify those potential faculty who are really prepared to support the college’s mission. An “alienated” Lutheran is less likely to help nurture the character of a Lutheran college than is a devout Catholic or Presbyterian.

Of course, it is not easy to sustain a distinctive character, and, on Burtchaell’s telling, the churches are often as much to blame as the colleges themselves. The point of the book is not really to place blame but to seek understanding. It is not easy to offer an education that is truly Christian. Many of the institutions Burtchaell has studied tried to locate their religious character in the cultivation of certain (supposedly religious?) traits of character, or in chapel or service programs. But colleges and universities are, first of all, places where the mind is to be formed, where “learning itself could be an act of piety,” and where scholars might gather who believe that the church’s faith genuinely offers a privileged insight” into their academic disciplines. That this is no easy task Burtchaell realizes, but he suggests—at various places along the way—that the attempt is what ought to characterize the church-sponsored college. Some will, of course, argue that this is silly, that there are no “Christian” versions of the various academic disciplines. (And a desiccated “two kingdoms” approach is likely to offer just such an argument in a Lutheran context.) Perhaps the critics are right. If so, however, it is hard to see why one would send one’s child to a church-sponsored school. The most important question—which Burtchaell never for-
gets or sets aside for long—is whether it makes sense to speak of “the intellectually clarifying power of the church’s faith.”

Clearly, he thinks it does. Clearly, he thinks that most of the seventeen institutions whose stories he recounts have lost that understanding. And clearly, he hopes that some might still do better in the future. But he offers few prescriptions; he simply invites reflection upon these case studies. He does not even, for the most part, “rage” against “the dying of light.” The tone is more ironic and wistful—an elegy in honor of a noble undertaking which may or may not have a future in this country.

Gilbert Meilaender


A resurgence of Shakespearean popularity is always a good thing. Despite having to endure Gwyneth Paltrow as the Bard’s inspiration (I’m sure someone will comment on this in this forum soon), one gets to “thinking in Shakespeare.” All of the great quotes come back to memory as old, familiar friends. And, of course, his familiar tropes form the chorus of his literary oratorios: ambition, jealousy, the supernatural, and my personal favorite, eavesdropping. Who can forget the comical effects of how Benedick and Beatrice overhear the young scholar, unsure of how to integrate faith within this new context. However, what they learn from one another may be as important as what they discover for themselves.

Although the first three chapters seem at first to be addressed to college presidents, deans, and tenured faculty, on further examination, the young scholar should listen in, as well. The legitimate place of religious perspectives is a prerequisite for the last two chapters, charging responsible action within research and teaching and then networking with others who value the same perspectives. For if religious perspectives are presented as alternative views of history, such as feminist or Marxist, then why, in a pluralistic society, cannot a Christian view be considered? Thus, according to Marsden, the young Christian scholar can, in theory, confidently engage faith within the context of undergraduate teaching and research and in the “building of academic communities,” as chapter five explains. But while Marsden’s opinions on the academy and religion have been debated loud and long, the younger scholar has become confused and sometimes alienated from the very traditions which attract one to the academy in the first place. By examining all that is good about academic study and the Christian tradition, Marsden encourages all to recapture that first love.

The most important point of the book is Marden’s definition of true Christian scholarship: “My ideal for Christian scholarship is one that not only looks for the bearing of one’s Christian convictions on one’s academic thought, but also reflects some Christian attitudes that shape the tone of one’s scholarship. Not only should Christian commitments lead one toward scholarly rigor and integrity, they should also encourage fairness and charity toward those with whom one differs” (54-55). This three part definition has value for all perspectives of young Christian scholars, regardless of their backgrounds and the backgrounds of the undergraduate institutions they have attended. For the sacramental, conviction; for the evangelical, rigor and integrity; and for the fundamentalist, fairness and charity. “Such scholarship is an alternative not only to the hollow secularism that dominates mainstream academia but also to the simplistic ‘fundamentalisms’ that present themselves as the only alternatives” (9).

If the college presidents, deans, and tenured faculty eavesdrop in on Marsden’s dialogue with the younger faculty, they will hear that today’s younger scholars are eager to apply themselves with the same rigor and discipline. “Anyone who is familiar with the Christian networks among graduate students and younger faculty will recognize that many committed young people, especially from evangelical Protestant heritages, are embarking on academic careers” (107). While Marsden doesn’t explain why this may be, an academic career has a tradition steeped in religion and gives young scholars a forum for exchanging ideas. This is in contrast to what many of these students find in their churches: attitudes that take scholarship warily and discourage free inquiry, especially among those evangelical and fundamental congregations. It is ironic that these people are turning to the academy to fill the spiritual void left, perhaps, by their churches.

Where Marsden seems to weaken is his explanation of how Christians can offer religious perspectives in the classroom without offense to students or administration. His simple qualifications maybe are what should be necessary in the academic world, in theory. But the reality is that administrations will not change because of a young Christian instructor who adds a religious disclaimer to instruction. Rather, young Christian scholars will gravitate towards those institutions that encourage
Christian worldviews. Thus, institutions, competing for these talented scholars, will put pressure on each other to offer faith-informed consortiums, conferences, organizations, and fellowships to attract these instructors. It is the market pressure for these scholars which creates these efforts, not the scholars themselves, as Marsden suggests.

What is much stronger though, is the priority that he assigns to the classroom in the spiritual maturation process. “Undergraduate teaching is at the heart of higher education, and it is in undergraduate classrooms that students must begin to explore the intellectual relationships between their theological commitments and everything else they are learning” (105). Like a music lesson, the classroom is the place where students are able to show what they have been learning throughout the week. And this is the forum where students reconcile what the campus community communicates about faith and what they already believe. The academy, listening in, can realize what an important impact the faith-informed scholar, who often is the facilitator of these discussions, can make on the entire campus community.

Marsden’s achievement lies not in its theoretical framework, but in its vision of hope for the future. “Like the student radicals of the 1960’s who are now the tenured professors, these young people may be the harbingers of a change in American academia that will come to fruition in the next generation” (107). In other words, the “outrageous” scholar will replace the “radical” one. Marsden’s book in an important benchmark for both the academy and young scholars. How well each will fare in the years to come depends upon how well they understand each other.

James Beasley


One effect of our concentrating upon the substance of Christian higher education is that we all too frequently lose sight of its political and historical location. To be sure, if church-related colleges can’t give an account of what is significantly different about what they do than what a state university with a good set of campus ministries does, then good stewardship will point Christian parents and students to the state university. So, attention to substance is warranted, but not at the expense of attention to context. Ostensibly state universities and church-related colleges are engaged in more or less the same project in more or less the same historical and political context. A fundamental question thus remains, what is the point of any university training in our contemporary setting?

How we answer that question, as Alan Ryan points out, is at least in part a matter of our political history, that is to say, in America and Britain, liberalism. Liberal democracy requires certain sorts of citizens and part of the work of the university, as western liberals have understood it, is to help produce some such supply of citizens. The most fundamental work of universities and colleges—students and parents hold on to your seats—is not to prepare students for better paying employment, or so most political and educational leaders have agreed for the past three-hundred or so years.

But the connection between liberal education and the liberal political tradition is not nearly so easy as the previous paragraph suggests, as Alan Ryan makes clear. Professor of Political Theory at Princeton University and author of important books on the political theory of Bertrand Russell and John Dewey, Ryan offers three lectures about this connection of the liberal political tradition and liberal education. In part, he writes in response to the frequent conservative attacks upon American universities in the 90’s, but only in part. His third chapter of Liberal Anxieties and Liberal Education, “Is Higher Education a Fraud?” thus, responds directly to those attacks with a glance at charges of idleness, and intellectual disorder as well as issue of multiculturalism. Ryan finds the conservative critique of higher education vastly overstated, although he agrees that the contemporary university has more than its share of problems, many of them having to do with under-educating our students. Approximately 50% of a student’s time is remedial education in British and American higher education, Ryan claims (142). Students and parents, thus, pay more and get less than earlier generations.

Ryan’s main concern, however, is to connect liberal political theory and liberal education. Having addressed issues of education more generally in his introduction (and having there noted the shameful plight of those who are consigned to education in American inner cities), the core of his book addresses liberal education in our current political and social context. The goal of a liberal education, as Ryan sees it, is to produce an ‘aristocracy of everyone,’ (in the phrase of his colleague, Benjamin Barber) to equip all members of a society with the basic tools for living in the world they inhabit. In our society, skills of learning, skills of language and communication, and skills of numeracy will enable students to live tolerably happy and useful lives. When appropriate, colleges and universities should provide the skills needed for employment, for employment is, usually, necessary for a happy life.

Skills of learning, communication, and numeracy are necessary for liberal society. Necessary, but not sufficient. For liberal society to flourish, for the individuals of our liberal society to live humanly, some appreciation of liberal values and their development is also necessary. Students will become
‘owners of the cultures we inhabit and the traditions we inherit’ only if they receive from their education a basic cultural literacy in addition to these learned skills. The nature and character of this requisite cultural literacy is, of course, subject to dispute and abuse, Ryan acknowledges. Still, liberal society depends upon individuals who understand and endorse liberal values and, thus, a minimal cultural literacy.

For liberals the problem with liberal education is this: the values of liberal society are values of self-assertion and individual autonomy, values that do not comport well with the humility required for genuine study, and with the community essential for liberal education as it is traditionally construed. It is not obvious that the liberal values of economic ambition, individual choice, meritocratic social mobility, and a pluralism of tastes and allegiances will lead one to value liberal education, especially liberal education at its best (43). As Ryan puts it, “If liberals have less reason than they once had to wonder whether change would not degenerate into mere chaos, they have every reason to wonder whether they were right to think that a free and prosperous society would also be lively, intelligent, and self-improving” (62).

Ryan reminds us that liberal education is not in high demand in our liberal societies. Of the fourteen million full- and part-time students in higher education today, only a handful of students—primarily those in the Ivy League and the small liberal arts colleges—receive something approximating a liberal education. Two-thirds of the courses on offer in the entire higher education sector can be characterized as ‘business studies’ courses, courses that promise to equip students for a specialized function in society, rather than promising to provide skills and knowledge necessary for a lively, intelligent, and self-improving life. (In this connection Ryan does not discuss the growing numbers of liberal education courses that mirror these business studies courses in promising students improved skills of community service rather than providing the intellectual encounter critical for an intelligent life. The distance between service learning and business studies is not so great as many liberal education advocates of service learning would have one believe. Each equips students for a specialized role in society; each abjures intellectual engagement that offers no clear practical value. Further removing students from an already minimal involvement in liberal education, service-learning is less benign than it first appears.)

If it is not clear that the individuals produced by liberal society will value liberal education, neither is it clear that a genuinely liberal education will lead students to embrace liberal values. Having dispassionately held all values up to criticism, having abandoned the claims of family and tradition upon us, can we be confident that the lib­erally educated individual will pursue anything other than a life of self-aggrandizement, will recognize in the depths of her being the bonds that unite us as humans? What is the basis of such confidence? Or perhaps she will recognize such bonds and discover that these bonds create in her an other-direct­edness (or Other-directedness) inimical to liberal values.

Liberalism's anxiety over lib­er al education is but one manifestation of a wider anxiety that has characterized liberalism for the past two hundred years, Ryan argues. Liberalism’s three great anxieties have been a fear of the culturally estranged position of the ‘under­class,’ an unease about the ‘disenchant­ment’ of modern life, and “a fear that the degeneration of the French Revolution into a regime of terror­ism was but a harbinger of ‘mindless’ revolutions to come” (54). Liberalism is, thus, char­acterized by anxiety—anxiety about cul­tural prospects and the ‘brutaliza­tion’ of the masses, anxiety about living well in a world in which humans have no moorings, and anxiety about the appar­ent human proclivity to political violence.

The paradox of liberalism, as Ryan sees it, is that as a result of these anxieties, liberalism is both conservative and revolutionary at the same time. Liberals hold dearly to a set of values they believe to be good and true and wish for all to embrace these values. At the same time, liberals endorse an education in which these values are held up for inspection, questioned, and may be found wanting by students. Conser­vatives fear the rejection of many of the goods liberals hold dear and are angry with the subject­ion of these values to possible rejection. Radicals feel exasperation with the commitment to liberal values and are angry with liberals for their unwillingness to abandon their core values for what they perceive to be some greater good. Neither conser­vative nor radical can accept the ‘shifting, insecure societies that liberal­ism creates.’

When we move from liberal­ism’s historical anxieties to the contemporary American or British context—the two worlds Ryan has inhabited in his life as student and professor, the great anxiety of liberal­ism is the fear of disenchantment. Neither Americans nor British seem inclined to mindless terrorism. And the working classes of both nations enjoy a material wealth quite unthinkable to previous generations; brutalization at its ‘crudest’ is present only in decayed inner cities, although unconscionably present there. As Ryan understands it, liberal anxiety over disenchantment and secular­ization remains, however, and is behind much of the contemporary discontent with universities.

There is, he argues, “one source, but two distinct aspects,” of this fear of disenchantment. The source is ‘the increasingly dominant position of the physical sciences among ways of explaining the world” (67). The first aspect of this worry is ‘that scientific understand­ing will drive all poetry out of the world,” that we will be left with nothing but “matter in motion.” The second aspect is the fear that, in the absence of transcendental sanctions, “mankind will become as the beasts: without shame, without
morality, and without ambitions for perfection" (67). These aspects share the worry that science has left us unmoored, as a species of being with no greater meaning or purpose than earthworms. Can humans live well in such a world?

Ryan is insightful about the initial human response to the disenchantment of the world. When science offers interpretations of the world apparently incompatible with religion, religion is replaced by poetry, as in Wordsworth (and, more recently, Richard Rorty). When the claims of poetry conflict with science, poetry and religion are each denied cognitive content; both are reduced to sentiment, to self-expression. Such has been the result of modern liberal education. Ryan eloquently writes,

Liberals suffer a self-inflicted wound: they want the emancipation that leads to disenchantment, but want the process that emancipates us to relocate us in the world as well. Nietzsche and Weber are only the most eloquent among the voices that say it cannot be done in the way the liberal wants. The anything but eloquent Dewey is the most philosophically astute of those who say it can. (71)

Ryan’s voice is equal in eloquence to the voices of Nietzsche and Weber, but his commitments and confidence are Deweyan, although it remains unclear to me why. Without God, how much do others really matter? Why? Why worry about the world we leave to future generations, unless, of course, our children will inhabit that world? Weber and Nietzsche are closer to the truth than Dewey, or so it seems to me.

Liberal education is needed for the well-being of liberal society, Ryan argues, for a liberally educated citizen will be prepared to engage in the conversation that characterizes Deweyan democracy. That is not the case with the student who has been schooled in business studies only. Nor, Ryan intriguingly suggests, is it the case with students at a research university. Neither is exposed to the range of ideas, neither develops the moral imagination necessary for Deweyan democratic conversation.

We could be most confident of our future were educational institutions to attend to four things, Ryan argues. First, despite the threat that vocational education poses to liberal education, it is critical that we improve vocational training for 16-19 year olds. Adequate vocational training will provide skills that are relevant to numerous situations and vocations, and this is essential, given the number of different types of work we can expect a person to do in her lifetime. These generalizable skills include imagination and social fluency. The implication is, thus, that an adequate vocational education includes a heavy dose of humanities.

Secondly, Ryan maintains that we must inculcate in our students a desire for intellectual challenges. Many things in life, for example, ‘playing the solo trumpet as well as Miles Davis or Wynton Marsalis,’ are valuable to us because of their difficulty. He continues,

Students study philosophy in part for the sake of the pleasure of seeing people vastly cleverer than themselves engaging with issues that it has taken every intellectual skill they possess to get clear and to see into. To describe Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason as a source of pleasure perhaps ought to be avoided, since many students have found it utterly intractable; but if there is pleasure to be had from hanging off a rock face, as there clearly is, there is a pleasure of a not dissimilar kind from venturing a view on what Immanuel Kant’s equally vertiginous derivation of the laws of the human mind may have been about. (179)

Although we ought to challenge students, we ought also to be honest with them, Ryan maintains, about the fact that many students will not immediately enjoy the challenge, that often developing the skills to meet the challenge will be boring, and that many students will find the intellectual challenge we provide depressing and painful. Still, Ryan thinks it true that human beings desire intellectual challenge, just as we desire challenge in sports. But, he quips, “Students who are ready to spend five hours a day practicing for the swim team ought to be quicker than they usually are to acknowledge that it may take much longer than that to come to terms with Hume or Plato or Gerard Manley Hopkins” (180).

A third important task of the university is to ensure not only that students can express themselves but that “they have a clear sense of what it is they wish to express.” To learn what it is that is worth expressing requires mastering the art of writing in many different styles and this requires, first of all, a careful and rigorous reading of many different types of texts.

Finally, a central purpose of education must be to help students overcome the sense that they have been thrown into a meaningless world. Ryan supposes that an exposure to the glories of human history, and the development of skills of critical thinking and conversation will provide students with a sense of meaning and with a commitment to liberal values. Perhaps so. Why he thinks so, he does not explain. Indeed, this may be but wishful thinking on his part. Still, his observation that all liberal education must attend to the question of meaning, must help students to discover meaning, is a clarion call not only to, but especially to, church-related liberal education.

Ryan concludes his book with an eloquent expression of liberal anxiety:

Most liberals believe—even if they only admit it somewhat blushingly—that the processes of economic and scientific modernization will bring all or almost all societies to a liberal, egalitarian, secular view of politics and culture and therefore of education, and that given a clear field a local version of a liberal society will secure the loyalties and affections of its inhabitants. Needless to say,
anyone who believes this, in the teeth of the horrors of the twentieth century, the resurgence of religious fundamentalism in the West as well as elsewhere, and the vitality of a conservative tradition that regards a faith in progress as foolishness, must temper hope with anxiety—but they ought also to temper anxiety with hope. (183-184)

Ryan writes eloquently and hopefully, but his liberal vision creates in me an anxiety different from that which he intends. He ably describes one type of liberalism—a Millian-Deweyan liberalism that aims at transforming society and ushering in a profoundly a-religious community of democratic conversationalists. But that is not the only liberalism, not the liberalism to which those who have been nourished by Augustinian milk will be most inclined. An alternative liberalism is that described by Judith Shklar as a 'liberalism of fear,' rather than the transformationist liberalism preferred by Ryan. Shklar's liberalism of fear is founded on the recognition that the greatest evil, that from which we must need protection, is cruelty to others. This is political, rather than world-view, liberalism and in this liberalism the political order exists precisely to protect individuals from the cruelty that others might do to them.

Such a liberalism will not attempt to transform society or individuals but will rather attempt to order social life in such a way that all citizens are free to make as many life-decisions as are compatible with a like freedom of other citizens. This liberalism puts on no airs; it makes no claim to guarantee a good life—its content is far too minimal for that. It will, however, provide an arena in which a wide diversity of people can pursue their own understandings of the good. Such liberalism is compatible with the pluralism that currently characterizes our society, if not with Ryan's transformationist impulses.

The goal of the liberal education of the liberalism of fear, thus, is twofold. Liberal citizens are appropriately exposed to the wrongs that individuals and societies have done to others and to the fallible and fragile political orders created to protect humans from cruelty. To understand the ongoing human proclivity towards cruelty is to understand the need for a political order that can protect individuals from the cruelty that might be done to humans, even for an apparently good cause. Secondly, each educational institution has a further task of enabling students to discover what human flourishing is, how we might live well. That task will be best accomplished if, rather than pandering to the perceived interests of students and parents in securing as inoffensively as possible the credentials for well-paid employment, colleges require students to explore in detail the poverty and wealth of some particular tradition, some particular understanding of the good life, and that will require faculties deeply familiar with and more than 'sympathetic to' such particular traditions. Such a thorough-going pluralism in liberal education will not alleviate Alan Ryan's liberal anxieties, to be sure, but it might lead to the discovery that a life with different anxieties, anxieties about whether, in fact, others are sufficiently protected, and whether we know and pursue the good and are known and pursued by the Good, is the best that we can hope for and is, in fact, not a bad life at all.

TDK
on poets—

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on reviewers—

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notes on covers—

“Athens and Jerusalem” is an utterance that faculty at Valparaiso know well. Having become the unofficial intellectual motto of the place since it was invoked by the patriarch, O.P. Kretzmann, many years ago, it seemed appropriate to visualize the phrase by sandwiching The Cresset between images of each city. On the front cover is a stunning panorama of Jerusalem painted in 1870 by Frederic Edwin Church. On the back is a photograph of modern Athens, featuring the Acropolis topped by that Periclean wonder, or what’s left of it, the Parthenon. Jerusalem as Frederic Church depicts it is an epiphany, a cascading disclosure of divine will, the home of prophets and kings consecrated by Jahweh. It is the shining city on a hill that inspired Augustine, Calvin, and American Puritans to conceive of their cities of divine purpose. Enthroned on a gigantic rock, the Parthenon is the temple dedicated to Athena, the goddess who defeated Poseidon in a primordial struggle, which left a gouge on top of the mountain from the sea god’s three-pronged spear.

This totemic conjunction of cultures is, of course, problematic today. What do either of these cities, glimpsed here in glorifying visual rhetoric, really mean for the purpose of Valparaiso University? They appear in these carefully crafted images as a divine revelation in one case and as the enduring monument to “western culture” in the other. Isn’t this coupling of cultural icons hopelessly retardeitaine in the context of twenty-first century globalization? Isn’t it the anachronistic projection of a dualist anthropology of heart and mind, faith and reason? And what of all the other cities and their civilizations left out of this privileged pair?

It is important to realize that Athens and Jerusalem were originally conjoined in a query by a North African theologian in the third century who summarily dismissed the relevance of philosophy, reason, and the study of the natural world to matters of the spirit, arguing that biblical revelation was sacrosanct. In other words, the two cultures were coupled in order to decouple them from one another. The situation today is different: many question the privileged relationship of the two in order to broaden the cultural repository of academic inquiry and a cosmopolitan formation of our students. But the spirit of linking Athens and Jerusalem remains intact and relevant in regard to the propensity of Christians to invert and pursue a path of iconoclastic purification. Coupling these two symbols of transcendent and worldly dispositions helps us resist intellectual fundamentalism and keep the conversation open and deeply reflective. But this is not enough. We need constantly to be reminded of the symbolic narrowness of “Athens” and “Jerusalem” in a world that includes “Beijing” and “Bogotá,” “Calcutta” and “Cairo.” Universities ought to be the place where this reminding happens with gusto and creativity.

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