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# A Faithful Christian Academic in a Secular Setting

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**Abstract:** As a Catholic Christian at a secular school, my aspiration for my work is that on the one hand it manifest genuine inquiry: I've no interest in writing about something that I think is already adequately understood, whether by me or by someone else. And, on the other hand, I intend that my work be faithfully Catholic. Many think such an aspiration is incompatible with the nature of a secular institution; they recapitulate, in the academy, the naked public square of political liberalism. But I suggest here that this model, both in politics, and in higher education, is in error.

What is it like to teach and write philosophy as a Christian, in my case, as a Roman Catholic, at a secular institution? I will situate my answer in relation to what I take to be a misleading model of the nature of the secular university.

A common way of thinking of the division between Christian and secular forms of higher education is in terms of a particular division of labor. The faculty at Christian schools teach and research on specifically Christian subjects, and they have the privilege, and perhaps the obligation, of doing so from an avowedly first-person standpoint. Thus, they speak, teach, and research from the standpoint of faith, and the content of what they teach and study concerns, among other things, matters of faith. By contrast, even if at a secular school matters of faith or religion are taken into consideration, whether in teaching or in research, they are done so from the third personal, detached, and neutral standpoint. The difference can be seen, for example, in the contrast between religiously affiliated schools that have departments of theology, and secular schools that have departments of religious studies.

On this model, religious and secular institutions are essentially different, and it would seem natural to think that a religious academic in a secular institution would need to check her faith at the door in order to approach matters from the necessarily neutral and impersonal standpoint the institution demands. In this way, the secular school recapitulates the idea of a neutral political realm: it is the naked public square transposed into an academic key.

It is clear that this model can veer in the direction of outright hostility to expressions of faith, whether in teaching or research, and can lead Christian academics to feel that they need to keep their heads down and their agendas secular if they are to survive; again, this recapitulates the concrete effects of the naked public square. And at the same time, this model keeps the need for religious schools constant, since otherwise there would be no research that is guided by faith.

I think this model, and its concomitant division of labor, is an error. All inquiry is first-person in the sense that it is carried on from the inquirer's standpoint seeking to assess evidence with a view to judging what is true. And the assessment of evidence, in at least some cases, cannot be divorced from one's larger creedal commitments. While the norms that guide the assessment of evidence for truth claims overlap, the set of such norms held by religious believers include some norms not common to non-believers: believers, for example, may believe *only* what is compatible with their religious beliefs, and this norm can shape their response to evidence in important ways. So, just as in the public square, it is not really possible in the academic arena to be a full participant and to check one's beliefs at the door.

Accordingly, on my view, a secular university should be an institution that encourages the seeking of truth on the part of all its citizens, so to speak, from the(ir) first personal standpoint(s). And if the relevant inquirers are religious believers, they should be encouraged to inquire in the way that is appropriate to the persons they are. This does not mean that their inquiry will not be genuine: the secular materialist believes the world to be of a certain sort and seeks to understand it. The religious believer is engaged in much the same project, seeking to understand the unknown in light of what is already understood to be true.

I have tried to conduct my own research as a citizen of a secular school from that same first person standpoint. My aspiration for my work is that on the one hand it manifests genuine inquiry: I've no interest in writing about

something that I think is already adequately understood, whether by me or by someone else. And, on the other hand, I intend that my work be faithfully Catholic. That has certainly had an effect on the topics I choose to consider, such as the ethics of the beginning and ending of life, the importance of which, from the Catholic perspective (as from others) is obvious. And it has had an effect on the way I approach those topics; to repeat, all inquiry is guided in part not only by the object yet unknown but also by truths already known, and the truths by which my work is guided are the truths of the Catholic Church.

It is natural enough that I have occasionally had colleagues who think that my work is "too Catholic." I was told by one colleague, for example, that my promotion file should not have contained the *Embryo* book that I co-authored with Robert George! On the other hand, a fair amount of my work is not on its surface discernibly "Catholic": there is much for a philosopher to do the bearings of faith on which are not obvious. When I think that an issue is interesting and important, and that I am suitably situated to be able to inquire into it, then I do so. That willingness has alleviated some strain that might otherwise have existed, for my colleagues can recognize a body of work for which I am responsible that conforms broadly to the canons of excellence that they too accept.

But to a much greater extent I have benefitted from the willingness of my colleagues, especially my secular colleagues, to appreciate my work for what it is: inquiry carried out in light of my Catholic Christian faith. Those same colleagues have recognized the quality of my work, where there is some, even while radically, in some cases, disagreeing with my starting (and ending) points. To that extent, I have been blessed to be in an academic environment that in important ways does live up to the model of a university I believe to be best. I would like to think my colleagues have benefitted as well: their work challenges mine as mine theirs, and the upshot is greater understanding all round.

With teaching, of course, things are different. Even at a religious school, the teaching of philosophy cannot be "professing" in a straightforward sense. That is not how philosophy works. In the classroom, there should be uncharted intellectual waters both for student and faculty member, and an openness to where argument might lead that forecloses the possibility of simply instruction "in the truth." But here again, there are some differences, I think. In my classes, the views of Aquinas, say, of John Finnis, get a hearing on

matters of morality, politics, and law. Many students would otherwise simply not be exposed to these texts.

Moreover, partly because I teach at a southern school, a fair number of my students are Christians, and many of them have not been exposed to real *but friendly* intellectual challenges to their faith. Neither, of course, have my secular students often been exposed to friendly *but real* challenges to *their* faith, for faith they surely have. As a Christian in a secular institution, I am, it seems to me, in a unique position to be able to serve both constituencies in ways that will serve their intellectual and moral growth. While I do not profess truth in the classroom, my goal is to plant, in the classroom environment, only such seeds as will, and perhaps only at a very much later date, grow in truth.

One might wonder what need there would be for Christian schools if all secular schools were to operate on the model I have suggested. A natural suggestion would be that Christian schools at their best provide not just an intellectual environment of a particular sort, but also a spiritual and moral community in which students and faculty can grow together in holiness and virtue. Anyone who has visited, for example, the Franciscan University of Steubenville, will be aware that the Catholic nature of that institution extends far beyond the classroom or the office. The community there is not just a community of inquiry, but also a community of shared faith encompassing all, or nearly all, of the university's members.

That is something that I occasionally envy. But the opportunity for Christian fellowship is hardly absent at my own institution, and it is critically important. While not as extensive as at a Christian school, there is nevertheless a network of Christian faculty and students at virtually every secular university. No doubt we need to work harder to be able to serve one another's genuine needs, but much good work is already being done. We should think of our task as that of building up micro-Christian communities that can provide the kind of cultural support and strength that both faculty and students need to be able to live fully their Christian vocation in a sometimes difficult setting. The members of those communities need also to support one another in the project of engaging in genuine inquiry, and they need to be models of truly Christian *and* academic excellence for one another and for the broader community. Here again, the role of the Christian in the secular academic world parallels that of the Christian in the secular political world. But, to make one final point, in neither domain should we conceive of the task as one of bringing battle to

enemies; nor should we adopt a siege mentality and bunker down. Witness, engagement, and inquiry: these should be the watchwords of Christian academics in a secular setting.

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