

College and the Christian Vision

Tad Dunne

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For centuries, students graduating from Christian-based colleges saw the workforce they were joining as far more than employment and income. Besides mastering professional skills and learning Christian doctrines, they had absorbed a view of life dominated by an expectation of self-sacrifice, symbolized by a sacramental aesthetics, supported by prayers of gratitude for Jesus and the Spirit, and lived out in a discipline of humility and compliance.

But it's a different world today. In the past 25 years, because of the proliferation of specialized professional courses and the decline of required courses in theology and philosophy, students inherit by default a business and professional vision of the world. What Christian vision is available comes more from personal contact with faculty and pastoral care givers than from course lectures and discussions. Students can be profoundly influenced by personal contact, of course, but insofar as their courses are a-Christian, that personal contact will have little influence on their assessments of the economy, the ongoing discoveries of science, and world affairs generally.

Religious sponsors of these colleges watched helplessly as professional concerns moved to the center while they were left circling the outside, as it were, through pastoral ministry programs. Great flocks of students migrated through the campus having met a few deeply religious men and women, and having learned something about the Bible and ethics, but what they picked up about physics, psychology, economics, sociology, English literature, history, and current affairs has been no different than what their peers in secular universities learned. Secularly mature but religiously adolescent, they no longer receive the integration of learning and religious living that Christian colleges were founded to give.

This is a pity, since Christian tradition is actually rich with doctrines that bear an immediate impact on scholarly and scientific world views. Our heritage already possesses an academically sound vision of the universe that deals with sin and grace, with the mystery of the person, with the spiritual character of the cosmos, and with the evolutionary process that brings forth the likes of us. The question is how to

address religious doctrines within a perspective designed to educate culturally-aware professionals.

The answer to that question will take ongoing academic discussions, but for an illustration of some key topics, here are three Christian doctrines that possess the intellectual depth suitable for inclusion in academic study:

- **Human progress and decline is a religious issue.** From ancient Israel to the present day, we have developed theologies of history that give a theological explanation of how a social order grows and how it falls apart. They have the power to help students understand redemption in social and historical terms.
- **The real remains mysterious.** A philosophy of science that takes meaning and value seriously can account for how the spiritual is just as real as the physical. This can give students an empirical framework for understanding the arrival of God's Word and Spirit in the world.
- **Everyone has a vocation.** Every student should feel a connection between their personal calling and the 'mission' of the college. This enables the college to embody the apostolic mission of the Church.

Let us look more closely at these three doctrines.

Human Progress and Decline is a Religious Issue

Since the late 60s, the focus of Christian faith has shifted from personal prayer and liturgy to social awareness and doing justice. In this new perspective, we can expect that the theology of history will play as central a role in Christian self-awareness as religious psychology did formerly. Where, formerly, stages of our personal intellectual, emotional and religious growth enjoyed the limelight, now dysfunctional families, the inherited character of psychological diseases, and great tragedies of nationalism and racism are moving to center stage. A theology of history can provide an explanation of these historical phenomena in a way that takes evil and God seriously.

This concern is nothing new to Christianity. The Christian churches have always explored the serpentine ways that evil twists history. Jesus himself seems to have elevated to first rank among Jewish religious teachings the notions of Satan and of the heart as the private source of all public goods and evils. St. Timothy's line, "the love of money is the root of all evil" (1 Tim 6: 10) represents an analysis of evil in the public sphere. St. Augustine (*City of God*) locates the

ultimate source of the fall of great empires in our "lust to dominate" other people.

In the sixteenth century, St. Ignatius Loyola promoted a view of world history that saw every man, woman and child as beset with a double pull -- on the one side toward getting rich, then getting famous, and finally landing at overweening pride; on the other toward their opposites: poverty, humiliations and ultimately to humble, self-sacrificing love. In his vision, whatever is good is the result of actual grace drawing individuals toward the kind of self-sacrificing love shown by Christ and whatever is evil is the result of following the opposite draw in consciousness toward pride.

In our own time, Bernard Lonergan located the sources of social decline in two interrelated sources. There are inherent biases natural to consciousness – particularly our bias to benefit our individual selves over anyone else, our bias to benefit our own group over any other group, and our “common sense” bias against in-depth and historical understanding of issues. Also, there is human willfulness, the irrational acts by which we deliberately act against our better judgments. The source of social progress, on the other hand, lies in the precepts natural to consciousness to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible, and in love. Lonergan emphasized the power of God’s love to heal social and historical problems and offered an empirical analysis of how that healing occurs.

These doctrines, each developed in different historical contexts, have in common the principle that the heart is pulled toward both good and evil, and that the covert choices of the heart are the ultimate drivers of overt history. These doctrines stand together against a variety of other philosophies of history common today. The Marxist locates the problem of historical decline in the structures of capitalism. The reactionary and the religious fundamentalist locate it in a failure to obey the letter of some law. Many Western liberals point to the suppression of individual rights as the central social problem, overlooking any duties individuals might have to maintain the commonweal. Typical Freudian analysts assume that all psychological disorders have explainable causes and therefore that even the irrational acts of willfulness can be explained and cured through analysis.

Because the question of the sources of good and evil touches deeply into the links between psychology, sociology, and history, they belong in the courses that teach these disciplines. That is, besides the compulsion stemming from bias there are also the sins stemming from willfulness. Besides community rights there are community wrongs

done to other communities. Besides geniuses lifting history upwards, there are geniuses dragging it down. The sources of moral action also touch deeply into literature insofar as poetry and stories can show how the heart's private working spins its public webs. Flannery O'Connor entitled her professional apologia "Mystery and Manners," because for her the human heart is a mystery, a force that regularly crashes through the social bounds of manners. A Catholic college need not preach one theology of history and condemn others. The intellectually honest thing to do is to keep the question of the roots of good and evil on the table, inviting the various disciplines to explore answers together.

Practically speaking, 'integration seminars' could help students pull together what they learned in more content-oriented courses. At Regis College, Toronto, for example, students have used a case study approach. They take turns bringing a 'case' involving a ministerial event, a difficult decision, or any other situation fraught with grace and freedom. The first step is for the group to identify what's good about the situation – the intellectual and emotional resources among the parties, the commitments and good habits, the ideals and goals, and so on. The second step is to identify what needs attention, or even reversing or undoing. Overlooked opportunities may merit attention, but other, more serious factors include emotional disorders, egotism, loyalisms that pit one community against another, and the assumption that learning is a waste of time. This leads to the third step: What, therefore, is grace here? Whom might the Spirit be inspiring with vision, kindness, or hope? With what values might the example of Jesus and the Christian tradition redeem this situation? Seminars like this can help students bring the analytical tools learned in professional courses to bear on everyday life situations within a theological vision of history.

The Real Remains Mysterious

A second Christian doctrine can make or break a student's chances of understanding what exactly scientific knowledge is. It is an ancient Christian belief that something does not have to be material in order to be real. That is, the spiritual order is no less actual than the material. Although neoplatonist strands of Christian doctrines interpreted this belief in a way that boosted the spiritual to the detriment of the material, some contemporary scientists have turned this upside down, regarding the spiritual as outside the realm of the empirical and the material as the only thing real. Still, we believe that God is spirit yet absolutely real – as are grace, wisdom, and love. Our belief in the

reality of spirit is not a rejection of the material but rather its embrace. Indeed we believe that God will redeem not just our individual souls but our bodies and indeed all of material creation, which "groans together and labors in birthpangs together even now" (Rom 8:22). Likewise, both Aquinas' analogies about God and the Church's reliance on the natural law as a basis for ethics presume that all of nature has invisible, "spiritual" dimensions.

Fortunately, the doctrine that the spiritual infuses the material is easily compatible with the view of science that all matter follows laws, laws which are absolutely invisible. Students easily take for granted that things have a nature, that Newton's apple will always fall, accelerating at a predetermined rate. But there's a shock in store when students face the bare question, Can the real be non-material? The realization may arise when, with Einstein, physics students accept mathematical equations as sufficient explanation of the unimaginable behavior of subatomic particles at one end of our imagination and of macro-astronomical phenomena at the other. Or psychology students may assent to the reality of spiritual dimensions when, with Freud, they acknowledge diseases whose proper realm is not synapses in the brain but ideas and feelings in the mind. These are rich fields for a philosophy of science to explore when it asks what a "Theory of Everything" ought to explain and whether or not there can be 'another universe.'

Evolution is a particularly relevant issue. Most people today accept the laws of natural selection and "survival of the fittest" as a sufficient explanation of evolution. Recently, however, a growing number of scientists claim that these laws do not explain the marvelous capabilities and economical complexity of emerging species – self-assembling organisms whose intricacies seem far beyond the opportunities offered by a natural selection. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, in *The Universe Story* (HarperSanFrancisco), suggest that there is another law by which the universe itself is probing, as it were, for avenues of higher development. Teilhard de Chardin and Lonergan have said as much, and in ways compatible with Christian doctrine. A key question, then, is this: Is "spirituality," as we traditionally understood it in medieval, normative categories, actually the emergence in human consciousness of a goal-directed character of the universe? If so, then spirituality belongs at the center of any integrated scientific account of our reality.

I have been speaking of the "spiritual" as an empirical datum rather than a norm of behavior because I believe this does more justice to

the mysterious character of reality. Not long ago, we used the word "culture" to mean to a norm of behavior. It meant sipping wine, talking about art, and eating by candlelight. More recently, though, "culture" is used empirically as simply the set of values that a particular social group happens to observe. So too, I think it is misleading to say that a college needs "spirituality" if what we really mean is a certain set of values and beliefs. Students soon ask, Who decided on *these* values and *these* beliefs? But if spirituality is understood more empirically as the *impulse* to find true values and beliefs that make sense of experience, then we can say that every college has a spirituality, and everything studied there does too. The key question is how well a particular spirituality encompasses the values and beliefs that are most important to a culture. The answer to that question takes an ongoing conversation as the times roll on and generations of students succeed one another.

Where should this exploration take place if not in colleges? It can happen in seminars, in brown-bag lunch discussions in the student cafeteria, in evening lectures, in panel discussions among the faculty and invited guest speakers, and in the auditoriums of corporations interested in the education of its employees. Courses in physics, chemistry, biology, and botany should assume an attitude of wonderment over the marvels of their subject matters. Courses in anthropology, psychology, and sociology should take seriously the phenomenon that humans can act against their better judgment. Art, sculpture, and poetry courses should emphasize how aesthetics is meant to to evoke a sense of the mysterious 'plus' in all reality that cannot be put into concepts and words, including tragic works that reveal the horrors we are capable of. It should be explored in an architecture school that believes that all shared space should lift and mobilize the spirit. More directly, courses in the philosophy of science, theology of history, and foundational theology should explicitly help students form a Christian vision that makes sense of all other courses. Courses on God and the Trinity should spell out how the mission of God's Word in our history is mediated by the community of Christians, and is matched at every point by the mission of the Spirit in our hearts welcoming the Word.

Everyone Has a Vocation.

When curriculum committees ask, "What should our students learn?", they depend on an often unspoken assumption about a prior issue: "For whom are they learning?" It is a question of purpose, not content; a question of the end, not the means. If they are learning only for

themselves and their careers, then the college serves society by handing over skilled workers to employers who are glad to tell them their purpose is to make money. But if they are learning for the sake of the commonweal, then, besides being skilled, students seriously intend to contribute to society.

Typically, it's up to the Boards of Directors and Trustees to state the college's purpose. To spell out the college's purposes, they issue *The Mission Statement*.— an expression now sadly degenerate. Originally, it appeared in Catholic hospitals sponsored by religious women. As their membership declined, they crafted 'mission statements' to pass on to incoming lay administrators their vocation to serve the needy. Unfortunately, industrial and business corporations copied the term, but omitted the meaning. They reduced 'mission' to 'what we have decided to do.' Ask their board members, To whom are you missioned? and you'll get a blank stare.

If a Christian college wants a mission statement, let it be written by those people who depend on scholarship and science for wisdom -- the laborers in the city, the poor in the slums, the leaders of the community, the representatives of service corporations and industry, and any others within the ministerial sights of its sponsoring religious body. These are the people to whom the college 'missions' the students. This would help convey the ideal that attending school on *this* campus is for the spiritual and material good of the commonweal, not merely for the career of the student or faculty member. To be effective, students should not first *read* the mission, they should *hear* it firsthand from men and women in the communities they will eventually serve.

Also, a mission statement should be cast in language with levers – directives with teeth that effectively guide both the development and the elimination of courses. Otherwise, they're just ideals without strategies, recipes for apple pie without a kitchen. This does not mean imposing a strict regimen of course content. It means that curriculum committees make sure that the overall syllabus addresses the questions raised by the communities they are responsible to. It means that faculty and staff take to heart the purpose of the college. An effective mission statement applies not only to teaching but also applies to budget justifications for research that promises to raise the standard of living.

Students will more readily take this mission as their own if teachers respect the actual *context* in which students will eventually pry their trades. If the mission is to serve the needy, the context of this mission

includes a vivid expectation that real situations are complex. John Glaser, in his *Three Realms of Ethics* (Sheed & Ward) points out that all real situations have three dimensions: the individual's choice (the dimension people usually associate with ethics), institutional issues (duties of employers, company policies, promise-keeping in the business world), and the effects on society (the common good, the environment, the cultural mores). Certainly in courses on business practice and professional expertise all three realms need to be considered, particularly in their interdependence. Practically all ethical conflicts of individuals are conditioned by institutional policies and cultural values. But the converse is also true: Individual decisions are what shape these policies and values. A woman who has been raped on campus faces the difficult question of abortion, but the failure of the college institution to provide adequate lighting in its parking lot and the failure of the community to squelch a male culture that degrades women are key parts of the problem. The decision she makes then adds to the lore of experience to which administrators and moralists appeal when they undertake reforms.

Here's another example of the multi-leveled context of moral issues. An analyst in a health insurance company did a cost-benefit analysis of a proposal to streamline billing forms for easier processing. It turned out that the company would save money by streamlining the forms, so, naturally, the company accepted the recommendation. What was missing was effect of the change on the billers in doctor's offices. The new forms required more work for them, so that the net costs for the combined work done by all the billers in doctors' offices and all the bill-processors in the insurance company were actually higher than before the change. What was cost-beneficial to the corporation was a cost-waste to the entire system of paying for people's medical care. This analyst had not been taught to ask about *whose* cost and *whose* benefit. The lesson here is that if students in a business track fail to think about the full human context of problems, they will only add short-sighted solutions to the hodgepodge of other short-sighted solutions.

Teaching career-directed courses with the full human context up front takes a mindset that is concerned not just about getting a job but enhancing life together on our planet. This mindset thinks of vocation not as job-preparation, but as a regularly occurring stream of inspirations to do some good. While the mystery of living an inspired life may lie in some exquisite religious experience for the few, for the many it lies in the mundane business of appreciating value where rational analysis sees only loss, in mustering the courage to reach out

to the marginalized, and in the resurrection of hope in the face of failure. This eye for the good, this heart for the neighbor, and these guts to persevere are the regularly recurring events that can divert social decline into progress. And precisely because these events arise mysteriously and without our fabrication, they pose in a refreshingly relevant way the theological question of how God's providence works.

The Christian College

Christian leaders have always adapted the Good News to their hearers. They realize that for the Good News to be effective, it has to speak to the mindsets of the times. During the half century that leaders wrote the New Testament, they did far more than just teach doctrine and denounce heresy. They also sharpened the questions that most profoundly affect human life. To make the Good News meaningful, they had to integrate their faith with the modes of thought peculiar to their times. For faith is not a piece of information, nor can it be effectively conveyed as mere information. Faith is being engaged with meaning.

What is meaningful in our present times are the functional kinds of insights that characterize science, scholarship, and the professions. Faith, then, should be presented not merely as truths to believe, but as divine values that function to improve life—a functioning that can be understood. At the same time, it means understanding science, scholarship, and professional life with the kind of insights that respond at least to the three questions we have been discussing here: What redeems us from the decline in our human condition? What must be the full dimensions of the universe where transcendence envelops us through a Person in our past and through a Spirit with our spirit? What, therefore, are we called to do?

Saving Truths

To these questions, courses in Christian theology provide answers. I say "theology" as distinct from "religious studies" because the scope of religious studies is typically limited to understanding what believers of various religions think and do—including believers in one's own religion. But when this understanding occurs in reasonable men and women, they are compelled to ask a further, personal question: But is it true? What really do we have on hand to "redeem" us from our own biases and willfulness? For what purpose—indeed, on account of *whose* purpose—is there a universe at all? In what sort of actions do I most completely fulfill my destiny? Answers to these questions are not

factual information about religion but truths that save the true lives of those who embrace them.

When the disciples of Christ asked these questions, Christ provided answers, which they subsequently recorded in the Scriptures. Later Christians integrated these answers into the philosophies and mentalities of their day. So Christian theology today not only includes “religious studies” but also promotes ever deeper understanding of what one already accepts as true about God, the universe, the history of the Christian community, and one’s own calling.

What are these saving truths that Christ revealed about redemption, the character of the universe, and one’s vocation? What is it that Christ expects his followers to understand more deeply? Here are 14 of these truths expressed in terms of modern empirical science, modern historical consciousness, and modern existential philosophy, along with special attention to the truths in the Gospel of John:

1. As cats live in a human order beyond their comprehension yet vital to their lives, so we live in a divine order.
2. Yet while a cat and everything else we know acts according to its nature, we are the only things in creation that act against its nature. We do so when we act against our better judgment. This is the essence of sin.
3. God so loves the world that in our history he sacrificed his only Son to the forces of sin and hatred so that sin and hatred might end.
4. God so loves the world that in our hearts he gives his own loving as a drive in us so that we too love the world and each person in it with God’s own love.
5. In giving us the complete person of Christ and the complete person of the Spirit, God surrenders the entire divine self to us.
6. Life is not a test of our moral integrity. It is a gift in which God comes in person as Christ in our history and love in our hearts. God’s self-gift saves us from acting against our nature by sharing what is “supernatural” to our nature.
7. Our charity to others is not a moral obligation but a privileged participation in God’s actual loving them.
8. Our mission to others is not being sent *out* from God with an assignment. It is being sent *as* part of God’s own divine Word and *as* impelled by God’s own divine Spirit.

9. Those who abide in love abide in God because they do not love alone; every true love is God's own love in which we love with God.
10. We become a "we" with God by loving Christ our historical forefather by the power of the Spirit offered to every heart.
11. Prayer is necessary every day to personally welcome such saving truths and give thanks for such fullness of life, lest the cares of the world make us forget.
12. The Son longs that we be with him where he is. The Spirit yearns in us to be with the Son.
13. The dead shall rise from their graves at the sound of Jesus' voice. We shall see him clearly and our hearts will flood with a joy that no one can take from us.
14. We will be completely one with God and with one another through love.

Are these strange to most Christians? Were many never invited to explore what these truths mean? Have teachers neglected to convey just how startling these realities are—realities in which we live and move and have our being? Have students' image of the universe never gone beyond what astronomers see, what psychologists probe, what advertisers present, what funeral directors manage? Perhaps, as Wordsworth said, "The world is too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers."

The Loss of Saving Truths

Today, we have our Catholic colleges, our Baptist colleges, and so on. Within these denominations we also have cultural and regional traditions—Dominican colleges, a Southern Methodist University, and so on. Typically, these colleges are manifestly dedicated to carry on values that are unique to their sponsoring religious congregation: on the arts, on preparedness for ministry, on social justice, or on many other rich facets often associated with Christianity. And yet, the many cultural values that distinguish one Christian college from another can overshadow the singular values on which they all claim to be Christian in the first place. Their mission statements list the moral values of service, ethics, and charity but, forgetful of our wounded human nature and the divine Word and Spirit in our midst, they gloss over the saving truths of Christianity. Many students graduate having little notion of what it means to live consciously and deliberately in a supernatural and healing order that is created in and for Christ, and is

empowered with a divine love that alone can reveal truths and values beyond the powers of natural reason and good will.

A number of concerns have overshadowed our concern for the saving truth in Christ. One is our concern, since the mid-1960's, to be more open to diversity of cultures in general and ecumenical in our theology curricula in particular. Unfortunately, course in comparative religions displaced courses on the meaning of Christian truths for those who believe. Another concern is to avoid dogmatism at all costs. As academic institutions, colleges feared the refusal to think for oneself that both fundamentalist preachers and authoritarian church leaders seemed to promote. Nobody wanted to claim any truth as certain, let alone challenge any claim deemed false. A third concern is about money. Most Christian colleges avoided any hint of proselytizing for fear of driving away the better students—along with their tuitions. It would also drive away the better faculty, and a loss of quality teaching which would further diminish the attractiveness of the college to tuition-paying students.

The Recovery of Saving Truths

How might Christian colleges restore the place of saving truths in an academic community? First, there is one way it certainly cannot be done. Ever since Socrates convinced Meno that virtue cannot be taught, it seems obvious embracing saving truths cannot be taught. It is one thing to ask factual questions, but quite another to feel the disturbing existential questions about living with evil in the world, about the supernatural character of the universe, and about one's personal calling.

Answers to these questions are not facts to learn nor just ideas to understand. They are invitations to embrace saving truths with the heart. For the sake of stoking the fire of discussion, let me suggest three ways that these invitations can be brought back to their proper place in Christian colleges:

First, just as we learn character from feeling an attraction to people who have it, so we embrace saving truths by an attraction to those who live it. In this light, the sponsors of the college should be men and women of living faith. The same goes for at least some faculty and administrators who, whether by office or by natural leadership, are regarded as "authorities."

Second, the curricula in departments of Religious Studies or Theology should include courses that deepen the understanding of the saving truths in Christian doctrine for those who already accept them as true.

Third, courses in both philosophy and comparative religions should include at least the question of God as natural to any thinking human being. In particular, this "question" may be cast in the three dimensions we have been considering here:

Why do things keep getting worse, and where shall we turn for help?

Does the real include realities that are absolutely spiritual? Is there a nature beyond human nature?

Is my destiny up to me, or is there also a call to be followed?

-Tad Dunne