

Answering Objections to the Integration of Faith and Learning at Christian Colleges

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Overview

Not only do secularists object to the integration of Christian knowledge with disciplinary content, but many Christian professors – even at Christian colleges and universities – do, too, preferring to follow a “two realms” or “two spheres” view of reality, where religious truth is kept separate and distinct from disciplinary knowledge. This article answers several common objections that Christian professors have raised against developing the integrative process in their scholarly work.

Objection 1:

Religious perspectives toward academic knowledge do not exist.

Religious perspectives do exist. The objection is an argument from ignorance and it is false. Religious perspectives, or better, items of relevant Christian knowledge, exist for most if not all academic areas. The usual flippant rhetorical question is, “How does Christianity apply to mathematics or chemistry?” The answer is, quite extensively. Whether the mathematics and chemistry are used to explore the nature of God’s creative ability, the rational world, or whether Christian principles are brought to bear at the interpretive level (what is the real meaning of chaos theory or complexity theory, for example), there is much for Christian truth to contribute. Generating data and working with facts are only part of doing academic work; interpreting those data and facts makes up the often more substantial part. And wherever interpretation is, there worldview assumptions, pre-theoretical commitments, philosophical preferences, and methodological habits are significant. All of these need to be tested and can be enhanced and clarified by Christian knowledge.

Additional religious perspectives can be developed. If we are generous and grant that in some area there is no Christian perspective, the point then is that *nonexistent* does not mean *impossible to develop*. Many problems currently have “nonexistent” solutions but we don’t claim that they therefore will never have

solutions. If therefore Objection 1 is true in your area of specialization, don't sit back and say, "Therefore I can't teach a Christian perspective." Develop one.

Objection 2:

Religious perspectives are irrelevant to disciplinary knowledge.

The meaning of knowledge involves religious assumptions. When Objection 1 is overcome, this appeal to irrelevance is often a fallback position. But it is also false, for reasons hinted at above. Objectors are fond of saying, for example, "There is no Christian physics or sociology." But this claim is only half true. The foundational assumptions of the disciplines and their interpretive frameworks are both connected to a metaphysical structure (their ontology – theory of what exists – and epistemology – theory of knowledge) that control both the identification of new knowledge and the meaning of that knowledge. When physics and sociology touch on the meaning of their findings, such as the origin of creation or the nature of human nature, then the Christian worldview has enormous, even decisive relevance to the subject. And even at the methodological level, the Christian perspective encourages us to challenge the philosophical naturalism behind the disciplinary processes and the limits naturalism places on the identification of knowledge.

The claim that "religious perspectives are irrelevant" is really the claim that "The religious perspective of Christianity should be kept out of the discipline so that only the religious perspective of naturalism will influence the discipline's findings and interpretations."

Objection 3:

There is no uniquely or exclusively Christian theory or approach to this subject, no "Christian economics" or "Christian biology."

Most theories involve elements in common with other approaches. Few theories, approaches, models, assumption sets, or even worldviews are unique in the sense of being completely unlike all others. The goal is to find truth and to gain understanding, not to elaborate an arbitrary or pet theory. In the process of developing a theory that covers the data the best, the Christian theory will likely overlap and include elements of other theories, insofar as they reflect accurate knowledge and provide a coherent understanding. Therefore, Christian theory may reflect (1) affirmation of parts of other models, (2) refinement or revision of parts of other models, and (3) unique parts, aspects, and components. New

theories often reconstruct material from older theories rather than replacing them completely. The goal of Christian approaches is not uniqueness, but truth.

Objection 4:

Attempts to define a Christian theory for a discipline would not produce a very good theory.

All theoretical work must start somewhere. David Claerbaut notes that even if we agree that “initial attempts at a ‘Christian sociology’ or ‘Christian economics’ may not be particularly ‘good’ sociology or economics . . .” (16), the same is true for most initial attempts to develop a discipline. After all, he continues, first attempts “are what academics call ‘first approximations’ – models to be improved upon. Consider that the first mainstream formulations in medicine, sociology, and psychology were incredibly crude attempts” (16). Most first attempts may be rough, tentative and in need of development and refinement, but that is no reason for avoiding the attempts in the first place. And, with the advantage of a clarifying worldview that can take what is worthy from established content, there is every hope that even first attempts may be substantial and of high quality.

No discipline will be advanced if the argument holds that we shouldn’t attempt to develop a new pathway because the attempt will be hard, fraught with peril, or less than perfectly successful on first attempt. That’s self defeating.

Objection 5:

Because there is no single, agreed-upon “Christian perspective,” a Christian perspective cannot be taught. It doesn’t exist.

It is natural to expect variation within Christian approaches. This “single-perspective” objection is a case of special pleading that singles out Christian theory for criticism while ignoring the simple facts about the status of other theories. For example, in evolutionary theory, there is no single evolutionist perspective (for there is Darwinian, Neo-Darwinian, Goldschmidt’s hopeful monster, Eldredge and Gould’s punctuated equilibria, Hoyle and Wickramasinghe’s panspermia, etc.).

Similarly there is no single Marxist, feminist, or Freudian perspective, but no one claims that because a single, agreed-upon perspective does not exist, none of these therefore can be taught. Of course, each perspective within each of these theoretical areas contains features that are found in common, which is why they

share the same general name, and yet there are many variations of thought within each. A Christian perspective or approach is likely to exist in several variations, also, each sharing a set of core features that make it Christian.

Further, each perspective is constantly under development and subject to change, combination, revision and so forth. This is the nature of theory and of academic work itself. Christian scholars working to develop Christian perspectives or Christian theories within their subject matter will likely continue to develop a variety approaches and interpretations within the general Christian framework. That is to be expected.

Objection 6:

It would be wrong to teach a Christian perspective because that would present “a biased view that is unfair to other religious perspectives” (Lyon and Beaty 85).

This falsely assumes that Christianity provides not knowledge but subjective belief. The objection is a cultural relativist argument that assumes that no “religious perspective” is true, but that all religious perspectives are equally false (or to be postmodern, equally “true”). Part of the problem is the use of the term *perspective*, which is sometimes taken to mean a subjective viewpoint rather than a knowledge claim. Those of us arguing for the integration of Christian faith (read, Christian knowledge) and learning believe that Christianity brings not just a viewpoint but objective knowledge to the table that must be incorporated into the world of learning in order for that world to be complete, accurate, and fully true. As a worldview, Christianity does make an exclusive truth claim over other religions (just as many of those religions do). A Christian college should have the courage of its convictions.

Note that those who object to the introduction of Christian assumptions and knowledge never also object that “it would be wrong to teach from a naturalist perspective because that would present a biased view that is unfair to other religious perspectives.” Once again we find a case of special pleading. My (naturalist) religion is okay in scholarship, but your (Christian) religion is not.

Objection 7:

Christian scholarship would be biased and subjective.

Christianity provides an objective foundation for knowledge. All knowledge is discovered and developed through the reliance on an interpretive paradigm to

bring intelligibility and meaning to individual and collected facts. Kerry Magruder and Mike Keas note that “no one can theorize without worldview precommitments.” To call Christian scholarship biased and subjective would be to open up the same charge toward all scholarship. It might be more profitable instead to say that scholars typically seek truth based on their understanding of the world and of the nature of truth itself. They apply interpretive models or paradigms to assess data. The Christian worldview might be seen as an alternative paradigm or interpretive framework, interested in objective truth wherever it may lead.

In fact, Christian scholarship should be the least biased and least subjective of all, because it is based on objective knowledge (Biblical truth) and it holds up truth as the highest value (unlike some of the ideologies in academia where political correctness and the suppression of dissent are more important than facing the truth).

At the bottom of this objection lies a large set of assumptions and preferences relating to epistemology (the theory of knowledge – how and what we can know) and ontology (which things are to be considered real and which not). Commitments to theory and methodology may or may not be labeled bias (after all, you’re biased but I’m just focused). A better discussion would result from the examination and assessment of the assumptions and commitments connected to all the competing paradigms, using tests such as coherence, correspondence, explanatory power and so forth.

Objection 8:

A Christian perspective would cause instruction to lack integrity because it is not based on religiously neutral presuppositions (Beaty et al 151, 152).

To the contrary, including Christian truth in the educational process guarantees rather than inhibits integrity. First, there is no such thing as religious (or metaphysical) neutrality. The process of all research and interpretation is based on “pre-scientific belief commitments” (Beaty et al 156). Scholarship proceeds either on the assumption that God exists or that he does not exist. Either God has created the universe and humankind or he has not. Neither position is religiously neutral.

Christian scholarship exposes all religious perspectives. The advantage and first guarantee of integrity of a Christian approach is that not only does it identify its own religious perspective and puts it admittedly on the table (thus avoiding hidden bias), but it also identifies the religious perspective (the metaphysical commitment) of all other worldviews and exposes them to

awareness and evaluation. Integrity is guaranteed by removing the veil of neutrality from, say, naturalism, and enabling the learner to see its religious biases. Only in an academic arena where religious perspectives are clear and on the table for discussion can this situation occur. As John Henry Newman wrote, [Without theology in its proper place in the academy,] “sciences will assume certain principles as true, and act upon them, which they neither have authority to lay down themselves, nor appeal to any other higher science to lay down for them” (73). Without the watchdog of a Christian perspective, the disciplines will make claims that are metaphysical (or even theological) rather than scientific or factual and will not be called to account.

Second, a Christian perspective guarantees integrity by supplying a check on the self-aggrandizement of other disciplinary areas. In secular universities, taking Christianity or any religion seriously is virtually banned. Yet students and faculty alike still have both spiritual and factual questions about their own lives. In the absence of answers from an accepted revealed truth and with the failure of purely empirical demonstration, the hard and social sciences move into these religious realms and make philosophical or theological pronouncements – about the meaning of life, man’s origin, man’s destiny, human nature, even the meaning of worship. Such pronouncements are neither scientific (in the strictly empirical sense) nor within the scope or competency of the disciplines from which they come. But without a Christian knowledge source to call them to account, the disciplines strive to answer such questions anyway. Once again quoting Newman: “I observe, then, that, if you drop any science [and by *science*, Newman means *arena of knowledge*, including theology] out of the circle of knowledge, you cannot keep its place vacant for it; that science is forgotten; the other sciences close up, or, in other words, they exceed their proper bounds, and intrude where they have no right” (55).

A third guarantee of integrity is the Christian exaltation of truth as the primary goal and value in education. Truth is the objective measure. Unfortunately, the secular academy has been overtaken by ideology and power politics where truth is no longer viewed as paramount (or sometimes even as objective). This sad state of affairs raises the daunting question, “Can you have academic excellence or integrity *without* a Christian perspective?” The Christian touchstone corrects, exposes, and challenges all knowledge claims, and it provides standards and tests of truth against sloppy, ideological, agenda laden, tendentious scholarship that is the real inhibitor of academic excellence and integrity.

Fourth, the word *integrity* includes the sense of wholeness or completeness, and from that sense, **the Christian perspective provides the integrity of a holistic view of knowledge** by including those spiritual dimensions that are usually ignored or even rejected with hostility in secular teaching. The secular academy

has suffered severe damage to its integratedness (to its integrity?) by the narrow view of knowledge arising out of positivism and still evident in scientism and by the relativism and dogmatism arising out of postmodernist attitudes. Christian scholars have the singular opportunity to repair the realm of learning and to restore genuine integrity to it.

Objection 9:

Trying “to work within a Christian context in one’s teaching . . . [would be] to lower the academic quality of the pedagogy” (Claerbaut 21).

Working out God’s truth should raise rather than lower the bar. First, from a religious motivation, seeking truth to honor God, seeking truth to learn more about God, and seeking truth to understand ourselves and the creation more fully should provide a powerful motivation to strive for excellence.

Second, the fact that Christianity seeks truth (as opposed to postmodernism, which seeks rhetorical power rather than truth and which scoffs at truth unless the word is robed in sneer quotes) should raise the desire for knowledge and even information quality because accuracy does indeed matter.

Third, Christianity’s holistic view of truth seeks to delineate a grand theory of the knowable universe, wider and more inclusive of all we can experience than the truncated view of naturalism (limiting itself to material reality).

Seeking unity and transcendent meaning and the interconnections – that is, the integration – of all knowledge is a high and motivating calling. Careful thinking and analysis are more important than ever when the perceived consequences – right or wrong knowledge of God’s creation – are more serious than under competing perspectives.

This “lower Christian quality” objection appears to arise from the fear that working from a Christian perspective will make Christian scholarship look different from secular scholarship, and secular scholars will denigrate it for that reason. Christian scholarship will indeed have differences, but those differences do not imply “lower academic quality.” Christian scholars should work to meet the highest standards and stop worrying about the respect of the secular scholarly establishment (which grants and removes respect often on the basis of politics and power and conformance with currently accepted ideas). Christian scholars should reject the inferiority complex that the secular academy wants to foist on them.

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