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Intellectual Humility and the Art of Disagreement at the Christian College

by James S. Spiegel, Ph.D.

Abstract

Education at a Christian college properly features both honest inquiry and unwavering allegiance to core theological standards, such as those embodied in the classical creeds. This combination of commitments can create tension for the Christian educator, as insistence upon doctrinal allegiance can inadvertently reinforce dogmatic attitudes so common among late adolescents. In this paper I discuss the virtue of intellectual humility and its importance for combating student dogmatism in an atmosphere of steadfast Christian commitment. After distinguishing between theological essentials and disputable matters, I discuss philosophical and theological grounds for being intellectually humble. And I illustrate ways in which faculty and staff may intentionally model this virtue for students.

Introduction

It is ironic that dogmatism is common among college students. Presumably, young people pursue higher education in order to explore new ideas, not just to reinforce previously held beliefs. But late adolescence is a stage of life typically characterized by personal crises of various kinds, particularly in the area of worldview and ultimate life commitments. A certain obstinacy of belief can be a form of self-defense against challenges to one's views. What results for some students is a stubborn clinging to certain beliefs, even in contradiction to plain evidence. While perhaps developmentally normal, this tendency can be aggravating to college faculty and staff as well as to the students' peers.

On Christian college campuses the challenge of dogmatism is aggravated by the Christian community's concern to guard theological orthodoxy and, sometimes, more narrowly, the specific doctrinal and behavioral expectations of the school. Thus, as Christian educators, we sometimes find our most basic faith commitments potentially undermining the whole point of education, viz. to change one's beliefs and conduct for the better. What is the solution? In what follows I will discuss the most important antidote to dogmatism—the virtue of intellectual humility. And I will show the relevance of this virtue for practicing the art of disagreement in an educational context that prizes unified commitment to core theological beliefs.

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The Christian College and Theological Commitment

In his classic *The Idea of a Christian College* Art Holmes proposes that the aim of Christian higher education is to produce a certain kind of person, rather than simply to endow a student with a discrete set of skills, as in vocational training (Holmes, 1987). The proper aim for the student in a Christian educational community, then, is transformation in the deepest sense, fortification of the individual's soul. Given the depths of such intended change, then, it is no wonder that students are often resistant. Even students who confess an open mind and willingness to explore new ideas can be narrow-minded and intractable in their actual belief commitments.

Psychologist James Marcia has proposed a model of identity formation in adolescence that may be helpfully applied here (Marcia, 1966). He uses the term "foreclosure" to describe commitment in the absence of genuine exploration. Applied more specifically to college students, we might say that a student is "foreclosed" who maintains a strong commitment to a set of beliefs without doing any exploration. In an academic environment that exalts the sorts of educational ideals described by Holmes, the foreclosed student is especially tragic. However, on the Christian college campus, where theological verities are cherished and perhaps guarded very closely, such refusal to genuinely open oneself to new ideas might be inadvertently reinforced. Some Christian educators see this as erring on the safe side, as it is better for students to be foreclosed in biblical truth than potentially to be led away from it altogether in the process of academic exploration. Perhaps it is better to err on the safe side, but, of course, it is best not to err at all. So the question is this: Is there any way to keep students secure in their most basic faith commitments while at the same time effectively guiding them in serious exploration in the world of ideas? As Christian educators, how can we maximize the likelihood that our students will keep the faith in spite of their exposure to various false beliefs, indeed even those that are downright inimical to a Christian worldview?

I have two points to make in response to this important question. First, it should be emphasized that there is no guarantee that *any* student will maintain her theological commitments, whether or not she is exposed to false teachings in the course of her educational career. The brutal truth is that we live in a fallen world and, more proximately, in a degenerating culture that continually assaults us all with insidious ideas and warped values, particularly via major media. Unless a person intends to retreat to a monkish life completely removed from Western civilization (if that were possible), she is destined to be regularly exposed to lies—attractive lies that are alluring even to Christians because they sometimes closely resemble the truth. So preventing students from being exposed to false ideas is a hopeless cause. Even worse, it is a strategy that sets up young Christians for a fall. Like sending soldiers out to battle without any weapons or, just as tragically, giving orders to troops without any knowledge of the enemy, we cannot expect young Christians to persevere in the truth without being trained to recognize some of this world's perennial lies.

This leads to my second point, best explained using a different metaphor. Exposure to false belief systems in an educational context of Christian commitment actually serves to *secure* students in the truth, preventing ultimate apostasy. The situation is analogous to immunizations against disease. There is always a remote chance that giving a child a tetanus vaccination, for example, will cause severe health problems, but

it is still in the child's best interest to do so because of the greater likelihood that she would catch the disease were she not vaccinated. Similarly, it is better to immunize the college student against the false teachings of the Marxes, Nietzsches, and Freuds of this world through critical analysis of their ideas than to allow the student to go into the world without any means of defense against their arguments. This is one of the reasons I am personally and professionally devoted to the liberal arts model of Christian education. Although inherently risky in some respects (what educational endeavors are not?), the likely outcomes are more than worth the risks incurred.

The apostle Paul articulated this vision of worldview analysis when he declared "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). Such should be the vision of Christian educators: to prepare students for this twofold task, at once critical and constructive, of demolishing opposing worldviews and building a formidable Christian worldview.

Now the point of this foray into an apologetic for Christian liberal arts education was to emphasize that careful guardianship of the verities of the Christian faith does *not* imply—indeed it precludes—prevention of student inquiry into foreign worldviews. Proper exposure to the full range of ideas assists rather than handicaps Christian students in their appreciation of the rigor and beauty of their theological heritage. The challenge for leaders of theologically conservative schools, of course, is to balance this bold attitude of inquiry with their unwavering commitment to the theological standards that define them institutionally. For exactly how such doctrinal standards are articulated and how allegiance is regulated is likely to have an impact on students' willingness to do serious academic exploration. Let's face it. There is a profound tension here. On the one hand we tell students "honestly explore all you want," then we say, in one way or another, "but don't you dare question this and this and this." Faculty and staff at theologically conservative schools must be aware of how their school's strong doctrinal stances impact students' readiness to do serious academic exploration. This is an uncommonly delicate matter. A school's core theological commitments, if not expressed carefully, can undermine its educational mission. In the name of orthodoxy, a Christian college can unwittingly contribute to student foreclosure, freezing the flower of learning just as it begins to bloom.

So how can Christian institutions simultaneously endorse the bold exploration of ideas while insisting upon steadfast allegiance to its core theological standards? Is this reasonable, much less feasible? First, it should be stressed that *every* academic institution has its core commitments, just as every individual person does. The Christian college is not unique in this. In fact, every school, like every individual, has ultimate *theological* commitments, be they theistic, atheistic, pluralistic, or agnostic. The question is not whether or not a college takes a theological stance but what *kind* of theological stance it takes, even if that stance is represented as a non-stance. (Despite what religious skeptics might say, their perspective is itself a view about religion, not the absence of a view.) So every educational institution proceeds from some ultimate framework that has a theological component. The Christian college is simply a place where this component is self-consciously theistic and, furthermore, where a particular Christian sub-tradition is endorsed, e.g. Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, etc. Those persons who share these commitments are invited to come as they are to

participate, while those who do not share these commitments are, hopefully, invited to participate as well, provided they go along with the ground rules that characterize the school's tradition and culture.

So, yes, insisting upon allegiance to core theological commitments at a Christian college is reasonable, if only because every college has its theological assumptions. The Christian college is unique only in that its core commitments happen to be both positive and explicit. Christian colleges typically define themselves according to the classical creedal points as expressed in such statements of faith as the Nicene Creed and the Apostles Creed, viz. the doctrine of the Trinity, the virgin birth and physical resurrection of Christ, the last judgment, the natural sinfulness of humankind, the atoning work of Christ, and so on. To mandate affirmation of these beliefs at a Christian college seems altogether reasonable for the further reason that these doctrines frankly define what it means to *be* Christian. And schools that have more parochial theological concerns might want to mandate more specific doctrinal commitments as dictated by the standards of their sub-tradition. But wherever the line is drawn between the core, untouchable commitments of the school and the myriad other issues that are "fair game" for students, staff, and faculty alike, what is to be our attitude and manner when dealing with disagreements about the latter?

Lessons from Socrates and Scripture

It is a truism that everyone has opinions. And the more thoughtful a person is, the more opinions she is likely to have and, perhaps, the stronger they are likely to be. If a college is a place where more thoughtful people congregate to share and discuss ideas, then conflicting opinions should be expected to abound. Such disagreements are, generally speaking, a sign of good health at an educational institution (assuming they do not pertain to the institution's core commitments). But the real gauge of the maturity of an educational community is the manner in which its members handle those disagreements. Just as there are good and bad ways to take notes, prepare for exams, and write papers, there are also good and bad ways to disagree with others. Indeed, like these other educational skills, disagreeing well with others is somewhat of an art form, requiring careful practice for success.

So what is the proper manner of disagreeing with others? Clearly, we should display the virtues of kindness, courtesy, and respect when debating issues. Rudeness and impatience are always out of place but especially so in an academic environment, where the quest for understanding requires on-going interpersonal cooperation. But there is a trait that is more fundamental than these virtues and which, I believe, ultimately fosters them: humility—this is the essential ingredient for practicing the art of disagreement. Without a genuinely humble perspective, no student or professor will be able to maintain a kind and generous spirit in the context of debate. She will have no patience to hear another's counter-arguments, and, thus, she will close herself off to new avenues of understanding. Humility is essential not just for proper disagreement but for learning in general.

Nowhere has the virtue of intellectual humility been more strikingly displayed than in the life of the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates. After being told that he had been called the wisest man in Athens by the oracle at Delphi, Socrates was incredulous. He

proceeded to conduct personal interviews of reputedly wise people in order to refute the oracle. To his dismay Socrates found that those he interviewed consistently claimed to know more than they really did. On one such occasion, after being disappointed by an Athenian politician, Socrates reflected:

Well, I am certainly wiser than this man. It is only too likely that neither of us has any knowledge to boast of, but he thinks that he knows something which he does not know, whereas I am quite conscious of my ignorance. At any rate it seems that I am wiser than he is to this small extent, that I do not think that I know what I do not know (Plato, 1961a, pp. 7-8).

This was Socrates' conclusion after every conversation with the most esteemed men of Athens. The oracle at Delphi, he concluded, was correct after all. Socrates was indeed the wisest man in all of Athens but only because he had a healthy sense of his own ignorance. "Real wisdom," declared Socrates, "is the property of God, and . . . human wisdom has little or no value . . . The wisest of you men is he who has realized . . . that in respect of wisdom he is really nothing" (p. 9).

This approach, now generally characterized as "Socratic ignorance," epitomizes intellectual humility. And it partly explains why Socrates' impact on human history has been deemed more profound than that of anyone except Jesus (Taylor, 1952, p. 11). Socrates' presumption of ignorance enabled him to assess all truth-claims fairly and dispassionately. And it provided the best assurance that his beliefs were not distorted by emotion, desire, blind prejudice and other irrational factors that tend to cloud sound judgment.

Another feature of the Socratic method is the notion of philosophical midwifery. Socrates regarded himself as essentially a servant, specifically as one who helps others "give birth" to the ideas that lie dormant within them. He explains that his art is much like that of a midwife;

The only difference is that my patients are men, not women, and my concern is not with the body but with the soul that is in travail of birth. And the highest point of my art is the power to prove by every test whether the offspring of a young man's thought is a false phantom or instinct with life and truth. I am so far like the midwife that I cannot myself give birth to wisdom, and the common reproach is true, that, though I question others, I can myself bring nothing to light because there is no wisdom in me . . . The many admirable truths they bring to birth have been discovered by themselves from within. But the delivery is heaven's work and mine (Plato, 1961b, p. 855).

This is a powerful metaphor. In addition to the intellectual humility that it betokens, note that Socrates' educational approach is essentially communal, an interpersonal affair. A third feature of the Socratic method, closely connected to that of midwifery, highlights this point: the technique of dialectic. The means by which Socrates assists others in giving birth to wisdom is question and answer. A question is posed: "What is knowledge?" The student offers an answer: "Knowledge is whatever a person perceives." Then further questions follow: Are perceptions ever mistaken? Can a person dream he has had a perception? Are values or mathematical truths ever perceived?" and so on. Accordingly, the student will have to revise and adjust his definition or else abandon it

altogether and start over. This is the dialectical method. It tests truth claims through a rigorous process of review by question and answer. The value of this tool is that it is useful for distinguishing true knowledge from mere opinion. A person who knows can give a rational justification for his belief, whereas the person who merely opines cannot. To believe something in the absence of evidential support, however strong one's convictions, is not knowledge. The person who knows can give good reasons in defense of his belief.

These features of the Socratic method, the presumption of ignorance, midwifery, and the technique of dialectic, are premised upon a deep humility on the part of the learner. Only the intellectually humble person would be willing to admit that he lacks wisdom, subject himself to another's guidance, and expose his beliefs to tedious and repeated questioning. The intellectually proud, such as the leaders at Athens in Socrates' time, have no patience for this and are only antagonized by the process. The Athenians' response, predictably, was scorn. (They plotted against Socrates, falsely accused him, and convicted him on a charge of impiety, for which he was eventually executed.) Of course, human nature has not changed, and today the proud are no less inclined to bristle at having their beliefs questioned.

But it is not only Socrates and the Western philosophical tradition that descended from him that advocates intellectual humility. It is a virtue recommended repeatedly in scripture, based on both God's omniscience and transcendence. Regarding the first point, a recurring theme throughout the Bible, particularly in the wisdom literature, is the unfathomable wisdom of God. The Psalmist declares that God's "knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain" (Ps. 139:6).¹ And Paul exclaims, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" (Rom. 11:33). Elsewhere, in humorous fashion, Paul accentuates the contrast between human and divine understanding, when he says "the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom" (1 Cor. 1:25).

Nowhere is the contrast between divine and human knowledge more startlingly represented than in the book of Job. After three dozen chapters of dialogue between Job and his friends about God's goodness and wisdom in light of Job's severe suffering, including several instances in which Job impugns God's justice in permitting his plight, the Lord at last answers Job:

Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone—while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? (Job 38:2-7).

And so goes the divine rebuke for four relentless chapters, itemizing the terrestrial and celestial wonders orchestrated by God, thus putting Job back into his humble mortal place. We can hear the sigh in Job's voice when he finally declares in response "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know" (Job 42:1). And to this he adds, "My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (vs. 5-6).

These passages afford sober insight into the proverb that says “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Pr. 1:7). It was only by glimpsing the terrible greatness of God that Job could begin to see just how pathetically feeble was his own understanding. Indeed, if we are to take the biblical proclamations of the knowledge and wisdom of God seriously, we can come to no other conclusion. It is reassuring, then, to hear from the apostle Peter that the “divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness” (2 Pet. 1:3). Despite our limited grasp of the nature of things, God has made sure to clearly reveal to us at least all that is necessary for right living.

As if our finitude and smallness of mind were not enough to keep us intellectually humble, God has also intentionally concealed himself and much that is true about him. The prophet Isaiah declares, “Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Savior of Israel” (Is. 45:15). And some things he only selectively reveals, apparently precisely to those who are naturally most humble, as is evident in this provocative prayer of Jesus: “I praise you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure” (Mt. 11:25).

In light of the foregoing considerations, we have overwhelmingly good philosophical and theological reasons to display intellectual humility. But now, the question arises, how do we transform the Socratic method and biblical injunctions to humble ourselves into actual practice of the art of disagreement? How does this translate into conduct, especially in a Christian academic context?

“In Non-Essentials, Liberty”: Credal Points and Disputable Matters

A well-known epigram enjoins Christians to exhibit unity in essentials, liberty in non-essentials, and in all things, charity.² This useful threefold distinction is based in the Pauline approach to divisions in the church. In 1 Corinthians, the apostle appeals to believers to “agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Cor. 1:10). Elsewhere, this ideal of complete unity is balanced off with the recognition that disagreements between Christians are bound to arise about many issues and that such differences are to be tolerated, so long as they pertain to “disputable matters” (Rom. 14:1). Paul focuses on the *unity in practice* that is still achievable even amidst *diversity of opinion* about issues that are neither central to the faith nor subject to decisive theological demonstration. His illustrative focus in Romans 14 is the eating of meat that has been offered to idols, but any number of issues could have been used, then as today, from convictions about capital punishment to the viewing of R-rated films. About such disputable matters, Paul says “Whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God” (Rom. 14:22). As biblical scholar Thomas Schreiner comments, “Paul does not expect an undifferentiated unity in the assembly in which everyone agrees on every matter. He does not expect or even desire unanimity of opinion. All believers are expected to live in accord with their conscience and to grant freedom to others to disagree” (Schreiner, p. 348). How much more so should this attitude prevail at the Christian college, where doctrinal agreement is less urgent than it is within the church.

To the extent, then, that a Christian college makes mandates about disputable matters, such as in a formal lifestyle agreement, it risks crossing the Pauline line of Christian liberty and compromising its own commitment to academic freedom. Even if such mandates are framed in solely behavioral terms (e.g., prohibiting tobacco usage while not insisting that students actually *believe* this to be wrong), an institution can insinuate that differing convictions on these issues are intolerable. This threatens to undermine an environment of free and humble inquiry and reinforce student foreclosure on such issues. Extra work will be necessary to properly model the virtue of intellectual humility and the art of disagreement.

But even at Christian colleges where views on (and behavioral manifestations of) disputable issues are not mandated there remains the more fundamental challenge of reconciling absolute commitment to the essential doctrines of the faith and the virtue of intellectual humility. How can the two be squared in practice? As noted above, there is no real inconsistency here, since every school has its core commitments. The Christian college simply seeks to organize itself according to a basic theological heritage, such as is expressed in the creedal points of the faith. The real challenge for the Christian college lies in practically communicating this, and all faculty and staff at an institution should be prepared to do so if the school is to succeed in training students to be genuinely inquisitive critical thinkers. Faculty and staff must themselves display intellectual humility by opening their minds to new ideas, actively exploring new perspectives, and inviting critical review of their beliefs, all the while maintaining a winsome but unwavering commitment to the theological verities that define the school's ultimate mission. Such would be to realize the ideal of unity in essentials, liberty in non-essentials, and charity in all things.

Faculty Modeling of Intellectual Humility

It is not enough to model the virtue of intellectual humility in an informal way. We must look for ways to do so formally, to create public forums that showcase the art of disagreement and a mature Christian willingness to admit one's ignorance. It was towards this end that seven years ago I initiated a faculty dialogue series at Taylor University, a primary aim of which is to educate the community about pressing contemporary issues, from art censorship to the ethics of war. An equally significant function of these dialogues is the way they model a humble approach to the difficult issues discussed. During preparation, I remind faculty panelists that their strong competence regarding the subject matter is readily on display, so no posturing is necessary. And I encourage them to explicitly admit their ignorance when they are stumped by a question or are unsure about some aspect of the issue. Faculty consistently respond positively to this and usually succeed in presenting a humble approach. Not surprisingly, this is one of the aspects of these dialogues that draw the most positive response from students, who often express a special admiration for faculty who are guarded or reserved in their claims, let alone those who bluntly declare their ignorance.

At the same time, panelists are encouraged to defend their positions earnestly, which is not problematic since each is chosen because of his or her stance on the issue under discussion. But they are encouraged to defend their views graciously, and, nearly always, they do so. Consequently, students are treated to the double benefit of hearing informed

defenses of a variety of views on an issue, while witnessing an exchange of ideas executed with all Christian courtesy and respect. Thus, they see conviction and humility modeled together, two traits that are too seldom present together in the academy today, whether in secular or Christian schools.

This is just one way that Christian intellectual humility can be modeled for students by faculty. Another way that I strive to model this virtue is less formal and more intimate. I am often asked to speak at residence halls or student groups on campus about a range of issues. And, when my schedule permits, I am eager to oblige. The topics students choose are usually inspired by current events, so they can be amusingly wide-ranging, from child rearing to animal rights. On each such occasion I make a point to emphasize my ignorance to students about various aspects of the topic. One of the ways I do this is by posing multiple additional questions spawned by the questions they themselves pose to me. In doing so, I demonstrate that I, too, am a student, a life-long learner who is every bit as curious as they are. Hopefully, this will inspire in them a more bold and energetic curiosity and affirm that brute sense of wonder that many of us tragically lose in our passage to adulthood. There is a certain exhilaration that goes with realizing one's ignorance, that one's meager knowledge—perhaps represented by a few graduate degrees—is dwarfed by all there is to know in this cosmos and, most profoundly, by the infinite wisdom of its Creator. The joy of wonder can be contagious, and frank, honest discussion of complex issues is a powerful vector of this attitude.

Faculty and staff can foster intellectual humility among students by initiating either of these sorts of student encounters with faculty. At Taylor many of my student development colleagues have followed my lead and now faculty forums are regularly organized by them as well as students leaders. As was my hope when I first conceived the plan, my administrative services are no longer necessary to keep the forums going. Consequently, intellectual humility is more widely idealized among our students, and the art of disagreement is better practiced by them as well.

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Footnotes (Endnotes)

- ¹ All biblical quotations are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.
- ² Commonly attributed to the Puritan theologian Richard Baxter, this quote actually predates him. For more on the history of this epigram, see Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 650-653.