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Faith in the Humanities

KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR

A Rough Time for the Humanities

SINCE HIGHER EDUCATION'S MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY shift away from the liberal arts (in liberal arts institutions, no less)¹ toward a more utilitarian, career-oriented educational paradigm, the humanities have had it rough. Within the context of conservative Christianity and its institutions of higher learning, which have not been immune to pragmatism's reign,² the humanities have it even rougher. Add to this decades-long trend the more immediate concerns about the pursuit of four-year degrees in a climate marked by a bad economy, a surplus of workers with four-year college degrees, and a persistent lack of jobs,³ and one wonders if the humanities education can—or should—survive.

Of course, the uncertain bond between church and culture, more generally, and between church and the humanities, more specifically, that has endured for millennia can't be blamed on the bad economy of the moment: the tie between church and culture has been knotted messily since

1. For a detailed report on the decline of liberal arts curricula in the latter half of the twentieth century, see National Association of Scholars, "Dissolution of General Education."

2. See, for example, Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided*.

3. Zagier, "College for All?"

the inception of the church. Nevertheless, both Scripture and evidence show that when the relationship between church and culture is correctly balanced, the beneficiaries of that proper balance are individual believers, the church body, and the culture at large.

“What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem?”

As early as the third century, Tertullian, a Roman lawyer and convert to Christianity, was one of the first to pinpoint this problem when he posed the question that has echoed within the church, in one form or another, ever since: “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?”⁴ In other words, of what possible use or value could the pagan learning of the Greeks be to the followers of the Messiah who came from the Hebrews? Dallas Willard fleshes out the question even further in explaining what is connoted by the opposing terms *Athens* and *Jerusalem*. “Athens refers to the capacity of unaided human thought to grasp reality,” Willard explains, “the human mind’s ability to grasp (some) reality by thinking, and Athens symbolizes that world-shaping discovery.” He continues:

“Jerusalem, by contrast, refers to the declaration of reality and gift of knowledge from a supreme, personal divinity who cares about what happens in human life and intervenes to give direction to the human enterprise.”⁵

This view of the uneasy relationship between the life of the intellect and the life of the spirit as being at odds with one another is an example of what H. Richard Niebuhr, in his classic text *Christ and Culture*, identifies as the view of Christ “against culture.”

The issue of the relationship between God’s people and their culture predates Tertullian, of course, and the Christian church too. Many of the Old Testament codes God commanded the Israelites to follow accomplished, among other things, the separation of his people from the surrounding pagan cultures. Yet, total separation from the culture is neither demanded nor possible. Indeed it was in excelling in the knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom of his captors that Daniel and his fellow captives brought glory to God. When brought before King Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were found by the king to be “ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm.”⁶ In mastering the surrounding culture in order to magnify God, Daniel exemplifies a very

4. Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics* 7, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:246.

5. Willard, Foreword, in Poe, *Christianity in the Academy*, 9.

6. Dan 1:17–20.

different view of culture than that of Tertullian. While it would be difficult to argue that it approaches the other end of Niebuhr's scale ("transformer of culture"), it may in fact exemplify what James Davison Hunter describes, in his important book *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, as a "faithful presence" in the culture.

One can find Daniel's engaging approach to culture in the early church even after Tertullian's haunting question. About a century after Tertullian, St. Augustine drew upon Old Testament examples to develop his own view of the church transforming the culture. To understate the case, Augustine's stance on culture is complicated and not entirely consistent across the body of his work. Coming from a pagan background and schooled in rhetoric and philosophy outside of the Christian faith, Augustine understandably expressed opposition to many of the ideas and values that shaped his life before conversion. Nevertheless, Augustine seems to have been unable to help himself, despite his best efforts, to claim for the kingdom's purposes all wisdom and eloquence, regardless of where it might be found. Augustine is, of course, recognized for the undisputed claim that all truth is God's truth: "For all truth comes from the one who says, 'I am the truth.'" Later, in the same text, Augustine restates it this way: "A person who is a good and a true Christian should realize that truth belongs to his Lord, wherever it is found."⁷ In the same work, Augustine asserts that Christians can put the "Egyptian gold" of pagan philosophy and learning into the Lord's service as long as that "gold" is tested by Scripture to determine whether or not it truly is gold. For example, rhetorical skills such as those Augustine learned before his conversion could be employed, he argues, in the service of advancing truth: "It is not the aim of the eloquence or the intention of the speaker that the truths or the eloquence should in themselves produce delight; but the truths themselves, as they are revealed, do produce delight by virtue of being true."⁸ Augustine distinguishes here between eloquence for its own sake and eloquence in the service of truth. Thus, in appropriating the values and knowledge of his culture for the advancement of God's kingdom, Augustine clearly fits Niebuhr's description of a "transformer of culture" in that "he redirects, reinigorates, and regenerates that life of man, expressed in all human work . . ."⁹

In the eighth century, Alcuin of York, a scholar, poet, and abbot who served Charlemagne as master of the Palace School in France, echoed the

7. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 6, 47.

8. *Ibid.*, 64–65.

9. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 209.

question of Tertullian from centuries earlier, but this time focusing more narrowly on literature. In 797, concerned about a growing fascination among the monks of Lindisfarne with the legendary Norse warrior Ingeld, Alcuin wrote a letter to their bishop in Lindisfarne. In it he asked, “*Quid enim Hinieldus cum Christo?*” or “What has Ingeld to do with Christ?”¹⁰ Apparently, Alcuin thought the monks’ time would be more profitably spent on things other than the heroes of story and legend.

This line of thinking about literature has continued to thread its way through the fabric of church history. One of the most notable purveyors of such antagonism—a view of literature that exemplifies what Niebuhr describes as “Christ against culture”—is the seventeenth-century British Puritan and theologian Richard Baxter. In a sermon titled “The Sinfulness of Flesh-Pleasing,” Baxter cautioned Christians to “take heed of a delight in romances, playbooks, feigned stories, useless news, which corrupt the mind, and waste your time.”¹¹ Baxter is most famous for this additional advice on reading:

Make careful choice of the books which you read: let the holy scriptures ever have the pre-eminence, and, next to them, those solid, lively, heavenly treatises which best expound and apply the scriptures, and next, credible histories, especially of the Church . . . but take heed of false teachers who would corrupt your understandings.¹²

Presumably, in following Baxter’s prescription, after reading the Bible, followed by commentaries, church history, and then other history, there wouldn’t be much, if any, time left for plays and poetry.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, British evangelicals, following in the footsteps of their Puritan forebears, offered objections that were slightly less severe than Baxter’s but otherwise similar. By this time, the literary form making the most gains in popularity and availability was the newly developing genre of the novel. Even in cases when objections to the novel’s content (more often than not, tales of illicit and/or romantic love) didn’t apply, evangelicals of the period expressed a number of anxieties over the activity of novel reading generally. Numerous sources voiced concern over the novel’s tendency to weaken the mind’s ability to read more serious material, produce too much familiarity with the secular world, and simply to waste time. Furthermore, echoing earlier concerns of Puritans,

10. Mitchell and Robinson. *Beowulf*, 35.

11. Baxter, “Sinfulness of Flesh-Pleasing.”

12. *Ibid.*,

evangelicals were leery of all fictional tales because, being untrue, they were therefore lies.¹³

A Brighter Cord in the Tapestry of Church History

Yet, despite the hand wringing by believers across the ages toward literature, another brighter cord is woven into the tapestry of church history by those who view human culture—even pagan literature—as part of the fullness of God’s world.

The first such thread perhaps comes from the Apostle Paul, who, in the famous passage of Acts 17, quoted the pagan Greek poet Aratus—a student of stoicism of the late fourth century BC—in order to point the philosophers debating on the Areopagus toward the one true God.¹⁴ As a result, the passage relates, some were saved. Like Daniel in the Old Testament, as described above, Paul saw the relationship of the church and culture as one in which the church is empowered to engage the culture. In order to quote Aratus as he did, Paul clearly had not only exposed himself to the ideas and works of the pagan culture around him (and perhaps this took place before his conversion to Christianity), but he was conversant enough with them even after his conversion to quote a passage from memory which—although not connected in any way to the God of Scripture—he could use to draw connections between it and the one true God.

Some centuries later, a masterpiece of Old English literature, *Beowulf*, exemplifies, perhaps, what Niebuhr describes as a synthesis of Christ and culture. While insufficient records exist to delineate the exact progression of this pagan heroic tale into a Christianized text, the evidence suggests that at some point a poem that emerged out of the Anglo-Saxon oral tradition was later transcribed by a monk (very few outside the church were literate at the time) and embellished with enough Christian elements to turn what was once a pagan folk epic into one of the earliest written expressions of Christianity in English. While the Christian embellishment is not enough entirely to overwhelm its deeply pagan worldview, *Beowulf* stands as one of the earliest examples in English of the power of the gospel to transform a culture.

13. For more on this subject, see my dissertation, “Hannah More and the Evangelical Influence on the English Novel,” 85–121.

14. Yet, apparently even this passage has been used to argue against engagement with the culture. Harry Lee Poe reports that some theologians have argued that the relatively low number of converts recorded in Acts 17 is evidence that Paul’s approach was wrong. Poe, *Christianity in the Academy*, 25.

In the sixteenth century, Sir Philip Sidney formulated one of the earliest expressions of a poetics—that branch of literary criticism that addresses the nature, forms, and underlying laws of all literature (not just poetry)—that is distinctly Christian. Sidney argued in his *Defence of Poetry* (published posthumously in 1595) that the “end of all earthly learning [is] virtuous action” and that of all the sources of learning, the poet is “monarch” of all “sciences”¹⁵ (*science* here is meant in the etymological sense of its Latin root, *knowledge*). In other words, what Sidney boldly asserts is that poetry, as the highest and greatest means of knowledge, is the best spur to virtue. In further describing the poet as, in making poetry, giving honor to “the heavenly Maker of that maker,”¹⁶ Sidney’s defense of poetry (and, effectively, all literary art) is rooted not in pragmatic or utilitarian terms, but in the very doctrine of creation. The goodness of poetry includes its practical effects (“virtuous action”), but is not limited to pragmatic value: simply reflecting the Maker through making makes the act of creating literary art good.

In the century following Sidney, the Puritan poet and pamphleteer John Milton offered a defense of literature grounded in Christian liberty.¹⁷ In his 1644 *Areopagitica*, a passionate argument against the Licensing Act of the Puritan-led Parliament (and one of the precursors to the prohibition in American jurisprudence of prior restraint), Milton defends a free press on a specifically Christian basis. In so doing, Milton distinguishes between innocence (which does not know evil), and virtue (which is the intentional choosing of good over evil), and he suggests that the best way to be acquainted with evil (which in the context of *Areopagitica* is particularly heretical doctrine) is vicarious exposure through liberal (“promiscuous”) reading. He writes:

As therefore the state of man now is; what wisdom can there be to choose, what continence to forbear without the knowledge of evil? He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true warfaring Christian. I cannot praise a fugitive and cloister’d virtue, unexercis’d & unbreath’d, that never sallies out and sees

15. Sidney, *Defence of Poetry*, 29, 39.

16. *Ibid.*, 24.

17. As a Puritan living during the period of bloody civil war that followed the English Reformation, Milton’s staunch anti-Catholicism is at the root of his strenuous advocacy for liberty of conscience, Catholicism being linked by Milton and most English Puritans with political and religious tyranny.

her adversary but slinks out of the race, where that immortal
garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat.¹⁸

In the treatise, Milton focuses mainly on the publication of political and theological writings. Although a great poet himself, he was concerned in this work primarily with the free expression of ideas and not a defense of literature as a form of art and expression of culture. Nevertheless, his standing—having written that great Christian epic poem *Paradise Lost*—as one of the greatest English poets of all time speaks even more pointedly to his view about the relationship between church and culture.

Both Sidney and Milton build upon the foundation established by Daniel, Paul, and Augustine—a foundation for a bold Christian confidence in engaging with the culture outside the church. In combination, the principles articulated by Sidney and Milton create a strong case for the value of literature in particular, not only to human culture but to Christian culture and Christian individuals as well. Sidney's defense focuses primarily on the value of literature as a *form* of art. In *Defence of Poetry*, Sidney argues that poetry is superior to both history and philosophy. While history describes what was, poetry is more philosophical than history because it is not limited only to what has happened but expresses what could and should happen. While philosophy describes what ought to be (rather than what was), poetry can add to that concrete examples of what should be. Thus, according to Sidney, poetry combines the virtues of history and philosophy in being able to depict concretely what ought to be.¹⁹ While Sidney concerns his argument with poetry (and, by extension, all literary forms), Milton's argument for a free press focuses not on the form of a text, but its *content*—even when that content contains the most dangerous ideas in the world: heresy. Milton argued:

Truth is compar'd in Scripture to a streaming fountain. If her waters flow not in a perpetuall progression, they sick'n into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition. A man may be a heretick in the truth; and if he believe things only because his Pastor sayes so, or the Assembly so determines, without knowing other reason, though his belief be true, yet the very truth he holds, becomes his heresie.²⁰

Here Milton claims that if one holds to true ideas simply because nothing else has come along to challenge those ideas, those true ideas are, in fact,

18. Milton, *Areopagitica*, 1006.

19. Sidney, *Defence of Poetry*, 29–32.

20. Milton, *Areopagitica*, 1015.

heresy. The implication is that exposure to oppositional ideas is necessary to a vigorous Christian faith.

The Humanities and Christian Learning Today

Yet, oppositional ideas are exactly what some Christians—parents, pastors, and educators among them—are most nervous about exposing themselves to, let alone those under their care. Even in Christian institutions of higher learning, this tension between church and culture can shift—in either direction—toward an unhealthy balance. Common assumptions, in fact, hold that faith tends to weaken as a result of a college education. But some recent studies show that the situation is a bit more complicated. It seems that some college environments foster an increase in faith while others are linked to a weakening of belief. But which colleges do which is a bit surprising. Research is showing that among college students it is in the secular institutions where faith is more likely to grow and strengthen. The sociological (as well as the biblical) evidence seems to suggest that a holistic approach to faith—one that engages all of life—cultivates a more robust faith.

In a study published in 2005, “How Corrosive Is College to Religious Faith and Practice?,” Mark D. Regnerus and Jeremy E. Uecker take on earlier findings that students typically experience a decline in faith during their college years. The authors do concede that the “assumption that the religious involvement of young people diminishes when they attend college is of course true: 64 percent of those currently enrolled in a traditional four-year institution have curbed their attendance habits.” But the study goes beyond the typical findings to compare this statistic with that of these students’ peers that did not go to college. Among their peers who did not go to college, 76 percent reported a decrease in attendance at their places of worship. Apparently, the majority of people in the college age bracket experience a decline in faith, but those who attend college are less likely to experience the decline than those who don’t go to college. The study further found:

Whereas 20 percent of those that did not pursue college renounced any and all religious affiliation, only 13 percent of four-year college students had done the same. Thus, the assumption that a college education is the *reason* for such a decline gathers little support. . . . Simply put: Higher education is *not* the enemy of religiosity. Instead, young people who avoid college altogether display a more precipitous drop in their religious participation.

Yet, as this and other studies show, some college students are clearly experiencing a weakening of faith. And surprisingly, it may be the students at the Bible colleges and Christian schools more so than their counterparts at secular institutions.

A 2010 essay by Edward Dutton in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Finding Jesus at College,” argues that, in fact, “there is a correlation between the kind of college [students] attend and their likelihood of developing a radical-conservative religious worldview.” However, it turns out that the type of college most likely to produce such a faith, the author’s research found, is not the Christian institution, but rather the elite Ivy League and Oxford variety.²¹ Dutton’s findings confirm earlier research showing that

Christian students who attend Christian colleges tend to become more liberal during the process of their education. They enroll as fervent evangelicals and leave, in many cases, far less ardent in their faith. The reason is that Bible colleges, unlike many more-prestigious universities, lack a central quality that encourages the formation of fundamentalist student groups and religious experiences.

What is this central quality? According to Dutton, that central quality is the sort of “identity-challenging rite of passage” that occurs in a heterogeneous environment and serves to strengthen one’s faith commitment. In contrast to their counterparts at faith-based institutions who, surrounded almost uniformly by like-minded peers, exhibit within such “homogeneity” “a more lenient attitude” toward unbiblical ideas and lifestyles, Dutton found that “Christian students who attend Ivy League and other respected institutions tend to leave more fervently evangelical than when they began college. Such universities tend to challenge students’ faith, prompting them to create a ‘fortress of identity’ to preserve their sense of who they are.”

A flaccid faith does not or cannot fulfill the exhortation of 1 Thessalonians 5:21–22: “test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil” (ESV). The verbs in these verses are muscular verbs, not passive or weak. Through literature, art, and other cultural artifacts, Christians can be exposed to worldviews that oppose the biblical worldview and see pagan philosophies fleshed out and enacted in the lives of those who have followed them, both in history and in literature, and thus put these ideas to the test.

Even more importantly, if, as James Davison Hunter claims, “Culture is far more profound at the level of *imagination* than at the level of

21. Dutton, “Finding Jesus at College.”

argument,”²² then Christians can do no better than to acquaint themselves with works of the imagination in order to engage the culture. Christians who are conversant with the prevailing cultural influences and ideologies are not only better equipped to exert their own influence on the culture, but, through the constant exercise of their faith in confronting these ideas, to develop a more muscular faith.

Reflection Questions

1. What are the benefits of a humanities education to a society overwhelmingly preoccupied with pragmatism?
2. Who/what constitute the beneficiaries of the properly balanced relationship between the church and the culture?
3. The respective views of Daniel and Tertullian toward culture differ greatly. In what ways do they differ? Where would their views fall on Richard Niebuhr’s scale of cultural engagement?
4. What answer does Augustine provide as the distinction between eloquence for its own sake and eloquence in service of the truth?
5. What is the value of studying secular literature, art, and other cultural artifacts? How does this correlate to 1 Thessalonians 5:21–22?

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