



Christian Academe vs. Christians in Academe

Submitted by Kenneth G. Elzinga on September 30, 2005 - 4:00am

A version of this essay was delivered as an address at Abilene Christian University's centennial celebration this month.

For all of my career, except for one semester, I have been a faculty member at secular schools. The University of Virginia, where I now teach, is often called “Mr. Jefferson’s university,” because Thomas Jefferson conceived and designed the school. The University of Virginia is relentlessly secular, as some believe Mr. Jefferson would have wanted: Thomas Jefferson, after all, is the founding father most identified with the constitutional doctrine of a separation between church and state. What does it mean for a school to be relentlessly secular? Try these on for size.

When I arrived at UVA in 1967, Christian student groups were not permitted to meet on the grounds of the University. So far as I know, Virginia was the only public university to have this restraint. How God used two UVA students to break down this barrier is a story well worth telling, but not here.

As an assistant professor, I once tried to schedule a room in the student union for a faculty Bible study and was told no. I asked if I could schedule a room to discuss the writings of Karl Marx. No problem. But the gospel of Mark: that was apparently off limits to discuss on grounds.

On several occasions, when parents ask me to talk to their high school age children about attending the University of Virginia, if in the course of the

conversation I learn that the children are followers of Jesus, I ask them if they are considering a Christian school as well. And if not, I ask why. And we have a conversation about Christian versus secular schools.

I am, in other words, a friend of Christian higher education even though I have been called, as a matter of vocation, to be at a secular school.

That is the background I bring to the question I address here: What is the difference between *Christians in higher education* and *Christian higher education*?

I can talk more knowledgeably about Christians in higher education since I am one. Christians in higher education, at secular schools, can be placed in two different bins or categories. I'm not happy with the terms, but I'll call one group the "privatizers" and the other, the "evangelicals."

Privatizers in higher education view their faith as disconnected from their work as professors. They are involved in a local church (often heavily involved); if they are married, they are probably faithful to their spouse; if they have children, they love their kids; and their names do not show up in the newspapers having done something that embarrasses their school.

But these professors, the privatizers, are not identified at their schools as Christians; this aspect of their identity may never be known by students or colleagues. Not that their faith is a deep or dark secret; they probably consider the information irrelevant. They are identified as professors of chemistry or accounting or German literature. That's it. Their Christian faith is private and apart from their jobs.

These professors live in two worlds, not simultaneously, but sequentially: one is secular; that's the campus; the other is sacred; that's their church.

Now let me say, as an aside, that by my observation some Christian faculty at Christian colleges and universities live like privatizers as well. I have yet to decide whether this is sad, or scandalous, but they are not the subject of this discussion.

The second kind of Christian professor in higher education I'll call the evangelical. The professors, researchers, and scholars in higher education I have labeled the evangelicals believe that the quest for truth begins and ends with Jesus. Their work involves teaching and research in their disciplines. But their calling entails extending the reign of Jesus into all realms.

The evangelicals resonate with the words of the Dutch Reformer Abraham Kuyper: "There is not one square inch of the entire creation about which Jesus Christ does not cry out, 'This is mine! This belongs to me.'"

These professors can be found giving talks to the campus chapter of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, or Campus Crusade for Christ; or the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, or a dozen other parachurch organizations on their campuses.

These professors can be found leading a Bible study in their office with students or other faculty.

These professors can be found having office hour conversations about the Christian faith, as well as office hour conversations about sociology and microbiology.

These professors can even be found praying for the spread of the gospel on their campuses. These are professors who, in accord with I Peter 3:15, are "always ready to give a defense of the hope that is within them," but should be doing so, as Peter makes clear, "with gentleness and reverence."

But you will *not* find these professors praying before class; you will *not* find these professors explaining the gospel in the classroom; you will *not* find these professors teaching their courses from a "Christian perspective." While they are Christians in higher education, their institutional environment is not one of Christian higher education. Their lectures will not begin with a prayer nor will they end with an altar call.

Indeed, Christian scholars in higher education at secular schools must be scrupulously fair and impartial with their students who are not followers of Jesus, treating the academic endeavors of these students the same way they would those students who share their Christian convictions.

Now here's what tricky to describe. It is not so much that, as Christians, these professors, the evangelicals, operate under the radar screen. In my own case, for example: probably most of my students know that I am a follower of Jesus. There are signs up on campus announcing talks that I give to student Christian groups.

Evangelical professors may be quite visible as Christians at their secular colleges and universities. But they operate under the constraint that, fundamentally, they have been hired by their institutions to teach and do research in a particular discipline or subject matter, not to evangelize.

To the extent they are open about their Christian faith, the evangelicals do so the same way that professors who are enthused about sailing or cooking can share with students something about their life outside the classroom.

A professor who is passionate about sailing can make that known to her students; her students may find that interesting; her students may even become interested in sailing. But all of her students understand that an interest or disinterest in sailing has nothing to do with the treatment the student receives in being taught chemistry or accounting. My students understand that their grade is in no way affected by their own religious beliefs, or lack thereof.

So these are two versions of Christians *in* higher education. In my reductionistic, bimodal distribution, one Christian professor sees his faith as largely irrelevant to his job. For the other, her job is fully under the Lordship of Jesus as a calling.

Now let me turn to *Christian higher education*. What should it look like?

What should Abilene Christian University and other Christian institutions be like, compared to the University of Virginia, my school? How should the two schools differ? What's the difference between my being a Christian in higher education and schools like Abilene Christian being a part of Christian higher education?

Christian higher education does not start with Christian students. That may

surprise you. But I would hope Christian institutions do not have a Christian litmus test for students.

If students want to be a part of Christian higher education, they should be welcome. The Christian faith is defensible; the Christian faith is compelling; the Christian faith is true. So let unbelievers live and learn in the environment of Christian higher education and test the faith.

Jesus did not throw out Doubting Thomas. Christian higher education should be a place that welcomes Doubting Thomases, as students.

But Christian higher education should be dominated by a faculty who are followers of Jesus.

The majority of faculty at a school of Christian higher education should be Christians. The institution makes no sense if that is not the case. Students are transients; they come and go. Christian higher education is defined by a core of faculty who believe that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:16), that every thought is to be made captive to Him and they are not ashamed of the gospel.

My undergraduate school was begun by Baptists many years ago. I have no doubt that the founders of this college were committed Christians who had a vision for a school that would have a Christian foundation. Over the years, the influence of Christianity waned at this school, as it has at so many colleges and universities.

When I was an undergraduate, I remember the college president stating that the school had hired its first avowed atheist on the faculty. This was announced with a measure of pride, as a sign of how the school was coming of age.

I look back upon that now as the time when Ichabod, "the spirit has departed," should have been written across the campus gates.

For those who would object that a faculty predominantly Christian will suppress freedom of inquiry and the pursuit of truth, I would respond in two ways. The first is the chronicle of how secular authorities have suppressed

truth as well. The second is with a rhetorical question: if Christian higher education is not made so by Christian educators, what is the alternative paradigm that merits the label?

If Christian higher education starts with Christian faculty, it must also have rules for living in a Christian community. But the rules are derivative of Christian higher education; they are not the foundation.

Years ago, T.S. Eliot put the matter this way: "The purpose of Christian higher education would not be merely to make men and women pious Christians... A Christian education must primarily teach people to be able to think in Christian categories."

On this point, I may have a different view than parents as to why their children should be at Christian colleges. I know parents who want their children to go to a school with Christian roots because they think their children are less likely to get involved in drugs, less likely to get AIDS, less likely to fall in love with a non-Christian, less likely to... well, it's a long list -- but the list goes right down to less likely to end up wearing a ring in their lip.

I don't want to make light of these parental concerns. But my concept of Christian higher education travels in a different direction than rules of student conduct. I happen not to think that Christian higher education should be safe. I think Christian higher education should have an edge to it, just as it was dangerous to hang around with Jesus.

The Components of Christian Higher Education

Christian higher education should be defined primarily by differences in teaching; differences in credentialing; and differences in mentoring. The faculty is pivotal in each of these.

If I had time to say more, I would discuss how Christian higher education would be defined by differences in facilities and athletics. If I had time to say still more, I would discuss differences in curriculum, tuition, and even the campus bookstore.

I mention all these because the difference between Christians in higher education and Christian higher education is not minor, cosmetic, or even converging. Christian higher education should be radically different. And if my French were better, I would say, vive la difference.

Teaching. It probably goes without saying that when a physicist at ACU teaches Bernoulli's theorem, it is not taught differently than it would be taught at UVa. When I teach the economic principle of elasticity of demand at UVa, I am confident the same formula is taught at ACU.

But when I teach the economic theory of income distribution at UVa, it is not fair game for me to ask: What might the Biblical principle of gleaning -- leaving some extra grain in the fields for the poor -- teach about income distribution in an industrialized society?

But one can and should have this kind of conversation in Christian higher education.

This is called integration: integrating the Christian faith with one's discipline. It is not easy to do. And it will involve different shapes and forms in different disciplines to take the Bible's great themes of Creation, Fall, and Redemption and weave them into classroom discourse.

To my mind, this is the great distinctive between Christian higher education and Christians in higher education. The classrooms and laboratories and seminar rooms of Christian higher education are places where faculty and students are free to explore topics that are, to some extent, off-limits to Christians at secular universities, or simply irrelevant to the academic discourse at secular schools.

If the faculty members in Christian higher education simply believe their job is to teach what they learned in graduate school, and go home and be good church members, then integration won't take place. And the school will produce a generation of students, many of whom will believe there is a gap between the secular and the sacred.

Joel Carpenter has written that every Christian school needs some faculty

“who focus on questions of faith and knowledge and a Christian worldview,” but goes on to add that in Christian higher education “[e]very professor must in some sense be a lay theologian.”

Credentialing. The business world emphasizes credentials. The professions of law and medicine emphasize credentials. But in higher education, we really emphasize credentials. We put them before our names, after our names; we calibrate and quantify performance; we rank people all the time; we look up to and look down on people according to performance-based credentials or titles.

For years I wrote a personal letter of congratulations to every student of mine who got an A+. I was proud of them. They made me look good too. I still do this, but now I write a letter to every student who fails my classes. Last fall I wrote 30 of these letters.

I suspect Jesus would have thought first to write the F students. Christian higher education would recognize (before I did) that the A+ students already get lots of strokes. It took me about 20 years to catch on to writing the young men and women who failed my class, and whom, perhaps, I had failed as their servant.

De-emphasizing credentials is a mark of Christian higher education. I am much taken by the Apostle Paul's example here.

How does Paul generally state his credentials? Right at the front of his epistles. Read the first verse of Romans, "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus"; Philippians 1:1, "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus"; Titus 1:1, "Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ." In higher education, a servant is not much of a credential. It should be in Christian higher education.

I consider credentialing one of the most important areas of distinction between Christian higher education and secular schools.

It should please us when Christian college graduates get into Ivy League schools for graduate work. But in Christian higher education, it should also matter that students are growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

That students who were estranged from their families have, as a result of being in Christian higher education, been reconciled to their families. That students who came to these institutions unredeemed now know Jesus as Lord and Savior. That students who entered shackled by materialism are now free of these bonds. That students who were chronically dishonest now let their “nay be nay and their yay be yay.” That those who were snobs, because of being part of their academic community, now are marked by humility.

Precisely how Christian higher education recognizes sanctification, and commends it, I am not sure. Abilene Christian University can place ads about Ivy League admissions. But somehow, this and other Christian institutions need to recognize and acknowledge to the community that their very best students are the sanctified ones, the broken ones, that God can use.

Students in Christian higher education need to know that the faculty values this: that professors admire godliness; that the faculty’s deepest satisfaction as professors comes from seeing students become what God wants them to be -- people for whom Jesus Christ is preeminent.

It would be great if Abilene Christian University had a Rhodes Scholar every year and the public relations office milked that for all it was worth. And in today’s world, that honor is worth a lot to a school. But I would be even more impressed if ACU was turning out Christians who advanced the Kingdom in ways that I might never read about in the newspapers or see on television.

If you read the alumni magazine at my institution, you will find all kinds of entries about the worldly accomplishments of UVa graduates. That’s what I would expect.

What would I expect the alumni magazine of a school in Christian higher education to look like? I ask because a school in Christian higher education should be a community of the Gospel.

Perhaps entries like this:

Judy Jackson, class of 1974, finally has overcome the love of possessions that used to shackle her.

Tom Phillipson, the student most into drugs in the class of 1996, has accepted Jesus as his savior.

Shawna Brown, class of 2003, has been reconciled with her parents.

Daryl Hendrix, class of 1999, has developed an affection for God's word that eluded him when he was in college.

If you have ever read alumni magazines, you will realize how peculiar entries like these would be. But, let me tell you something: when you teach at a secular school, you grow accustomed to the Christian faith being peculiar.

One of the chief functions of any Christian community is the gracious, loving diagnosis of the idols worshipped by members of the community. A Christian college or university should be a community where it is safe and normal to talk to one another about the false gods that capture our hearts.

Mentoring. I would expect Christian higher education to be full of professors who mentor students. Not just teach them chemistry and accounting; not just teach them biology and Spanish; but model out for them how to walk with Jesus. Not because these faculty members have mastered how to do this, but because they have been pilgrims longer, because they have experienced more often the consequences of sin and redemption.

I have been surprised, in my travels, at how few faculty members in Christian higher education mentor students. When I have asked why, the answer I have heard is: well, that's for the Dean of the Chapel to do, or that's the job of the Dean of Students office.

I am an economist, so I appreciate that answer. It is right out of Adam Smith; it appeals to what Adam Smith called the specialization and division of labor.

But I can restrain my enthusiasm for the answer. To me, it means that Christian higher education has professors who are not investing in the lives of students beyond teaching them chemistry and accounting and biology and Spanish.

But you can learn chemistry and accounting and biology and Spanish

anywhere; and probably at less cost than in Christian higher education.

To sum up, I am going to personalize what I have been talking about by telling you of my experience during the one time I was not simply a Christian in higher education but was a visiting professor at a school that is a part of Christian higher education. In the spring of 2004, I was a visiting research professor at Pepperdine University.

When I was first being considered for a position at Pepperdine, I spoke with the school's Provost. That's appropriate. The provost is the chief academic officer of a school. The provost at every university is supposed to scrutinize who is going to be on the faculty.

In the course of our discussion, the provost of Pepperdine University (who used to be on the faculty here) prayed for me and for my time at Pepperdine. I shall never forget that.

As someone who has taught and done research at a university where provosts do not pray with prospective visiting faculty, I am grateful for Christian higher education where there is this added dimension of collegiality.

From an economist's perspective, Christian higher education expands the choice set of higher education. Christian institutions make for a more diverse population of institutions to consider. Even students who are not followers of Jesus ought to support the Christian distinctives of the school, if only because of the valuable diversity schools like this one bring to American higher education.

Author's email:

info@insidehighered.com

Kenneth C. Elzinga is the Robert C. Taylor Professor of Economics at the University of Virginia. He delivered the Centennial University Address on Tuesday at Abilene Christian University.

Source URL: <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2005/09/30/christian-academe-vs-christians-academe>