

# Defining the Integration of Faith and Learning

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## A Common Task

The integration of faith and learning is not a process that is strange, quaint, unusual, or unique to Christianity. The integration of learning (or knowledge) is an activity performed by everyone who understands the need for a coherent worldview, by everyone who knows that believing conflicting claims is not reasonable. Further, if we understand by “faith” the set of basic beliefs, preferences, and presuppositions that guide our lives, then everyone – religious or not – practices the integration of faith and learning, too.

## Integrating Knowledge

Every time we learn something, we engage in the process of integrating knowledge, for integration is the process of connecting knowledge with knowledge—connecting facts, ideas, and other information together in a way that unifies them. Every time we encounter a new claim about knowledge, we work on integrating it into our overall knowledge. Integration, then, is the process of fitting new knowledge in with existing knowledge, a process of coherence making, done naturally, every day whenever new information or knowledge claims are presented to us. Since every person’s store of existing knowledge is unique and individual, so is the process of integration.

Every time we learn, we engage in the process of integration, comparing new knowledge claims with already accepted knowledge, attempting to fit the two together into a consistent and coherent whole.

The two essential requirements for successful integration are consistency and coherence. You probably recognize these as two skills involved in any critical thinking activity.

- **Consistency.** The new knowledge must be consistent with what we already know. There must not be a conflict between the claims. Contradictory ideas cannot both be true in the same way. If there is a conflict, either the new knowledge claim must be adjusted, reinterpreted, or rejected, or what is already known must be adjusted, reinterpreted, or rejected.
- **Coherence.** One’s entire set of knowledge must fit together into a unified whole. Our overall view of reality must make sense as a more or less harmonious, interrelated set of ideas. Our view of reality comes not only from facts we learn but through observation, experience, reason, interpretation, and even basic assumptions about the world, ourselves, and others.

Significantly, then, claims about new knowledge are not accepted immediately and as presented, but are first tested against current knowledge and against beliefs about, for example, what is possible, what is likely, and what is compatible with one's other knowledge. When someone tells you a story that seems hard to believe, you may conclude that it is a "tall tale" rather than a description of fact. This conclusion is the result of your automatic integrative process. The story fails the consistency test by making claims beyond what you know or believe to be true or possible.

## Types of Integration

Our efforts to bring harmony and consistency to our whole stock of knowledge include several activities.

- **Connecting knowledge with knowledge.** As already mentioned, here a new knowledge claim is brought into play with currently held knowledge to see how everything fits. The new claim may be accepted, rejected, adjusted, or "put on the shelf" until later when sense can be made of it (that is, when it can be successfully integrated). And sometimes, current knowledge must be adjusted in light of the new.
- **Connecting knowledge from one area with knowledge in another area.** Discoveries or theories from one area of learning can influence our thinking in another area. The findings about brain chemistry, for example, may influence theories in psychology about human behavior and motivation. New discoveries in history may change the way political scientists view the actions of past governments.
- **Connecting knowledge with one's larger beliefs about the world.** In the process of finding coherence, we bring to bear our beliefs about how rational the world is, what is possible to exist, what human nature is like, and so forth.
- **Connecting knowledge with one's basic presuppositions and values.** Sorting out how one's basic beliefs fit in with one's personal experience is the integrative process of finding meaning in life. When you ask not, "What is it?" or "What happened?" but "What does it all mean?" then you are working out this integrative issue.

Integration involves several interrelated activities, all aimed at making sense of what we learn and finding meaning in what we know.

## Integrating Faith and Learning

Christians perform the same kinds of integrative tasks as those described above, with the crucial addition of Christian knowledge, based on Biblical authority, as both part and ultimate test of all other knowledge. When we look for consistency and coherence in our knowledge, we do so within a Biblical framework. Christian faith is both a type of knowledge (a set of truth propositions) and a worldview (an interpretive framework for creating understanding and making sense of all reality). The assumptions behind the integration of faith and learning are these:

In the work of connecting all aspects of truth to each other, the most common task is resolving conflicts between incompatible or apparently incompatible interpretations.

- **All truth is God’s truth.** Christian knowledge (Biblical teaching, belief in God, human nature as fallen but redeemable, etc.) should not be considered a separate realm of truth or reality, but as a vital and clarifying part of it. Christian knowledge must be part of the whole integrative database.
- **There is no conflict between God’s truth and other truth.** Conflicts arise when true meets false, or more commonly, when there are incompatible interpretations, presuppositions, preferences, and worldviews. The most common work in the faith and learning area is that of integrating apparently conflicting interpretations rather than apparently conflicting facts.
- **Secular learning is incomplete and often distorted.** The worldview of philosophical naturalism, that limits all reality to the material world, is inadequate to explain all of existence because of its truncated coverage. The incoherent and self-refuting worldview of post-modernism is defeated by its basis in relativism and its abandonment of transcendent meanings. Only the Christian worldview supplies a complete, objective, and rational explanation for all of existence.
- **Christian integration is based on a Biblical framework of reality.** This framework functions as an objective measure of all knowledge claims, a touchstone against which all claims to truth are tested. Biblical authority is the starting point. The clear implication here is the crucial importance of good hermeneutics—the skillful and accurate interpretation of the Biblical text.
- **Truth is the most important goal of learning.** The goal of integrating faith and learning is the maintenance of a coherent, unified system of understanding, a full knowledge and harmony of all truth. Truth must take precedence over politics, ideology, and wishful thinking.

*In conceptual integration, one's theological beliefs are blended and unified with propositions judged to be justifiably believed as true from other sources into a coherent, intellectually satisfying world view.*  
—J. P. Moreland

In sum, successful integration of faith and learning depends on a thorough, accurate, and carefully thought through understanding of the Bible, together with a good understanding of how academic knowledge claims are made and the worldviews underlying those claims. Skillful interpretation in both areas is a key factor.

## Integration Across Worldviews

The two prominent worldviews promoted in universities today are scientific naturalism and postmodernism. Knowledge claims coming from these two ways of looking at reality provide a challenge to the process of integration because both worldviews include basic assumptions in conflict with Christianity. Scientific naturalism limits the realm of the knowable to what can be observed or learned from physical experiment. In other words, any non-material explanations (such as a divine creator) are ruled out arbitrarily.

A key part of integration is learning to become a good critical thinker, examining knowledge claims, and looking for the assumptions and worldviews that shape the claims. Test everything: 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

Postmodernism rejects the idea of absolute truth and instead teaches a relativism of knowledge and values. It also rejects the supernatural. Thus, both scientific naturalism and postmodernism are anti-supernatural.

Knowledge claims based on or arising from such incomplete and distorted views of truth and reality are therefore often incomplete or distorted themselves. It is crucial in the integrative process, then, to be cautious about knowledge claims and to look for the assumptions behind such claims. The same is true for claims made in subject areas where the content may be highly politicized or controlled by an ideological agenda. Agenda scholarship is common now in the academy.

Good preparation for integrative work is to learn about naturalism and postmodernism (and possibly some of the prominent ideologies in your major), so that you will better understand how knowledge claims are shaped to fit within those worldviews.

## Intentionality Needed

The integration of faith and learning is such an important topic largely because too little of it seems to occur. The bias in the academy and in the larger culture against Christian truth and Biblical authority has had the effect of disconnecting Christian knowledge from other knowledge, even in the minds of some Christians. For that reason, integration must be undertaken with deliberateness. Christians must be intentional about making the connections between their faith and the knowledge claims they encounter and careful to keep the Biblical framework in the foreground as the structuring principle of truth.

To become a better integrator, learn all you can, be dedicated to the Word, and look for the unity of truth.