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CHAPTER FIVE

Contours and Contexts of Christian Scholarship

The intermingling of faith and learning that takes place in Christian scholarship is often unpredictable, usually multidirectional, and always complex. A mapping of that terrain reveals several broad distinctions that can help Christian scholars better define their own work. Even with a clear understanding of what they are doing, however, Christian scholars will often find their task daunting. In particular, Christian scholars will sometimes find themselves caught between the differing expectations of the academy and the church. But done well, Christian scholarship can be a great boon to both the churches and the academy as a whole. Faith is a part of life, and the struggle to understand faith in the light of scholarship and scholarship in the light of faith is ultimately both unavoidable and potentially deeply rewarding.

Every year, thousands of scholars gather for an academic extravaganza called the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion. One of the major sessions at a recent meeting was a panel of experts responding to George Marsden's book *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*. The very fact that a book with such a title could be a focus for serious discussion at the American Academy of Religion meeting might have been cause for celebration among Christian scholars, but what made the panel interesting was that it included voices from a wide variety of perspectives.

One respondent thought that the term "Christian scholarship" was itself "ambiguous and unfortunate" and "freighted, fairly or not, with particularistic, exclusivistic, and triumphalistic overtones."¹ This respondent noted that the term "Christian studies" would be far less

outrageous, as anyone, Christian or not, could do scholarship about Christians and Christianity. Christian studies is the scholarly examination of Christian faith and practice: the study of what Christians believe, how they behave in groups, how their beliefs and practices have changed over time. Anyone can answer these kinds of investigative questions. Anyone can engage in the historical, sociological, psychological, literary, or philosophical examination of Christian faith. Anyone can do Christian studies because its aim is to be simply descriptive.

But, of course, Christian studies is not the subject of Marsden's book. His topic is Christian scholarship, and it is far different. The purpose of Christian scholarship is not description but reflection—to reflect on the world from the perspective of faith and to reflect on one's own faith from the perspective of scholarship. This is an insider's task. The questions are existential, and the answers need in some sense to be vetted by one's religious colleagues as well as by one's scholarly peers. Thus it is the faith orientation of the scholar that makes the work Christian. As Paul Griffiths has rightly noted: "One is a Christian scholar if one understands one's work to be based upon and framed by and always in the service of one's identity as a Christian."² The Christian scholar does not speak merely *about* Christian faith (i.e., the stance of Christian studies) but *out of* and *on behalf of* his or her own community of faith.

While Christian studies and Christian scholarship have different goals and purposes, the two tasks are not necessarily antagonistic to each other and may even function in a complementary way. At the very least, good Christian scholarship requires some sensitivity to the concerns of Christian studies. Good Christian scholarship is never merely evangelistic or apologetic; it always involves some degree of self-criticism, requiring the scholar to look at faith and life from the perspective of the other. We are all highly limited in this kind of endeavor. It takes a tremendous act of imagination to examine one's own life as if looking at it from the outside, and none of us truly succeeds. Therefore mature Christian scholars will necessarily engage in dialogue with others—with Christians who hold views that differ from their own and with persons from other religious traditions or no religious tradition—who can provide them with external points of reference to maintain the honesty and fairness of their Christian scholarship.

In a similar manner, those who undertake Christian studies will sometimes need to trespass onto the turf of Christian scholarship. They will, that is, if they want to make sure that their outsider descriptions of Christian faith and practice ring at least partly true to the ways Christians understand their own religious faith and practice. The quality of Christian studies is not dependent on the fact that members of the group being studied fully accept an outsider's scholarly description of their faith, but it is a positive sign if members of the group being investigated can recognize themselves in the final scholarly product. In that sense, the self-consciousness of the Christian community (in-

cluding self-consciousness that takes the form of Christian scholarship) has a role to play in Christian studies. But having said that, we would still maintain that in their primary impulses Christian studies and Christian scholarship are fundamentally different undertakings, and the focus of this book is and has been unambiguously on the latter. Our concern is not with Christian studies but with Christian scholarship: the exploration of the diverse ways in which Christians as individuals and as members of their communities of faith understand their faith to be connected with their scholarship and their scholarship with their Christian faith.

The Contours of Christian Scholarship

Christian scholarship is always a two-way street: faith influences learning and learning influences faith. In most instances, however, either faith will have the predominant role or scholarship will. When the faith side of the equation is most prominent the result will be *faith-informed scholarship*. In instances where the opposite takes place—where the primary flow of influence is from the scholarly realm to the religious—the result will be *academically shaped faith*.

Every act of scholarship involves both questioning and affirmation, two actions that are often intimately related. We assume certain things to be true so we can question other things; we designate certain items or aspects of reality as given, so we can arrange other parts of reality around those points of orientation in new and creative ways. It is impossible to question everything at once, so scholarship tends to question one thing at a time against a background of other items that are deemed, at least for the duration of one's academic project, to be relatively fixed points of reference. A Marxist analysis of history, for example, assumes the truth of Marxism, at least while it is being used as a tool to pry open new questions about history. Later the same historian might turn critical attention to Marxism itself. In a similar way, most composers in Western cultures accept without criticism the standard Western eight-note scale when writing music scores, even though they know other scales are available. The givenness of the scale provides them with a fixed framework for creative expression. The same pattern of affirmation and questioning is evident in Christian scholarship.

In faith-informed scholarship, Christian faith is the fixed point of reference—at least temporarily, the unquestioned background of one's thinking—while some aspect of disciplinary knowledge or expertise is examined and then critiqued or tweaked in light of Christian beliefs or values. Sometimes this kind of faith-informed scholarship can be quite critical of existing ideas and norms within the academy; sometimes it can play a more corroborative role, adding depth or nuance to existing paradigms and ways of thought. Often, as is the case with scholarship in general, Christian scholarship will include both

critique of and support for different aspects of the current academic scene. In fact, there is a tremendous variety of potential relations between faith and learning that might emerge, many more than we can document here. Our point is merely to indicate that if the subject is faith-informed scholarship, the faith side of the relationship will by definition remain relatively unaffected by the encounter. This does not mean that Christian scholars are necessarily asserting that Christian beliefs and values can never be questioned (though some Christian scholars would make that claim); instead, Christian scholars are assuming the basic truth of Christian faith in much the same way that a Marxist historian might assume the basic truth of Marxism as a method of economic analysis. Christian scholars, like all other scholars, are asking how our understanding of the world might change if we began our inquiry with a set of assumptions different from that which currently serves as the common standard. In that sense, Christian scholarship is a form of exploratory study seeking to test the explanatory power of Christian faith insofar as Christian faith can be converted into a tool for academic inquiry.

In academically shaped faith the opposite process is at work: Christian scholars turn the issues around and use their disciplinary knowledge as a fixed point of reference to critique or tweak their own Christian faith. Biblical scholars do this all the time. As new archaeological evidence is uncovered, Christian scholars modify their understanding of the biblical text. And so do Christian scientists. Thus as a result of the nearly universal acceptance of evolution as an accurate description of the history of life on the planet, most Christian biologists have adjusted their understanding of the biblical account of creation to square with that scientific theory, even though many still want to argue vigorously (along with many of their colleagues who are not Christians) about the precise details of evolutionary history and the mechanics of evolution. Physicists have done the same, with people like John Polkinghorne (an ordained Anglican priest and president of Queen's College of Cambridge University) leading the way.³ Christian sociologists similarly use social theory as a fixed point of reference to analyze and criticize the ways churches organize themselves and relate to the larger society. This kind of faith-reformulating scholarship is not necessarily antagonistic to faith. In fact, the academic critique of Christian faith can actually help make Christian faith more Christian. For example, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith's book *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* can be seen as a form of academically shaped faith. It asks American evangelical Christians to rethink some of their most deeply cherished beliefs and values in light of a scholarly examination of racial realities.⁴ In the world of the arts, a good example of how learning can influence faith is found in Jeremy S. Begbie's *Theology, Music and Time* which argues that music can illuminate the meaning of certain doctrines in a way that the traditional language of systematic theology simply cannot.⁵ Christian academicians like Polkinghorne, Emerson and Smith, and Begbie

are not saying that faith should bend to every new theory or idea developed within the academy, but rather that faith should be open to change in the light of genuine advances that emerge from the academy. Further, they argue that this is not only a matter of keeping up with the academy, it can also be a way of refining and improving the ideas and practices of faith.

While we have emphasized the differences, there is actually no such thing as purely faith-informed scholarship or purely academically shaped faith. Even in those cases where a gushing river of influence goes one way, there will always be at least a trickle of influence going the other. Christian scholarship as a whole would be improved if Christian scholars would more readily admit that fact. In the past, the tendency in more conservative Christian circles, whether Catholic or Protestant, has been to stress faith-informed scholarship as the norm and to discredit the importance or even the validity of academically shaped faith. In more liberal Christian circles, the tendency historically has been almost the opposite: to stress the need to reformulate Christian beliefs and practices in the light of emerging scholarly trends and to be very cautious about imposing any norms of faith on the work of scholarship. Numerous scholars have, of course, always sought to avoid these extremes, and in recent years that tendency seems to be increasing. From our perspective, it is this middle ground, where influence flows both ways at once, that holds the most promise for the future of Christian scholarship.

Another distinction in mapping the terrain of Christian scholarship has to do with the issue of how visible the dimension of faith is or ought to be in that scholarship. In some forms of Christian scholarship the influence of faith will be quite intentionally *explicit*. In other examples of Christian scholarship the role of faith will be protrude much less visibly, being only *implicit* in the motivation, assumptions, and message of the work rather than being explicitly flaunted. The decision to be more or less explicit about matters of faith is often a function of audience. When Christian scholars are aiming their work at predominantly Christian audiences, they may speak of faith in a manner that would not be appropriate if they were addressing a broader public. In fact, it is sometimes said that Christian scholars need to be "bilingual" in the ways they relate faith to their academic work, speaking explicitly to their Christian colleagues but adopting a much more implicit style when addressing the larger academy.

A related issue is the degree to which Christian scholarship is or should be different and distinct from other scholarship produced in any given disciplinary domain. Some Christian scholars stress difference; others do not. Scholars who emphasize the fact that Christian faith either forces them or allows them to look at the world in a manner different from other scholars often think of Christian scholarship as a separate school of thought or practice within their disciplines (e.g., Christian psychology in contradistinction to cognitive psychology or behaviorism). The more one adopts this kind of stance,

the more likely one is to feel it necessary to be explicit about the faith dimension of one's work. Other Christians, however, are much less prone to stress difference. For them, Christian faith does not so much change the way they think within their academic fields of study as it adds depth or breadth or seriousness to the work they do as scholars. Persons of this ilk will normally be attracted to forms of scholarship in which the dimension of faith is implicit in the tone and orientation of what they do, but they will not necessarily discuss faith as something that sets their work apart from the work of other scholars.

The factors that draw scholars toward different styles of Christian scholarship are multiple and overlapping. Personality often plays a role. Some people are naturally blunt or brash while others are cautious or tentative. Theology also has an effect. Thus Protestants often speak more explicitly about these matters—even confrontationally (after all, the word "Protestant" is historically derived from "protest")—than Catholics who tend to favor a more implicit approach (which is very much in keeping with how they see God's grace sacramentally infused into all of creation). The disciplines themselves play a role. In some fields of study—especially in the human sciences—issues of faith and values naturally arise. In other disciplines—calculus or chemistry, for example—the insertion of religious themes into the discussion will almost always feel a bit awkward, if not out of place. None of this can be easily systematized. In fact, most Christian scholars would find it hard to predict which style of Christian scholarship they will adopt with regard to any given project. In this regard, Christian scholarship is just like scholarship in general. As scholars we are engaged in an open-ended enterprise of learning—a process of exploration, creativity, and insight—that is larger than we are. The subjects we examine and the questions we ask lure us forward into areas of reflection where our previous experience eventually exhausts itself and where we do not know the answers in advance. But of course, that is the point of scholarship—that is the way learning works—and in their scholarly endeavors, Christians necessarily follow the same path as everyone else.

Christian Scholarship in the Context of the Academy

The task of Christian scholarship within the academy, when the academy is functioning at its best and when Christian scholars are performing at their best, is basically the same as the task of scholarship in general: to ask well-crafted questions about the world, to formulate creative and well-reasoned answers to those questions, and then to assist in the work of vetting those answers so as to identify which show the most promise for further exploration. That is the way the academy is supposed to work, and Christian scholars obviously have an important and valid role to play in that ongoing process of intelligent reflection.

There is, of course, a great deal of overlap in what different scholars can contribute to the process of asking good questions, proposing interesting answers, and evaluating options, and the contributions made by Christian scholars often have nothing directly to do with their faith. Much of what Christian scholars do is what everyone else in the academy tries to do: to think clearly about the world and to reflect critically on our varying interpretations of the world. Christian scholars, like all other scholars, seek to pay attention to the details of what they are studying. They seek to understand their subjects of study in a larger context and to make connections with other related facts and theories. Then they propose their own ways of fitting things together that they hope will prove to be more insightful and dynamic than other available alternatives. None of that takes religious faith, only good sense and a keen mind.

But having said that, there are a number of areas where Christian scholars may have a naturally greater propensity to contribute something. In particular, Christian scholars should bring a commitment to antireductionism to their work. Reductionism is defined as the attempt to explain—and, indeed, sometimes to explain away—the complexity of the world by claiming that everything can ultimately be reduced to only one or a very few underlying mechanisms of cause and effect. The key phrase is often “nothing but.” Thus some Marxist scholarship can be seen as reductionistic because it asserts that human life is really “nothing but” economic struggle. Similarly, biology would be reductionistic if it asserted that the history of life is “nothing but” the competition of selfish genes. Christians can also be reductionistic at times, seeming to claim that every subject can and should be viewed through “nothing but” religious categories of thought. However, the more common role for Christian scholars is to be reductionism detectors. The Catholic commentator Margaret Steinfels says “it is a characteristic of [the Christian] tradition, at its best, to resist reductionism; it does not collapse categories.” With regard to the human sciences in particular, she argues: “Empirical findings are not solely determinative of who we are and what we do. Yes, absolutely: Findings in psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, neurobiology enrich our understanding of the human person and the human project, but they do not exhaust that meaning or determine that trajectory.”⁶ There is no question that scholars often do have to lop off one part of reality in order to examine it for a time in isolation from everything else, and there is no doubt that it is sometimes helpful to describe complex systems in drastically simplified terms, but Christian faith precludes stopping at that point. Simplification for the purposes of research and analysis is fine, but when reductionistic scholarship is presented as an accurate description of all that really matters about the world or when scholars simply refuse to consider the fact that information that falls outside their narrow areas of expertise can have any relevance for their own work, Christian scholars invariably protest. They are convinced that the world is an interrelated whole.⁷

As seen through the eyes of Christian faith, the world comprises many

complex layers of organisms, entities, interrelations, and levels of meaning. Thus any study of any particular item in the world is naturally connected to a host of other realms or dimensions of existence. It is impossible to study economics without simultaneously dipping into the concerns of culture, health, geography, education, and the arts. It is impossible to be a good engineer without occasionally considering the economic, aesthetic, historic, and "human factor" aspects of what is involved in that discipline. Especially in the study of persons, Christians stress that we are dealing with whole persons who possess emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions as well as physical and physiological attributes. This type of concern for and awareness of the seamless fabric of the world is surely not a uniquely Christian contribution to the larger academy, but it is a concern that Christian scholars tend to promote with vigor.

Another area in which Christians may make a contribution, even if here again their actions are not unique, might be called the scholarship of compassion. Like many individuals from other faith traditions and like many other persons who profess no religious faith at all, Christians often include in their scholarship a deep sense of empathy for those who are poor, sick, oppressed, or suffering from violence at the hands of others. What marks the Christian contribution in this area, if it is distinctive at all, is not so much the concern itself as the way it has been so clearly articulated in relation to the scholarly task. Thus David Hollenbach of Boston College has argued that

the intellectual solidarity that is required if religion and the academic are to be brought into a higher unity must be accompanied by a social solidarity that links the Catholic university [and, by implication, all Christian scholarship] to the struggles of a world marred by . . . the long history of human beings' sinful propensity to treat one another in inhuman ways.⁸

Hollenbach is not saying Christians do this better than anyone else; he is merely arguing that this is a necessary ideal for Christian scholars and institutions of higher learning. Other commentators on the American higher educational scene who are not Christians have said much the same thing, and some have even recognized the importance of religiously affiliated colleges and universities in this regard. For example, Martha Nussbaum, in her influential defense of liberal education, *Cultivating Humanity*, argues that while

all universities can and should contribute to the development of citizens who are capable of love of the neighbor . . . the religious universities have this mission at their heart in a special way; and it is precisely for reasons such as these that the major religions have founded universities, believing that love at its best is intelligent and that higher education can enhance its discrimination.⁹

She says it well. In many ways, the ultimate goal of Christian scholarship and the reason why Christian colleges and universities exist is not merely to seek truth; the goal is to seek truth in order to more intelligently love the world and every person in it.

Christian scholars also have something special to share with the larger academy when it comes to the subject of religion itself. Here again, the issue is not so much that Christian scholars are naturally better equipped to understand the religious dimensions of the world as that they are naturally more likely, because of their own faith, to pay more attention to the religious aspects of human life and experience. The backdrop of this matter is the issue of secularization. An older generation of scholars assumed that secularization was simply a fact of history; religion was in the process of slowly but inexorably evaporating from the public realm of society and from the academy as well. They assumed human consciousness was inevitably moving away from religious ways of thought toward scientific ways of thought, away from a focus on the metaphorical to a focus on the real, away from the lofty poetry of faith to the blunt prose of logical deduction. As such, scholarship in general and college and university education in particular came to be seen as helping students develop new nonreligious ways of talking about reality that could replace the worn-out language of the churches. True scholarship, then, had to be expressed in language and concepts that had no necessary recourse to the ideas or insights of faith. Religion was seen as a hindrance to understanding, a leftover way of thinking that could not possibly aid in the modern task of understanding how the world was actually put together.

In retrospect, this was not the academy functioning at its best. Many scholars rejected religious interpretations of the world without examining them simply because those interpretations were religious and hence, by definition, anachronistic. But more recent developments have shown that religion is not necessarily disappearing from the world after all—not from among the masses of ordinary believers and not from the ranks of the academy. A recent study of religion on college and university campuses concluded that religious practice was so “vital and inviting” it made the researchers “wonder if it had ever been more so in the past.” They even went so far as to muse that it was “possible that young people in American culture have never been more enthusiastically engaged in religious practice or with religious ideas.”¹⁰ Richard Light of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University has noted that religion is a significant factor in the lives of many college and university students and that religious diversity on the campus can be a source of enrichment rather than an obstacle to learning or an irritation in the classroom.¹¹ Christianity will never again be able to position itself as the one “sacred canopy”¹² under which the entire American academy is supposed to reside—the new world of the nation’s colleges and universities is for the most part pluralistic—but it seems

increasingly strange to hold religious faith or spirituality entirely at bay.¹³ If the best teaching and learning helps students connect new skills and knowledge with who they are as whole persons, religion can no longer be kept out of the mix even on the most secular campuses. Consequently, many professors are struggling with the issue of how to let faith and spirituality back into their classrooms in a manner that enhances learning without undermining critical thinking.¹⁴

Christian scholars can be of immense help to their scholarly peers in the task of developing new ways to allow faith appropriately into the academic context, but unfortunately not all Christian scholars are in a position to play a constructive role in this process. A number of Christian scholars, embittered by what they have sensed is an unfair prejudice against religion in the academy, have adopted the mirror image of their opponents, condemning the entire academy as irredeemably opposed to faith at least in its Christian forms. Michael L. Peterson is one of the most articulate popularizers of this view. In his *With All Your Mind: A Christian Philosophy of Education* (2001), he bluntly declares that

the deep structures of modern intellectual life are essentially unaffected by any ideas that could be labeled Christian; instead they are almost completely influenced by the works of non-Christian and anti-Christian thinkers. . . . The set of assumptions that are commonly taken for granted in cultural debate simply rule out the tenets of Christianity.

Peterson also assumes that this is a more or less permanent situation, arguing that "the secularizing influences in contemporary culture will almost certainly keep Christian thinking from ever being a dominant force again." Hence, the only reasonable response is for Christian scholars to become "roaring lambs" within the academy—humble but bold critics of the "serious distortions of reality that have become entrenched in various academic disciplines."¹⁵

A more nuanced approach is offered by Stephen H. Webb in his book *Taking Religion to School: Christian Theology and Secular Education*. While Webb is, like Peterson, critical of many aspects of the secular academy, his proposal is that religious faith not be privileged but that it simply be allowed a seat at the table. He suggests that reactions to the scholarly discussion of religion "will range from rejection and critique to defense and reconstruction," which is fine with him. He insists, however, that the tone of the academy, and of the college classroom in particular, should be one that allows a positive evaluation of religious faith as readily as it promotes a negative or critical response. Thus he argues that college lectures and other campus discussions of religion should keep alive all the options and that the academy should "not foreclose . . . the possibility that students and teachers alike will draw closer to God" as a result of their interactions in the classroom.¹⁶

Webb's argument is framed within the context of the discipline of religious studies. However, the question of whether to include religious faith in academic discussions is pertinent far beyond the borders of religious studies. There are a host of other disciplines in which the subject of religious faith might be a required component. Political science is an obvious case in point. How can anyone understand global political developments without some sensitivity to matters of faith? Political scientists and politicians alike need to understand the deep-seated hopes and fears that drive religious persons, and they need to reflect on how their own religious, nonreligious, or antireligious views might affect the way they see things.¹⁷ In other academic disciplines, especially those that focus on the person (psychology, sociology, history, anthropology, literature), the same issues apply. Since faith is part of the reality that these disciplines seek to study, matters of faith ought not be banned from the academic discussion of those subjects.

The doors of the academy seem perhaps more open to the inclusion of religion than they have been for some time, but the reinfusion of faith into the language of the academy is far from certain. This is partly because doubts remain about the willingness of religious believers to genuinely accept the pluralism of views that are present in the academic world. From the Protestant world, George Marsden has sought to assuage these fears by arguing that "traditional religious viewpoints . . . can be just as hospitable to scientifically sound investigation as many other viewpoints" and that, given the pervasive reality of democratic pluralism in American culture, Christians "have little choice but to accept pragmatic standards in public life."¹⁸ But at some church-related institutions it is hard to tell if this kind of acceptance is based on principled conviction or grudging acquiescence.

Catholic scholars have generally taken a less ambiguous and more positive stance toward the academy, arguing, as early as the Land O'Lakes Statement (1967) that "all recognized university areas of study are frankly and fully accepted and their internal autonomy affirmed and guaranteed." The Statement further declared that "all scientific and disciplinary methods, and methodologies, must be given due honor and respect" and that it was inappropriate for theology to try to assert any kind of "imperialism" over the other disciplines.¹⁹ The strength of this position was its genuine respect for freedom of inquiry. The weakness was that many faculty members at Catholic colleges and universities felt free to simply pursue their own disciplinary studies with no reference to faith whatsoever. Colleagues in the theology department were supposed to handle any and all religious questions. As a result, the potential for creative interaction between faith and learning was sometimes undercut. Recently the pope and many other Catholic leaders have stressed the interrelatedness of all truth as a corrective to this fragmented situation. If truth ultimately is all of one piece, then the proper academic goal is both to support the autonomy of the disciplines and to strongly encourage them to explore the

connections that exist with both other disciplines (including theology) and all of life (including faith).

Trying to negotiate that kind of balance will never be easy on any college or university campus, nor will it be easy in the academy at large. There should and undoubtedly always will be room for feisty argument and debate. Like everyone else in the scholarly world, Christian academicians have the right, indeed the responsibility, to argue their points as strongly as they can. At the same time, however, Christian scholars who participate in the larger academy would be well advised to avoid any trace of triumphalism and, if they truly want to be heard, they may want to monitor the vehemence of their rhetoric as well. The obverse is that the academy itself, if it is truly interested in expanding the range of discussion so that religious faith and modes of thought are included, will need actively and self-consciously to create spaces and places where that can happen. We are convinced that the world of scholarship as a whole would be stronger if religious faith was more readily allowed into the discussion, but the pathway to that enlarged conversation is still being constructed.

Christian Scholarship in the Context of the Church

The role of Christian scholarship within the community of faith is as delicate and tricky as it is within the academy. On the one hand, Christian scholars are simply part of the community of believers. Like other Christians they look to the church to supply an outlet for their desire to worship God, a place of instruction for their children, a source of comfort in times of trouble, and a means of outreach and service to others. It is not at all surprising then that one of the main goals of Christian scholarship is to make the best thinking of the academy available to the church. Christian scholars serve as the church's allies and supporters. They defend the church when it is attacked and cheer it on in its successes. They assist the church in articulating the gospel in language and symbols appropriate to today's cultures. They share their knowledge and insights with the church about how to be more effective in the ministries of care that the church offers to the world. They provide technical and philosophical expertise to help the church reflect intelligently on the complicated moral issues of our day. Christian scholars also often serve the Christian community in ways that transcend the boundaries of any given church or institution by engaging in scholarly, practical, or artistic projects that help make Christian faith more academically respected and accepted. For many people, C. S. Lewis and G. K. Chesterton skill exemplify the ideal of what Christian scholars should be. These mid-twentieth-century apologists used their quick wits and logical minds to undercut a host of clever secular arguments against Christianity,

demonstrating in the process that faith, even if it was not fully provable, was most certainly a reasonable interpretation of reality.

Relations between Christian scholars and their churches have not, however, always been that smooth and easy, and it is helpful to examine some of the reasons why churches occasionally look askance at Christian scholarship. Clearly one major reason for the distrust that sometimes flares up between Christian scholars and their churches is the pervasive antiintellectualism apparent in American culture in general. Most Americans, including most American Christians, have a simple, or even simplistic, notion of truth. What they believe is what they believe, and they do not need any highfalutin scholars telling them what they are supposed to think. They feel they can make those judgments for themselves, thank you very much. The mere fact of being a scholar, unless one adopts an "Aw shucks, I'm just one of the folks" kind of attitude, can sometimes create resentment from people in the pews.

It is discouraging that some scholars seem more than willing to accommodate antiintellectualism, and even to encourage it, for the sake of their own popularity or to assuage the fears of ordinary believers. Some Christian academicians use scholarship against scholarship to reinforce popular prejudice and to validate the dismissal of scholarly questions as esoteric, effete, and of little real value. Such antischolarship is unhelpful to both the church and the academy. Christian scholars are called to help raise the level of scholarly discussion in the churches as much as they are called to raise the consciousness of the academy with regard to faith. When Christian scholars act in ways that encourage the disrespect of scholarship in general, they show that they have already to some degree deserted their calling to hold faith and learning together.

Other tensions exist apart from this generalized antiintellectualism. They occur whenever Christian scholars ask questions that most church leaders and lay people would prefer to ignore. Tensions are also created when the work of Christian scholars—regardless of whether it is in the area of analytic, strategic, or empathic scholarship—smudges the lines of demarcation between the church and the world that many church leaders, parishioners, and theologians would like to keep clear and precise. When Christian scholars raise these questions or produce these boundary-fuzzing works, they usually do so out of a deep sense of loyalty to the church, hoping their efforts will prod the church toward a deeper and more nuanced understanding of both the faith and the world; the result, however, often leaves them frustrated. This pattern of question, rebuff, and frustration is unfortunately almost as old as the church itself. As early as the third century, the well-known Christian scholar Origen of Alexandria was at odds with his bishop, Demetrius, over precisely these issues. Recent debates within the world of Catholic higher education over the Apostolic Constitution "Ex Corde Ecclesiae" are only the latest chapter in this long history of tension between the church and the Christian academy. The nature of Chris-

tian scholarship makes it almost certain that similar tensions will emerge in every age.

The corporate role of Christian scholars within the Christian community is to constitute themselves as the church's intelligentsia. They are called to be askers of questions and, to some degree, troublers of the water. Christian scholars are intellectuals who serve the church by exploring the ever-expanding boundary where faith and human learning meet and by seeking to share their insights as much as possible with their fellow believers. In the person of the Christian scholar, faith and learning merge into one, but socially the Christian scholar inhabits two worlds—the church and the academy—and serves as a translator between them. With a foot in each camp and loyalty shared, Christian scholars will inevitably find themselves alternately supportive and critical of the church and academy at different points along the way. Christian scholars live at that intersection. In fact, that liminal identity is a critical element in Christian scholarship and higher education. Theodore Hesburgh, the outspoken former president of Notre Dame, described that state of existence by saying: "The Catholic university is not the Catholic church. It might be said to be of the church as it serves the church and the people of God, but it is certainly not the magisterium, although it does respect it." What the Catholic university is, according to Hesburgh, is "a place—the only place—in which Catholics and others, on the highest level of intellectual inquiry, seek out the relevance of the Christian message to all of the problems and opportunities that face us in our complex world."²⁰

From the perspective of the churches, however, some scholars seem much too willing, much too quickly, to set aside older forms of belief and to reconstruct Christian faith anew in the light of contemporary scholarly developments. And, even more troubling, scholars sometimes seem to do that even before those scholarly developments have been fully tested within the academy or have been subjected to critical analysis from the perspective of faith. In the current academic environment, value is placed on being both up-to-date in one's field and creatively different from others. In the best scenario, this emphasis on newness and contemporaneity can lead to leaps of insight that truly advance our understanding of the world; in the worst-case scenario, we end up with trendy tripe. The more typical result is usually in the middle, but the churches often fear the worst more than they hope for the best. They do not want the historic faith of Christendom subjected to repetitive reconceptualization at the hands of Christian scholars who might be more concerned with being on the cutting edge than they are with being faithful to the long tradition(s) of Christian belief and practice.

This perspective, while understandable, is problematic for the Christian scholar. Christian scholars know that the academy does indeed produce wave on wave of new ideas, methodologies, and theories, and only some of them

are really worth exploring in relation to Christian faith, but they also know it is not always easy to discern which new insights will last and which will fade. It is hard to tell which new perspectives are truly significant and which are not. The natural impulse of churches is to move slowly in these matters. If some new idea or insight develops within the academy that seems to require a significant rethinking of certain long-held Christian beliefs (e.g., the way Galileo's heliocentric view of the solar system eventually forced the church to change its reading of the Bible), the churches are prone to wait and see if that idea truly has any staying power before using it to reconfigure Christian faith. But Christian scholars do not necessarily have that option; they have to deal with developments at the scholarly edge of progress. What's more, many Christian scholars would argue that too often their churches have not only held back too long from adopting new insights offered to them by the academy but frequently have been openly hostile to new academic ideas that they would later have to accept as true. That is not only an embarrassment but a travesty—especially when the churches sometimes use the language of loyalty to Christ to condemn or reject new points of view even before those ideas have been given a fair examination.

The default position of many Christian scholars is to search for truth even if, at times, that search seems to conflict with some traditional interpretation of Christian faith. Their deep conviction is that ultimately scholarly truth and Christian truth will converge, even if the path to that convergence takes some uncomfortable twists and turns that sometimes seem to pit learning against faith. In this regard, Simone Weil would be their spokesperson when she said that "Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms."²¹

Scholars who are also devout Christians typically have no desire to weaken the churches that have nurtured them into faith and that continue to support them in their ongoing pilgrimages of faith. Instead, their constant hope is that their scholarly reflections on the world and on their faith will ultimately aid the Christian community in its corporate commitment to the gospel. That assistance can sometimes take an uncomfortable form, as in cases when scholars feel a responsibility to help their churches remember that the religious folkways and commonplaces that shape their own churchly practices are not necessarily identical with the gospel itself. This should come as no shock. The Bible warns over and over again of the dangers of idolatry, that is, the danger of mistaking some lesser good for the divine itself. One of the tasks of Christian scholarship within the churches is to combat this tendency to imprison God in the limited perspectives of our own particular traditions.

Richard Hughes makes this point forcefully in his recent book *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind*, which argues that one of the main

goals of Christian scholarship should be to help Christian churches and individuals "break through the particularities of their own traditions."²² His purpose is not to deny particularity; we can never overcome particularity. Rather his notion is that Christian scholars need to help their own churches and Christians in general remember that even though the gospel can be cradled in many different forms of thought and practice, the gospel itself transcends those particular expressions. Thus Christian scholarship is both affirmative of Christian faith and iconoclastic at the same time. Christian scholarship seeks to defend the faith, but it also works to keep the language of faith fresh and alive through crossfertilization with new insights that are constantly emerging from the academy. The Notre Dame historian James Turner says the church-friendly, but critical goal of Christian scholarship is to help the thinking of the church become slowly "more nuanced, more supple, [and] more in touch with the culture it hopes to influence."²³

Establishing a healthy balance between this kind of affirmation and critique is not easy. If the churches would trust their scholars a bit more, that would surely help ease tensions. If Christian scholars would take a bit more time to converse with their churches and with ordinary believers, that would help as well. Richard Mouw's little book *Consulting the Faithful: What Christian Intellectuals Can Learn from Popular Religion* offers some good advice in this regard.²⁴ While Mouw would agree that Christian scholars have a responsibility to critique popular religiosity, he also argues that academic disdain for the beliefs of ordinary believers is highly inappropriate on grounds that are both moral and scholarly. On moral grounds, academic disdain for ordinary faith is simple hubris: being smarter or better educated than other people does not mean one is morally or spiritually superior to them. But disdain for the views of ordinary folks also runs the risk of being a scholarly sin, for it involves (mis)reading the intentions of others in the worst light possible. Good scholarship will always give the other at least some benefit of the doubt, and when the other is a fellow Christian that need for a hermeneutic of charity seems even greater.

All in all, being a Christian scholar within the context of the church means that one constantly has to be attuned to both what one says and how one says it. The etiquette of the academy allows for the blunt criticism of others and for the brash presentation of new views, but the etiquette of the church is different. Despite a few glaring counterexamples, such as Luther's bombastic rhetoric of the Reformation era, typical churchgoers usually expect Christian scholars to choose their words with care and caution so as to minimize offense to other believers. The task of Christian scholarship within the academy is obviously complex, but the terrain Christian scholars must negotiate within the churches is perhaps even more challenging.

Conclusion

Christian scholarship occurs whenever Christians are wrestling with academic issues, whether they do that as independent scholars, as faculty members of church-related institutions of higher learning, or as professors at secular colleges or universities in America or beyond. The key element is not the place where scholarship occurs but the Christian commitment of the scholar. James Mannoia, the president of Greenville College in Illinois, has used the phrase "critical commitment" to describe mature Christian faith. Mannoia explains that critical commitment goes "beyond dogmatism in applying the best critical tools available to the real questions of life."²⁵ Christian scholarship at its best will be critically committed both to faith and to the world of scholarship—loyal to both but unbound by dogmatism in either context.

Mature faith—self-critical but committed faith—provides the Christian with an attitude toward the world and others that allows him or her to be a helpful and contributing member of both the church and the academy. The critically committed Christian scholar is not locked into the need to defend every idea he or she has about how the world is put together. Instead, the goal of Christian scholarship, like the goal of all genuine scholarship, is to contribute to the human quest for truth, goodness, and beauty, and to be willing constantly to correct and revise its understanding of the world as new information emerges. The goal for Christian scholars is to use their minds each day to discover a bit more about how the world is put together, to ascertain what roles and responsibilities they might be called to play in the world because of their scholarly expertise, and to infuse all their scholarly efforts with a sense of generous care for the world that parallels God's own deep love for creation.

NOTES

1. Remarks by Robert Sarna at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, November 20, 2000, Nashville, Tenn., Evangelical Theology Group (session A196), "The 'Christian Scholar' in Secular America: The Work of George M. Marsden."

2. Quoted in Richard T. Hughes, *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 138.

3. See John Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

4. Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

5. Jeremy S. Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

6. Margaret Steinfels, "The Catholic Intellectual Tradition," *Origins* 25, 11 (August 24, 1995), 173.

7. See, for example, David Hollenbach, "The Catholic University under the Sign of the Cross: Christian Humanism in a Broken World," in *Finding God in All Things*, edited by Michael J. Himes and Stephen J. Pope (New York: Crossroads, 1996). Hollenbach writes: "Intellectual specialization can easily close academic disciplines, including theology, to insights that arise beyond the boundaries of their field of inquiry. This situation has led a number of contemporary thinkers to conclude that all we can aspire to in intellectual life are fragments of meaning that are not really the meaning of anything external to those who find them meaningful. . . . As with the Sophists and nominalists in the past, this can lead to the reduction of intellectual undertakings to matters of power and will." He goes on to argue that "though the presence of these currents in the university is often exaggerated, it would be a mistake to underestimate their influence . . . they both threaten the academic project itself and undercut any attempt to uncover the connections between the religious and the academic" (285–86).

8. David Hollenbach, "Comment [on Michael J. Buckley, "The Catholic University and the Promise Inherent in Its Identity]," in *Catholic Higher Education at the Turn of the New Century*, edited by Joseph M. O'Keefe (Chestnut Hill, Mass.: Boston College, 1997), 227.

9. Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 292. The Catholic ethicist John C. Haughey writes that while not all scholarly research can or should be designed and undertaken in a manner that benefits people directly—there is room for the study of crystals, salamanders, differential equations, and medieval plays simply because those things exist—none of our scholarship should ever be undertaken in a manner that is "neighbor-numb." We are all, whether Christians or not, members of the humanity first and scholars second. See John C. Haughey, "Catholic Higher Education: A Strategy for Its Identity," in *Enhancing Religious Identity: Best Practices from Catholic Campuses*, edited by John Wilcox and Irene King (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000), 161.

10. Conrad Cherry, Betty DeBerg, and Amanda Porterfield, *Religion on Campus* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 294–95.

11. Richard J. Light, *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001). See especially chapter 8, "Learning from Differences," 160–89.

12. See Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969).

13. See Sophie Gilliat-Ray, *Religion in Higher Education: The Politics of the Multi-Faith Campus* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2000). While this book focuses mainly on higher education in Great Britain, the parallels to America are numerous and instructive.

14. A number of scholars have addressed this point, including Martin E. Marty, *Education, Religion, and the Common Good: Advancing a Distinctly American Conversation about Religion's Role in Our Shared Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000); Robert J. Nash, *Faith, Hype, and Clarity: Teaching about Religion in American Schools and Colleges* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999) and *Religious Pluralism in the Academy: Opening the Dialogue* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001); and Nel Noddings, *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993). For an interesting case study of how religious faith can be allowed into the classroom see Susan

Handelman, " 'Stopping the Heart': The Spiritual Search of Students and the Challenge to a Professor in an Undergraduate Literature Class," in *Religion, Scholarship, and Higher Education*, edited by Andrea Sterk (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 2002), 202-29.

15. Michael L. Peterson, *With All Your Mind: A Christian Philosophy of Education* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 2001), 204, 207, 216, 219.

16. Stephen H. Webb, *Taking Religion to School: Christian Theology and Secular Education* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2000), 17.

17. A good example of such scholarship is R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

18. George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 45-46.

19. "The Land O'Lakes Statement: The Nature of the Contemporary Catholic University," in *American Catholic Higher Education: Essential Documents, 1967-1900*, edited by Alice Gallin (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 8.

20. Theodore M. Hesburgh, "The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University," in *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University*, edited by Theodore M. Hesburgh (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 4.

21. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 69.

22. Hughes, *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind*, 28.

23. James Turner, "Does Religion Have Anything Worth Saying to Scholars?" in *Religion, Scholarship, and Higher Education*, edited by Andrea Sterk, 21.

24. Richard J. Mouw, *Consulting the Faithful: What Christian Intellectuals Can Learn from Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994).

25. V. James Mannoia, Jr., *Christian Liberal Arts: An Education that Goes Beyond* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 42-43.

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