
CHAPTER FOUR

The Power of Christian Traditions

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HOW IS IT POSSIBLE FOR CHRISTIAN COLLEGES AND universities to mature into first-rate institutions of higher learning while, at the same time, living out of the faith traditions that gave them birth? In the field of Christian higher education, no question could be more urgent. Throughout the course of Western history, numerous institutions of higher learning originally founded to serve both the life of the mind and the Christian faith have sloughed off their Christian underpinnings as part of their attempt to become academically respectable.

This pattern does not imply that Christian faith and the life of the mind are fundamentally incompatible. But it does suggest that Christian educators have often failed to ask in meaningful ways, "What is there in the Christian faith that can sustain serious intellectual inquiry and the life of the mind?"

We are not asking, "How is it possible for Chris-

tian faith and the life of the mind to merely coexist?" If we frame the question in those terms, we are beaten before we begin, for if we ask about mere coexistence, we confess — quite wrongly, I believe — that Christian faith and serious intellectual inquiry are not compatible. If we frame the question in terms of coexistence, therefore, we have set ourselves up for failure and can surely anticipate that when our institutions achieve the levels of academic excellence toward which they aspire, their faith dimensions will inevitably wither.

We are not asking, then, about mere coexistence. Instead, we are asking how we can genuinely *live out of* our faith commitments. Put another way, is it possible to use the faith commitments of our colleges and universities as the *foundation* for academic growth and maturity? Or put another way still, is it possible to embrace serious intellectual inquiry precisely *because of* our Christian commitments, not *in spite of* those commitments?

I am convinced that the Christian faith can indeed sustain the kind of work in which Christian scholars are engaged. But for that to happen, each Christian scholar must begin to ask in a careful and systematic way, "What is there about the Christian faith, what is there about my own faith tradition, or traditions with which I am acquainted, that can genuinely sustain the life of the mind?"

We must now explore that question with reference to the Roman Catholic tradition, on the one hand, and

the three great Reformation traditions, on the other: Reformed, Anabaptist, and Lutheran.

A Roman Catholic Model

When we ask how the Roman Catholic tradition can sustain the life of the mind, the first thing we must notice is the diversity that characterizes Catholic institutions of higher learning. After all, Catholic colleges and universities were established not by the church *per se* but by a variety of religious orders that bring to the task of higher education a diversity of emphases. Nonetheless, we find in all Catholic colleges and universities certain uniquely Catholic dimensions that can sustain the life of the mind.

The first characteristic of the Catholic tradition to which we should point is its *rich intellectual heritage*. The truth is, the Catholic intellectual heritage is so vast, so deep, and so broad that many Catholic intellectuals may find it strange to ask, "How can Christian faith sustain the life of the mind?" From Justin to Augustine to Loneragan, from Origen to Anselm to Teilhard, from Aquinas to Newman to Küng, one finds here a stunning array of intellectual resources to which, in fact, no other Christian tradition in the Western world can compare.¹ As Notre Dame's James Turner has written,

1. Pope John Paul II both celebrates and seeks to extend the

We are talking, after all, about nearly two thousand years of human intellectual effort, of grappling with the problems of human psychology, social organization, political power, and aesthetic imagination, of thinking and writing by some enormously gifted people, including at least two individuals, Augustine and Aquinas, who rank among the most profound, prolific, and creative minds of all eras.

But the most striking aspect of the Catholic intellectual heritage is its rich diversity. As Turner notes,

This is no simple corpus; it is rife with disputation, disagreement, development, divergence. Heterogeneity and many-sidedness are among the great strengths of the Catholic intellectual traditions, one of the reasons why they have provided such rich resources for human reflection, so flexible and open-ended a source of possibilities for understanding.²

Catholic intellectual tradition in his encyclical letter, *Fides et Ratio* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1998).

2. James Turner, "Catholic Intellectual Traditions and Contemporary Scholarship," a pamphlet published by the Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism, University of Notre Dame, pp. 10 and 5.

In this context, Protestants who imagine that faith/learning integration is a contemporary Protestant project are simply mistaken. Instead, the most widely applied program for integrating faith and learning in twentieth-century America was the Neoscholastic revival that did so much to shape Catholic higher education from the 1920s into the 1960s.³

If we ask about specific theological motifs that can nurture the life of the mind, the *sacramental principle* looms large in importance. This venerable Catholic doctrine points to the fact that the natural world and even elements of human culture can serve as vehicles by which God mediates his grace to human beings. This conviction allows Catholic educators to take the world seriously on its own terms and to interact with the world as it is.

If, as we shall see, some Protestant educators argue that the world and the contents of human culture are fundamentally secular if not brought under the sovereign sway of the Lord Jesus Christ, many Catholic educators, affirming the sacramental principle, take sharp issue with that contention. Alice Gallin, former executive director of the Association for Catholic Colleges and Universities, for example, has argued that "'secular' is not simply nor always the opposite of 'sacred,'

3. On the Neoscholastic revival, see Philip Gleason, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 105-23.

for in a Christian sacramental view of reality, the secular has a legitimate role and one that is congruent with and not opposed to faith or religion."⁴

This is why David O'Brien of the College of the Holy Cross points to one of the documents of Vatican II, *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World*, as a virtual "magna carta" for Catholic colleges and universities. It functions in this way, O'Brien argues, since it affirms "the study of the human sciences, respect for non-Catholic, secular culture, dialogue with those beyond the church, and service to society," all in the context of the sacramental principle.⁵ Two other Catholic educators — Emmanuel Renner and Hilary Thimmesch, writing in *Models for Christian Higher Education* — argue that "secularization could very well mean sacramentalization to those who recognized the presence of God in the world."⁶

In a word, the sacramental principle sustains the

4. Alice Gallin, "American Church Related Higher Education: Comparison and Contrast," ACHE presentation, December 29, 1992, p. 1.

5. David O'Brien, *From the Heart of the American Church: Catholic Higher Education and American Culture* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994), p. 49.

6. Emmanuel Renner and Hilary Thimmesch, "Faith and Learning at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University," in *Models for Christian Higher Education*, ed. Richard T. Hughes and William B. Adrian (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 37.

life of the mind by placing a very great value both on the natural world and on human culture, and by reminding us that these realms possess their own intrinsic legitimacy, whether transformed by the rule of Christ or not.

The sacramental principle does not imply that the Roman Catholic tradition possesses no serious doctrine of sin, for of course it does. Nor does it deny the possibility of genuine secularization. But it does maintain that one may well find the presence of God both in the created order and in the contents of human culture. For that reason, the notion of an inevitable slippery slope to secularization makes far less sense in a Roman Catholic context than might be the case in some other Christian traditions.

The third characteristic that allows the Catholic tradition to sustain the life of the mind is the *universality of the Catholic faith*. As a global church, Catholicism embraces believers from every corner of the world, people who hold a variety of political ideologies, who speak a myriad of tongues, who represent virtually every nationality in the world, and who reflect every social and economic class on the planet today.

The universality of the Catholic tradition *should* permit the Catholic university to prize pluralism and diversity and to find a legitimate place at the table for every conversation partner. Many have argued this case, but no one has done so more effectively than Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, president emeritus of the Univer-

sity of Notre Dame. "The Catholic university," Hesburgh writes,

must be a *bridge* across all the chasms that separate modern people from each other: the gaps between young and old, men and women, rich and poor, black and white, believer and unbeliever, potent and weak, east and west, material and spiritual, scientist and humanist, developed and less developed, and all the rest. To be such a mediator, the Catholic university, as universal, must be engaged with, and have an interest in, both edges of every gulf, must understand each, encompass each in its total community and build a bridge of understanding and love.⁷

Indeed, the University of Notre Dame grounds its commitment to diversity and inclusion precisely in its theological tradition. Accordingly, the officers of the university released in 1997 the following statement, which now appears in all major university publications.

The University of Notre Dame strives for a spirit of inclusion among the members of this com-

7. Theodore Hesburgh, "The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University," in *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University*, ed. Hesburgh (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), pp. 9-11.

munity for distinct reasons articulated in our Christian tradition. We prize the uniqueness of all persons as God's creatures. We welcome all people, regardless of color, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social or economic class, and nationality, for example, precisely because of Christ's calling to treat others as we desire to be treated.

Finally, we must consider a theme that Monika Hellwig describes as *the communitarian nature of redemption*. At its core, this notion holds that the church is not simply the hierarchical magisterium; instead, the church is comprised of *all* the people of God, scattered throughout the world, who together form this community of faith. This means that the life of the mind, if understood only in cognitive terms, is less than adequate in a Catholic university. Instead, as Hellwig notes, the life of the mind must translate itself into

genuine bonds of friendship and mutual respect and support [which] are envisaged as the core of the educational enterprise, because not only book learning but human formation for leadership and responsibility in all walks of life are sought through the community experience of higher education.⁸

8. Monika Hellwig, "What Can the Roman Catholic Tradition

Precisely because it takes "seriously the unity of the human race," the communitarian dimension suggests that faculties in Catholic colleges and universities should place scholarship and teaching in the service of justice and peace for all the peoples of the world. To a very great extent, many Catholic institutions have done just that. As David O'Brien observes, "president after president [in the world of Catholic higher education] has repeated the words of the American bishops insisting that pursuit of justice and human dignity is an essential work of a Catholic institution."⁹

A Reformed Model

On the Protestant side of the ledger, we begin with the Reformed tradition since that model is so widely known and embraced in so many Protestant circles of church-related higher education. Admittedly, the Reformed tradition today is hardly monolithic, embracing as it does a variety of Presbyterian denominations, a variety of Dutch Reformed denominations, and several other communions — including the Southern Baptist Convention — that descend in one way or another from the work of John Calvin.

But in the world of Reformed Christianity, only one tradition has developed a thoroughgoing understanding of how Christian faith can sustain the life of the mind. For that reason, the following description will focus especially on a theoretical understanding that has its deepest roots at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, an institution related to the Christian Reformed Church.¹⁰ Though birthed at Calvin

10. Calvin College issued an important statement on the

Contribute to Christian Higher Education?" in *Models*, ed. Hughes and Adrian, p. 21.

9. O'Brien, *From the Heart of the American Church*, pp. 86-87.

College, this vision has subsequently exerted an extraordinary impact on evangelical Protestant colleges and universities throughout the country.

If we ask, "In what ways can the Reformed tradition sustain the life of the mind?" the answer has everything to do with the original vision of John Calvin. Simply put, Calvin sought to transform Geneva, Switzerland into a model kingdom of God. To achieve this goal, he sought to place every facet of Genevan life — its religion, its politics, its music, and its art — squarely under the sovereignty of God. Ever since those early days, this same vision has motivated Calvinists to bring all human life and culture under the sovereign sway of God's control. Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch statesman and philosopher, expressed this vision well: "There is not a square inch on the whole plane of human existence over which Christ, who is Lord over all, does not proclaim: 'This is Mine!'"¹¹

If all of this sounds terribly theocratic, we must also recall that the doctrine of the sovereignty of God can also move in very democratic directions. For ex-

meaning of Christian education in the Reformed genre in *Christian Liberal Arts Education: Report of the Calvin College Curriculum Study Committee* (Grand Rapids: Calvin College and Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970).

11. Abraham Kuyper, "Souvereiniteit in Eigen Kring" (Amsterdam: Kruyt, 1880), p. 32, cited in James D. Bratt and Ronald A. Wells, "Piety and Progress: A History of Calvin College," in *Models*, ed. Hughes and Adrian, p. 143.

ample, the early French Calvinist Philip Mornay appealed to this doctrine in his attempt to undermine the absolute power of kings and place power in the hands of the people. Likewise, it is no accident that the vast majority of the American patriots who sought to resist the tyranny of King George III were Calvinists who firmly believed that if God alone is sovereign, no human being has the right to tyrannize his or her fellow mortals.

Still, in the world of Reformed Christianity, the doctrine of the sovereignty of God often finds expression in the attempt to transform human culture into the kingdom of God on earth. This is precisely the vision that sustains the life of the mind in places like Calvin College and in the various evangelical institutions that Calvin College has influenced. Educators who rely on this vision seek to place the entire curriculum — and every course within the curriculum — under the sovereignty of God. According to this vision, all learning should be Christian in both purpose and orientation. For this reason, Reformed educators employ three fundamental concepts that underscore these objectives.

The first and most important of those concepts is a notion popularized by Kuyper, the notion of a *Christian worldview*. As Albert Wolters points out, Kuyper argued that "Calvinism was not just a theology or a system of ecclesiastical polity but a complete worldview with implications for all of life, implications which

must be worked out and applied in such areas as politics, art, and scholarship." With such a worldview, Kuyper believed, Christianity could provide broad cultural leadership in the nineteenth century and compete head to head with other perspectives like socialism or Darwinism or positivism.¹² With their insistence on a Christian worldview, Reformed educators contributed to the world of higher education an awareness of the power of presuppositions long before the rise of post-modernist theory.

Central to the notion of a Christian worldview stands the second conviction, the notion that *all truth is God's truth*. By this phrase, Reformed educators mean to say that God is the author not only of our faith, but also of every facet of the world in which we live. If this is true, they insist, then there can be no discrepancy between Christian convictions and authentic knowledge regarding other aspects of human life. It is therefore possible to understand every facet of the natural sciences, of the social sciences, and of religion and the humanities in the light of Christian faith without running the risk of intellectual dishonesty.

It is precisely this conviction that breathes life into the third concept employed by Reformed educators:

12. Albert Wolters, "On the Idea of Worldview and Its Relation to Philosophy," in *Stained Glass: Worldviews and Social Science*, ed. Paul A. Marshall, Sander Griffioen, and Richard J. Mouw (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1989), p. 20.

the integration of faith and learning. Because all truth is God's truth, all learning should be integrated into a coherent understanding of reality, informed by explicitly Christian convictions. No one has expressed the theological rationale for this perspective better than Arthur Holmes in his classic book, *The Idea of a Christian College*. There Holmes argues,

When the apostle writes that in Christ "are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3), he refers . . . to [the fact that] Jesus Christ is . . . Creator and Lord of every created thing. All our knowledge of anything comes into focus around that fact. We see nature, persons, society, and the arts and sciences in proper relationship to their divine Creator and Lord. . . . The truth is a coherent whole by virtue of the common focus that ties it all into one.¹³

It is incumbent, therefore, upon Reformed educators to integrate explicitly Christian convictions into every branch of learning and, more than that, to discover those common, Christocentric threads that transform all fields of learning into one coherent whole.¹⁴

13. Arthur Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 17.

14. While many Reformed scholars employ the "integration of faith and learning" language, not every Reformed thinker agrees

Finally, this triad of ideas — a *Christian worldview*, *all truth is God's truth*, and *the integration of faith and learning* — sustains another notion that is critical to at least one version of the Reformed understanding of reality: the notion of *secularization*. One finds in the Reformed tradition two perspectives on this theme. First, Calvin himself argued that “the Spirit of God [is] the sole fountain of truth,” whether one finds that truth in the secular sphere or in divine revelation.¹⁵ Extending this line of thought, many Calvinists today argue for a doctrine of “common grace.” According to this understanding, God sustains a significant measure of truth, beauty, and justice, even in the midst of a fallen and secularized world.

At the same time, following another impulse in Calvin, many contemporary Reformed thinkers view the secular as a hindrance to the Christian presence in the world and therefore seek to overcome it by trans-

with this formulation. For example, Carl E. Zylstra, president of Dordt College in Iowa, argues that the language of “integration” implies an artificial connectedness. What is needed, he suggests, is language that conveys the real objective of Reformed education, namely, *rooting learning in Christian faith*. For this reason, he suggests the phrase, “faith-based learning,” as a preferable ideal. “Faith-Based Learning: The Conjunction in Christian Scholarship,” *Pro Rege*, 26 (September 1997): 1-5.

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.2.15, in John T. McNeill and Ford Lewis Battles, eds., *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), pp. 273-75.

forming it into the kingdom of God.¹⁶ From this perspective, secularization occurs when there is even one dimension of human life that escapes the sovereignty of God, or when we fail to bring all of reality under the umbrella of a distinctly Christian worldview. Because the possibility of secularization is so real in this context, the notion of a *slippery slope* is a metaphor that many in this tradition take very seriously. If one hopes to avoid the slippery slope toward secularization, therefore, the integration of faith and learning around a distinctly Christian worldview becomes absolutely imperative.

This aspect of the Reformed tradition stands in stark relief when we compare it with Lutheranism, on the one hand, and Catholicism, on the other. For if some in the Reformed tradition argue that the slippery slope to secularization is a real and present danger, many in the Lutheran and Catholic traditions acknowledge that the secular can often serve as a legitimate vehicle of the grace of God.

Clearly, the Reformed tradition sustains the life of the mind by integrating faith and learning around a distinctly Christian worldview. One can identify at least three great strengths of this perspective, whether one subscribes to the Reformed worldview or not.

16. See Nicholas Wolterstorff's important discussion of the role of the secular in Reformed thought in *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 12 and 40-41.

First, it overcomes fragmentation with its holistic approach to learning. Second, it frankly acknowledges the reality and power of worldviews and presuppositions. And third, it provides students with a clearly defined standpoint from which they can discriminate between competing perspectives and worldviews. And if one cares about relating faith to learning at all, one is likely to find the Reformed emphasis on the sovereignty of God over the entire learning process extraordinarily compelling.

But to what extent does the Reformed perspective encourage academic freedom and genuine interaction with pluralism and diversity?¹⁷ Put another way, to what extent does the Reformed tradition encourage the scholar to break through the particularity of his or her own religious vision and to engage other visions in serious and compelling ways?

There are two answers to that question. First, if a given scholar embraces the Reformed worldview, and is willing to understand all reality from the standpoint of that perspective, she or he will experience substantial academic freedom. Arthur Holmes, among others, has made this point abundantly clear.

17. For a superb discussion of the question of academic freedom within a Reformed context, see Anthony J. Diekema, *Academic Freedom & Christian Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

Academic freedom is valuable only when there is a prior commitment to the truth. And commitment to the truth is fully worthwhile only when that truth exists in One who transcends both the relativity of human perspectives and the fears of human concern.¹⁸

On the other hand, while the Reformed perspective allows the scholar substantial freedom to search for penultimate truths within the context of an all-embracing Christian worldview, the Reformed perspective is always susceptible to the twin risks of triumphalism and distortion. A hypothetical case in point might be a class in world religions. If, for example, one were to study Buddhism from the standpoint of a Christian worldview, one might easily run the risk of distorting Buddhism into something it is not or debunking Buddhism in favor of a triumphalist Christian perspective.

And yet, the Reformed tradition contains at its core a powerful sentiment that can undermine triumphalism. That sentiment is simply the historic Reformed insistence on the finitude of humankind and of all human thinking and constructions. Arthur Holmes points squarely to that conviction when he writes, "Truth is not yet fully known; every academic discipline is subject to change, correction, and expansion."

18. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, p. 69.

sion — even theology.” Holmes further notes that even worldview construction must take on tentative dimensions. A Christian worldview, he argues, is merely “exploratory, not a closed system worked out once and for all but an endless undertaking. . . . It remains open-ended because the task is so vast that to complete it would require the omniscience of God.”¹⁹

And yet, the notion that God has called upon his saints to renovate the world is such an overpowering theme in the Reformed tradition that the profoundly Calvinist theme of human finitude and brokenness can sometimes get lost in the shuffle.

A Mennonite Model

When we turn from the Reformed to the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition, we quickly discover that we have entered into a frame of reference radically different from the Reformed perspective. The first thing we notice is that the starting point for Mennonites has more to do with holistic living than with cognition and more to do with ethics than with intellect. One faculty member at Goshen College, a Mennonite college in Indiana, summarized very nicely the difference between the Reformed and Mennonite models when she observed that if the Reformed model is fundamentally

19. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, pp. 58-59 and 66.

cerebral and transforms living by thinking, the Mennonite model transforms thinking by living.

This vision represents a challenge to those who think of higher learning exclusively in cerebral terms. Perhaps for that reason, critics have suggested that the Mennonite tradition offers no serious model for developing the enterprise of Christian higher education. A few years ago, I spoke on the campus of a midwestern church-related college on the topic, “Models for Christian Higher Education.” I described my conception of a Catholic model, a Lutheran model, a Reformed model, and finally a Mennonite model for the task of Christian higher education. When I finished my presentation, a gentleman noted for his rigorous scholarship rose to ask, “Why do you speak of a Mennonite model? Mennonites have no serious model at all.” Months later, another critic of the Mennonite tradition shared with me his conviction that education is primarily a matter of the head. “But Mennonites,” he lamented, “focus on hands and heart.”

Mennonites do indeed “focus on hands and heart,” but instead of constituting a liability, this emphasis is one of their greatest strengths. For when Mennonites “focus on hands and heart,” they remind us that human life is more than cognition. They therefore help us to see that higher education in the Christian genre must be multifaceted and holistic, helping students to develop every aspect of their being, not simply their minds.

Yet, if we assume that by focusing on hands and

heart, Mennonites neglect the life of the mind, we are badly mistaken. Mennonites prize the life of the mind, but they rarely divorce cognition from lifestyle commitments, grounded in Christian faith. More precisely, Mennonites begin their task by seeking to implement a vision of discipleship that takes its cue from the radical teachings of Jesus. They take seriously Jesus' words when he counseled his followers to abandon self in the service of others and especially in the service of the poor, or when he charged his disciples to practice humility, simplicity, and nonviolence. Theirs is a radical vision, to be sure, and one that stands almost entirely out of sync with the values of the larger culture.

One who is not accustomed to the Mennonite frame of reference might well ask what this perspective has to do with the life of the mind. How can unconventional virtues like these possibly sustain the values we associate with the academy? Put another way, how does one move from Christocentric living to critical and pluralistic thinking?

We can answer that question in four ways. First, we must recall that sixteenth-century Anabaptism originated in the very womb of dissent. For well over a thousand years, Europeans had taken for granted the notion of a state church. No one could imagine a stable society without it. And the one rite that maintained the state church was the sacrament of infant baptism. For hundreds of years since the days of Theodosius the Great in the late fourth century, every infant had been

baptized within days of its birth, and in that way every child — and as a result, every person in society — was both citizen and Christian. Church and state were virtually coterminous.

The problem was one of commitment. How could one speak of discipleship in a church that embraced not only saints, but also thieves, murderers, liars, adulterers, and those who had no serious concern with Christian faith at all? This was the problem that became inescapably clear to a small group of men and women in Zurich, Switzerland, in the early 1520s. These people had read the New Testament and understood full well the radical teachings of Jesus. They therefore longed for a church composed only of people willing to commit themselves to lives of radical discipleship. But this would mean the rejection of infant baptism in favor of the baptism of believing adults.

The Zurich city council discussed this proposal, but finally rejected it with the following affirmation:

Therefore all those who have recently left their children unbaptized must have them baptized within eight days. Whoever does not want to do this must leave our town, jurisdiction and domain with his wife, children and property, or await further action against him.

Undaunted, a small group of dissenters met in the home of Felix Manz on January 21, 1525. Their position

was both simple and clear: they must obey God rather than men. Accordingly,

After the prayer, George Cajacob arose and asked Conrad [Grebel] to baptize him, for the sake of God, with the true Christian baptism upon his faith and knowledge. And when he knelt down with that request and desire, Conrad baptized him. . . .

Following his baptism, George of the House of Jacob baptized all the others present. In that way, the Anabaptist movement was begun. As the *Hutterite Chronicle* notes, "Therewith began the separation from the world and its evil works."

The Zurich city council responded quickly. On March 7, 1526, the council proclaimed, "Whoever hereafter baptizes someone will be apprehended by our Lords and, according to this present decree, be drowned without mercy."²⁰ Within a few years, virtually everyone who had met in Felix Manz's home on the night of January 21, 1525, had been executed. The repression quickly spread. Catholics, Lutherans, Zwinglians, and Calvinists all agreed that seditious and he-

20. All these citations may be found in *The Reformation: A Narrative History Related by Contemporary Observers and Participants*, ed. Hans Hillerbrand (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 230-33.

retical people like these deserved extermination. Accordingly, thousands of Anabaptists met their deaths over the next ten to fifteen years. They were burned at the stake, run through by the sword, hanged, or tied in bags and dumped into the sea, accompanied by the taunt, "Here is your water, Anabaptist!"

I have told this story for one reason: In a world that prized lockstep uniformity, Anabaptists dared to question the status quo, and they paid for their convictions with their lives. It matters little that their dissent began with commitments of the heart, not with high-level theoretical formulations. Regardless of their starting point, sixteenth-century Anabaptists proved time and again their commitment to independent thinking. If a willingness to question conventional wisdom stands at the heart of the academic enterprise, then surely the Anabaptist heritage offers important resources for sustaining the life of the mind.

Second, Mennonites routinely counsel one another to abandon self in the interest of others and to abandon narrow nationalism in the interest of world citizenship. For this reason, service to other human beings, especially to the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed throughout the world, stands at the heart of the Mennonite witness. If we ask how a global service commitment like this can sustain the life of the mind, the answer is not hard to find. It is difficult to abandon self for the sake of others in any meaningful sense unless one is prepared to take seriously those "others,"

their cultural contexts, and their points of view. This means that Mennonite colleges, precisely because of their service orientation, are prepared to take seriously one of the cardinal virtues of the modern academy: the emphasis on pluralism and diversity.

If one wishes to see how this commitment might play itself out in an academic context, one need only consider the international studies program at Goshen College, where 80 percent of all students spend an entire semester in a third-world culture, serving and seeking to learn that country's history, traditions, and language.

Third, the Mennonite heritage offers its scholars an extraordinary basis from which to engage in critical thinking. The ability to engage in critical thinking depends on two factors. First, it requires a perspective or vantage point from which one can make critical and discriminating judgments. Second, one's frame of reference must be vulnerable to criticism even as the scholar employs that frame of reference as a basis for critiquing other perspectives. Put another way, one must have a place to stand, but at the same time, one must be able to break through the particularity of one's own intellectual foundation.

In the Mennonite tradition, the vantage point that allows one to make discriminating judgments is not a theological abstraction. Rather, it is a story-formed community. Story plays a powerful role in the Mennonite tradition. The story with which Mennonites most

identify is the story of the "little flock," the persecuted remnant, beginning with Stephen, the first Christian martyr, continuing through the history of the ancient and medieval periods, and finally erupting into a massive persecution of believers in the sixteenth century. Nor is this story a disembodied tale, passed down by oral tradition alone. Instead, it became incarnate in book form in 1660 when Thieleman J. van Braght released his *Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians, Who Baptized Only Upon Confession of Faith . . . , From the Time of Christ to the Year A.D. 1660*.²¹ Around this concept of the "little flock," Mennonites have built an extraordinary sense of community.

A story-formed community like this one could easily nurture a spirit of tribalism and thereby preclude critical thinking. In all honesty, we must admit that this is precisely what happens in some Mennonite and Amish circles. But the genius of the Mennonite story lies in its outward orientation. In other words, Mennonites remember what it means to be a persecuted remnant, but they also remember the commitments that brought on the persecutions: the embrace of nonresistance, the rejection of materialism, the commitment to the poor, and the passion to emulate Jesus in his ministry to "the least of these." So long as

21. Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror*, trans. Joseph F. Sohm (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1950).

this story-formed community reaches beyond itself to the stranger, to men and women of other cultures and other faith traditions, to orphans and widows and the despised of the earth — so long as this is true, the Mennonite story is a dialectical story. This story affirms a specific faith tradition — but precisely because of that tradition, the Mennonite story reaches beyond itself to men and women who tell stories completely different from the story celebrated in *The Martyrs Mirror*. For this reason, the Mennonite tradition holds the potential to nurture critical thinking in extraordinary ways.

Finally, because of its historic emphasis on humility, the Mennonite tradition prepares its scholars to embrace one of the cardinal virtues of the academic guild: the willingness to admit that my understandings are fragmentary and incomplete and that, indeed, I could be wrong.

For all these reasons, the Mennonite commitment to a life of radical discipleship can contribute in substantial ways to a vigorous life of the mind. Yet, we must also acknowledge that while the Mennonite commitment to stand with a radical Jesus is surely one of their greatest strengths, it can also be a serious liability in the arena of higher education. Ironically, the very commitment that has often inspired humility, dissent, and respect for cultural diversity can also inspire narrowness and sectarian exclusivity. This can happen in several ways. It can happen, for example, when Men-

nonites allow the radical teachings of Jesus to become little more than the substance of ethnic folkways, or when they take seriously the ethical mandates of Jesus without embracing with equal seriousness the grace of God whereby he forgives us *in spite of* our failings and shortcomings.

A Lutheran Model

We now must ask, “What resources does the Lutheran tradition offer for sustaining the life of the mind?” I want to begin this exploration by recalling two comments made to me by two different Lutheran professors in two different schools. A Lutheran teaching in a Reformed institution remarked, “When I first came to this school, I couldn’t hook onto this ‘worldview’ business that everyone talked about. At first I thought I was dumb. I finally decided I was just Lutheran.” A second person — this time a Lutheran teaching at a Lutheran institution — spoke of how exhausting it was to teach in a Lutheran context. When I asked why, he spoke of the constant interplay and tension he felt between the sacred and the secular. These two comments offer telling clues to the rich resources for sustaining the life of the mind that reside in the Lutheran heritage.

The first resource the Lutheran tradition offers for sustaining the life of the mind is Luther’s insistence on human finitude and the sovereignty of God. But hav-

ing made that affirmation, we must also recognize that Lutheran theology is not a static and self-contained orthodoxy that simply stands there, gazing at itself in all its narcissistic splendor. Nor is Lutheran theology linear or flat or one-dimensional. Nor can we rightly regard Luther's theology as an orthodoxy at all if we understand the word "orthodoxy" in its conventional sense. Instead, Luther offers us a dynamic and vibrant vision, always subverting any confidence we may have in our own ability to do the good, to tell the truth, or to get the story right in any full or final sense.

To speak of human finitude, then, is to point not only to our frailties and limitations or our estrangement from God, from other human beings, and even from ourselves; it also points to the depth and breadth of sin that undermines our ability to fully grasp or do the good. When Luther argues for God's sovereignty, therefore, his point is not that Christians should impose God's sovereignty on an unbelieving world. That would be an impossible absurdity. Rather, when Luther points to God's sovereignty, he always points at the very same time to human finitude. The sovereignty of God, therefore, means that I am not God, that my reason is inevitably impaired, and that my knowledge is always fragmentary and incomplete.

In the context of higher education and the life of the mind, this position means that every scholar must always confess that he or she could be wrong. Apart from this confession, there can be no serious life of the

mind, for only when we confess that we might be wrong can we engage in the kind of conversation that takes seriously other voices. And only when we confess that we might be wrong are we empowered to assess in critical ways our own theories, our own judgments, and our own understandings.

This does not mean that we have no confidence in what we know. We do indeed have confidence in what we know since we are made in the image of God. At the same time, our confidence must be tentative, not absolute, since we are victims of sin and the fall. Put another way, in the Lutheran tradition, doubt is always the partner of faith. In his marvelous book, *Exiles from Eden*, Mark Schwehn quotes James Gustafson to the effect that "we believe what we question and question what we believe."²² Or, as the father of the boy with the evil spirit confessed to Jesus in Mark 9, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief." In the Lutheran context, one who refuses to confess that he or she might be wrong has forfeited the ability to engage in critical scholarship and really has no legitimate place in the academy.

Because of the Lutheran insistence on human finitude, Lutheran theology always has the capacity to break through its own particularity. Authentic Lutheran

²² Mark Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 49.

ans can never absolutize their own perspectives, even their theological perspectives. They must always be re-assessing and rethinking, and they must always be in dialogue with themselves and with others.

But there is more, for if Lutherans *must* always be in dialogue with themselves and with others, it is equally true to say that they are *free* to be in dialogue with themselves and with others. For knowledge that one is justified by grace through faith grants the Christian scholar a profound sense of freedom to question his or her own best insights, to revise them, or to discard them and start again. This is the genius of the Lutheran tradition, and this is the first reason why the Lutheran worldview can sustain the life of the mind.

The second resource the Lutheran tradition offers for sustaining the life of the mind is Luther's notion of paradox, a theme that stands at the heart of Lutheran thought. Luther prized the theme of paradox, not because the notion of paradox was philosophically intriguing, but rather because he found the notion of paradox at the very heart of the Christian gospel. Indeed, the notion of paradox is deeply embedded in Luther's "theology of the cross." In this upside-down world of redemption, life emerges from the throes of death, the first are last and the last are first, and the Christian is the one who is simultaneously justified and a sinner. Because his "theology of the cross" stands at the very center of Luther's thought, so does the notion of paradox.

Of all the paradoxes that abound in the Lutheran vision, there is none more supportive of the life of the mind than Luther's notion of the two kingdoms. In his view, the Christian lives in the world and in the kingdom of God — or, put another way, in nature and in grace — and does so simultaneously. In fact, in Luther's vision, God employs the finite dimensions of the natural world as vehicles that convey his grace to human beings. As Luther often affirmed, *finitum capax infiniti* or, the finite is the bearer of the infinite. This means that both kingdoms — the kingdom of nature and the kingdom of grace — stand under the rule of God, each in its own way.

Precisely for this reason, Luther suggested that the distinction we often wish to make between the sacred and secular spheres may be fraught with far more ambiguity than we may wish to admit. Accordingly, Luther wrote in his 1520 treatise, "The Freedom of the Christian,"

It does not help the soul if the body is adorned with the sacred robes of priests or dwells in sacred places or is occupied with sacred duties or prays, fasts, abstains from certain kinds of foods, or does any work that can be done by the body and in the body. The righteousness and the freedom of the soul require something far different since the things which have been mentioned could be done by any wicked person. Such works

produce nothing but hypocrites. On the other hand, it will not harm the soul if the body is clothed in secular dress, dwells in unconsecrated places, eats and drinks as others do, does not pray aloud, and neglects to do all the above-mentioned things which hypocrites can do.²³

In a word, Luther is telling us here that the sacred and secular spheres overlap in remarkable ways and simply do not conform to the neat distinctions we wish to make from our finite angle of vision. At this point, the Lutheran tradition greatly resembles Catholic sacramental understandings.

The authentic Lutheran vision, therefore, never calls for Lutherans to transform the secular world into the kingdom of God as many in the Reformed tradition have advocated over the years. Nor does it call for Lutherans to separate from the world as the heirs of the Anabaptists sometimes seek to do. Instead, the Christian must reside in two worlds at one and the same time: the world of nature and the world of grace. In Luther's view, the Christian is therefore free to take seriously *both* the secular world *and* the kingdom of God.

This notion carries great implications for the life of the mind, especially if we think of the life of the

23. Martin Luther, "Freedom of the Christian," in *Martin Luther: Selections From His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Doubleday, 1962), p. 54.

mind as one that fosters *genuine conversation* in which all the voices at the table are taken seriously. In the context of Luther's two kingdoms, there is no need to superimpose on other voices a "Christian worldview." Nor is it important to "integrate faith and learning" around a distinctly Christian perspective. Rather, one lives in the midst of a paradox in which the sacred and the secular intersect and converge. Put another way, Luther's vision sustains conversation and dialogue and resists homogeneous conformity to imperialistic understandings. Luther's notion of the two kingdoms is therefore fully capable of sustaining a commitment to the Christian faith and a serious engagement with the secular world at one and the same time. For this reason, the notion of a slippery slope to secularization scarcely makes sense in a Lutheran context.

Yet, it may be partly misleading to speak of the notion of paradox as I have here. After reading this chapter in an earlier draft, Professor Patricia O'Connell Killen of Pacific Lutheran University wrote the following.

It is as much if not more the quality of living in the paradox between sovereignty of God and finitude of humans that characterizes Lutheran higher education than the deductions you draw from this paradox for higher education. For example, one does not grasp once and for all Luther's insistence on human finitude and the sov-

ereignty of God. It takes a lifetime to grasp this with one's mind, heart, will, being.

After all, Killen points out, Lutheran faith has at least as much to do with subjectivity, sensibilities, and aesthetics as it does with formal and definable intellectual content.²⁴ This is why we can never reduce Lutheran faith to theological formulas that can be codified intellectually and grasped in some final kind of way. And this is why it is probably inappropriate to use the Reformed language of "worldview" to describe the Lutheran theological vision.

It is precisely because Luther has such great appreciation for the depth of human finitude, because he understands the ambiguity of the human situation, and because he knows that from the perspective of the infinite, this world is full of appearances, and appearances deceive—it is for all these reasons that the Lutheran tradition possesses such an extraordinary capacity to break through its own particularity. This is why the principles of the Lutheran vision are fundamentally in keeping with the Enlightenment vision that Sidney Mead describes as the "theology of the Republic," why the Lutheran heritage can give us the courage to raise the most radical kinds of questions, and why the Lutheran vision can do so much to sustain the life of the mind.

24. Letter from Patricia O'Connell Killen to Richard Hughes, January 24, 1999.

Now we are in a position to understand why the young scholar teaching in a Lutheran institution could speak of his work in that institution as so exhausting. It is exhausting to constantly question your own presuppositions. It is exhausting to live in the midst of an unresolved tension between the sacred and the secular. And it is exhausting to allow the sacred and the secular to dialogue with one another in the midst of one's own work. It is far easier to assume that our presuppositions are true and right. And it is far easier to superimpose our religious perspectives on the world we seek to study.

The truth is, the Lutheran tradition possesses some of the most potent theological resources for sustaining the life of the mind that one can imagine. It encourages dialogue between the Christian faith and the world of ideas, fosters intellectual humility, engenders a healthy suspicion of absolutes, and helps create a conversation in which all conversation partners are taken seriously.

At the same time, the strength of the Lutheran tradition is also its weakness. As we have seen, Lutheran theology thrives on the theme of paradox. But it is difficult—incredibly difficult—to keep both sides of the paradox alive and to nurture each simultaneously. It is all too easy to sacrifice one side of the paradox in the interest of the other. When the paradox dissolves in this way, the risks can be absolutism on the one hand and relativism on the other.

These temptations are especially apparent when one considers Luther's understanding of the two kingdoms. If we accentuate the kingdom of God at the expense of the secular world, we run the risk of absolutizing our religious vision and imposing that vision on the world in which we live. Here one thinks, for example, of the Scholastic theologians who absolutized the dynamic, paradoxical qualities of Luther's thought into a rigid, airtight system. Or one thinks of those early Lutherans in the United States who developed a strongly catechetical form of their faith since they felt that a catechetical religion could sustain them in an alien religious culture. It is safe to say that this version of Lutheran theology is simply inimical to the life of the mind. Yet, rigid codification of Lutheran thought occurs even within some Lutheran colleges and universities.

On the other hand, if we accentuate the secular world at the expense of the kingdom of God, we run the risk of relativism. Indeed, apart from its insistence on the kingdom of God the Lutheran tradition could easily resemble a flaccid secular ideology in which nothing is ultimate, transcendent, or absolute.

The scholar who hopes to draw on the Lutheran heritage to sustain the life of the mind must therefore find ways to live out the heart and soul of Luther's original vision — a vision defined most of all by the paradox of the Christian gospel.

Looking Ahead

We now have explored four different Christian models for sustaining the life of the mind: a Catholic model, a Reformed model, an Anabaptist model, and a Lutheran model. We have discovered that each of these faith traditions has its own theological resources that can sustain the academic enterprise.

But we also must observe that none of these traditions has a monopoly on the theological motifs we have discussed. For example, while the Reformed tradition does not accentuate the notion of paradox as the Lutheran tradition does, it is nonetheless true that the seeds of paradoxical thinking — the sovereignty of God and the finitude of humankind — are fundamental to the Reformed perspective. And while Mennonites do not embrace a vision of the transformation of society as Reformed Christians do, they surely seek to transform the lives and hearts of individual men and women. Likewise, while one would hardly regard the quintessential Lutheran theme of justification by grace through faith as a defining motif of the historic Catholic tradition, that theme has nonetheless played a defining role in the thought of many Catholic theologians.

These points are important for several reasons. First, in presenting these four faith traditions, I have tried to present ideal types. But ideal types are rare in real life. More important still is the fact that many Christian institutions of higher learning — especially

evangelical institutions — define themselves with reference to a variety of faith traditions and theological motifs. Even schools that are closely related to specific faith traditions often employ faculty who represent other faith perspectives.

I am therefore not suggesting that a particular theological perspective should be a unifying feature of a church-related college or university. But I am suggesting that scholars who wish to ground their scholarship in Christian convictions should pay close regard to these four great traditions of the Christian faith: Roman Catholic, Mennonite, Reformed, and Lutheran. Indeed, these four traditions complement one another in important ways, and professors who can utilize the insights of each of these traditions will enhance their teaching and scholarship immeasurably.

We now must turn our attention to a slightly different question: “What might it mean to *teach* from a Christian perspective?” Implicit in that question is another: “How can Christian scholars draw on various understandings of the Christian faith to sustain them in their classroom work?” In the following chapter, we will seek to illumine some answers to those questions.

*How Christian Faith
Can Sustain the Life
of the Mind*

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*William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company
Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U.K.*

**Murray Library, Messiah College
One College Avenue Suite 3002
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055**

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Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

255 Jefferson Ave. S.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503 /

P.O. Box 163, Cambridge CB3 9PU U.K.

www.eerdmans.com

Printed in the United States of America

06 05 04 03 02 01 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hughes, Richard T. (Richard Thomas), 1943-

How Christian faith can sustain the life of the mind / Richard T. Hughes.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8028-4935-0 (alk. paper)

1. Church and college — United States. 2. Church colleges — United States. 3. Christian education — United States. I. Title

LC383.H84 2001

248.8'8 21; aa05 04-18 — dco1

2001033220

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