

Ideals in Christian Higher Education

By Don Ratcliff

The basic goal of instruction and learning in a Christian higher education context is a lifetime of effective service in the contemporary world. Informed citizens need to understand the influence of history upon the present, comprehend the world as it is, and possess a vision for what it can be.

A relativistic and naturalistic stance is often taken within many academic disciplines. In contrast, Christians affirm the existence of a transcendent God who has revealed moral absolutes, sustains a relatively stable universe, and exists both within and outside of time and space as perceived by humans. The world and those within it are more than they seem.

While life sometimes appears to be meaningless and chaotic, Christians understand that this is due—at least in part—to the presence of sin and evil in the world. The world and those within it are not as God intended. Yet Christ has provided a way out of enslavement, and offers to humanity the opportunity of helping to build the Kingdom of God.

Faith and Learning

In a Christian college setting faith and learning deserves careful study, which in my opinion, involves the exploration of biblical principles and perspectives of historic Christianity, comparing these with corollary aspects of any given discipline. Christianity and concepts in a discipline may concur, conflict, or complement one another at three levels: assumptions, concepts, and practices. There is also the possibility that faith and learning, at times, may be independent of one another. However, the assumptions—both philosophical and theological—that undergird concepts and practices related to faith and learning, are unlikely to be completely unrelated.

As a part of their educational experience, students in a Christian higher education context are expected to synthesize Christian ideas, personal experiences, and perspectives offered by the academic discipline being studied. The learner is to be eclectic in gaining knowledge, carefully comparing, contrasting, and even integrating revealed Truth with the conclusions of academia in a non-contradictory manner. Apparent contradictions between a Christian perspective and good scholarship must be due to inadequacy in understanding revealed Truth, less than accurate disciplinary scholarship, or less than robust methods and thinking in the process involved in relating revealed Truth and disciplinary understandings.

There is limited utility in narrow sectarian views of faith, although it is important to affirm the foundational doctrines of historic Christianity. Instructors should cultivate openness by students and themselves in the quest for truth, and affirm that openness regularly in classes. A Christian orientation to education affirms that the Christian faith is the ultimate reference point for truth and the best foundation for theory and research.

Comparisons and contrasts between faith and disciplinary scholarship will fall short of exhaustive integration, in part because of the mortal and moral limitations of humanity and partly due to the distinctive qualities of various disciplines that are not faith-related. Attempting absolute faith-learning resolution is to ask for either a truncated view of faith, an oversimplified view of a discipline, or a disingenuous resolution.

Instruction

Because they respect the image of God in all humanity, instructors should be flexible in responding to the distinctive needs of students. Western society is increasingly marked by multiple cultures and ethnicities, groups that may not understand one another a great deal. In a Christian college setting, instructors not only should attempt to understand and respect such differences, but—to the degree possible—adapt teaching methods to reflect cultural diversity and thus encourage maximal learning. The requirements and procedures of education should adapt to student needs and interests as well as the dynamic content of a given discipline.

An instructor should present desirable and less desirable ideas of both current and historical interest within the discipline, fostering the student's critical thinking in the process. By incorporating a diversity of perspectives in the classroom, and encouraging critical thinking, the teacher is also more likely to encourage a love for learning and ongoing self-education by the student.

Teaching in a Christian college setting should include methods and procedures that are maximally effective and practical, and thus facilitate the mutual search—by teacher and students—for a distinctively Christian viewpoint. It is not assumed that the teacher has all the answers, but is in a quest—like the student—for the best possible answer given the limitations of human reason, realizing that only God is faultless.

Academic knowledge is important, but knowledge is inadequate without developing and implementing corollary applications. Appreciation for the diversity of created humanity suggests that opportunities to learn through creative writing and projects involving multiple learning styles can affirm multicultural and personal distinctive qualities, yet simultaneously affirm the practical value of what is learned. Education in the fullest sense is cognitively understood, affectively experienced, and behaviorally transforming. All aspects of the whole person are valued.

Epistemology and Research

Christians can affirm the value of research and theory by holding to a critical realist perspective. While not the only possible epistemology for Christians, critical realism affirms the general continuity between perception and reality, and thus research and theory have the potential to be accurate representations of what exists, albeit always partial and subject to the danger of reification.

Because humanity was initially created in the image of God, as recorded in Genesis, creativity in designing research and developing theory—as well as art, music, and other areas of the fine arts and humanities—are possible. There is genuine potential for the acquisition of knowledge.

Yet there are also limitations to the acquisition of knowledge, and thus the need for humility in conducting and using research, and theory-building—not only in the natural and social sciences, but also in the fine arts and humanities. Humility is a key virtue of Christianity and it should be reflected in the Christian's quest for knowledge and understanding. Learning is always partial and tentative; “we know in part,” conclusions that are fully isomorphic are elusive. Rational thought and scientific inquiry will always fall short of the perfection that only God possesses, yet because people are made in the image of God, genuine knowledge and truth can—in part—be apprehended.

A priority is placed on research-based concepts that reflect intellectual integrity, as well as the need to integrate faith with those concepts. “Research” is understood here to include the advances in a discipline that may not always be empirically derived, as occurs in the humanities and fine arts.

By modeling and sharing in the quest for a Christian perspective, the teacher is able to encourage students to defer judgment until sufficient evidence is accumulated and analyzed. Because of prior study in the discipline, the professor is also a guide or mentor who helps direct students to central concepts in that area of study, rather than allowing the class to become sidetracked with peripheral or irrelevant matters. The goal is to help students carefully evaluate the tenability of concepts from research and human experience. This is an important component in developing future Christian leaders in any given discipline.

The Liberal Arts

Studying a variety of disciplines prior to—and sometimes simultaneous with—classes in a chosen major, provides a wider exposure to philosophies that underlie disciplines. Exposure to a variety of research methods and investigation, inherent to the study of multiple disciplines, may contribute to future innovative study—both methodologically and topically—in one’s major area. More intuitive knowing can complement factual knowledge, as well as aesthetics and pragmatics; all of these are of value to students, faculty, and administrators. The holistic knowledge provided by the liberal arts, grounded in the Christian faith, provides a strong basis for any given area of study.

It is easy to underestimate the potential value of a liberal arts approach to education. The natural sciences provide insight into the material world and the living creatures within it, and also convey the scientific method as a means to increasing knowledge. The fine arts potentially contribute a deep appreciation for beauty, which may expand the aesthetic qualities of the student, as well as increase the value attributed to artistic expression. The humanities reflect both the image of God and the fallen nature of the human race in vivid and compelling ways, which may contribute to a lifetime of interacting with the great minds of the centuries. The study of mathematics can reflect the divine ordering of nature, which constitutes an important assumption within a theistic framework.

A liberal arts approach to Christian higher education has much to commend it, yet there is much potential in this area that has yet to be realized. Perhaps it is possible for faculty from different disciplines to share courses where topics can be considered from alternative disciplinary perspectives. Creating such classes may be an enriching experience to faculty, and provide examples of creative inquiry that may encourage students to investigate perspectives that transcend disciplinary boundaries and existing parameters of understanding.

The Quadrilateral Extended to Christian Higher Education

A Christian perspective of any discipline can be enhanced through an adaptation of what has been termed “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” While initially this formulation was primarily applied to faith and doctrine, it is expanded here to include the academic disciplines.

First, the Bible is authoritative and deserves serious, ongoing study in a manner that is both hermeneutically sound and includes an openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Scripture should be used devotionally and serve as a reference point for the assumptions and key concepts within any academic discipline.

Second, tradition in terms of the historic doctrines and practices of the church, along with the nomenclature and historical framework of a given discipline are also priorities. Tradition has the potential for conveying purpose and meaning both for faith and learning.

Third, personal experience of God and first-hand experience of one's discipline through research and application are also of crucial importance. Intuitive experience and reflective encounters are to be valued.

Fourth, reason is affirmed as an important aspect of studying both the content of one's faith and a given discipline. In contrast with an exclusively rationalistic approach, reason is understood to build from assumptions that are biblical, have doctrinal and disciplinary integrity, and are resonant with personal experience. Scripture, tradition, personal experience, and reason combine to form a holistic perspective of both faith and learning.

Note: This essay originated in the mid 1970s when I was asked to develop a philosophy of education for the school where I began my career in higher education. The document has gone through a number of revisions since then. Many of the ideas were derived from my experience as an undergraduate at Spring Arbor College, although I do not recall many being explicitly taught in classes. Some concepts are from my work at state universities, while others evolved during my early formative years of teaching. Other aspects were probably influenced by conversations with my parents, both of them educators and Christians. I acknowledge an ongoing debt to the work of philosopher-chemist Michael Polanyi, scientist-theologian Alister McGrath, evangelist-theologian John Wesley (particularly as interpreted by theologian Mildred Wynkoop), and psychologist-theologian James E. Loder. My reading in the area of psychology and Christianity integration has also been a significant influence on my thought in these areas. Finally, I am deeply indebted to the authors and Author of scripture. God provides guidance and discernment, often through people of the Truth, the Church.