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Christianity and the Soul of the University: Faith as a Foundation for Intellectual Community

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Douglas V. Henry and Michael D. Beaty, Editors **Christianity and the Soul of the University:** **Faith as a Foundation for Intellectual Community**

Reviewed by Barry Loy

If you have ever wished for a better understanding of the mind of Christian intellectuals, this is the book for you. *Christianity and the Soul of the University: Faith as a foundation for intellectual community* is the published outcome of the March 2004 conference co-sponsored by The Baylor Institute for Faith and Learning and The Council of Christian Scholarly Societies. According to the program description, conference goals included the following:

- *To underscore the place that Christian faith should hold as scholars consider how they are called to intellectual labor and how they regard their disciplines.*
- *To remind Christian scholars of the vision of the faith as a comprehensive, unsurpassable, and central account of human life and the world in relation to God.*
- *To promote the vision of an intellectual and spiritual community that aims at comprehending and appropriating the all-encompassing Christian vision of life, and doing so not incidentally, but as an essential and unifying aspect of all academic disciplines.*

The three-day gathering included 5 plenary sessions and a multitude of concurrent meetings consisting of over 100 speakers. Baker Academic, the publisher, included the 5 plenary talks and chose 5 essays from the concurrent sessions for the final volume. The book is divided into two main sections – basic issues and vital practices.

The first section describes intellectual community as a community founded upon the incarnation of Jesus Christ and driven by reflective Christian faith. The second part explores ways in which institutions might comprehend and live out a commitment to the belief that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3).

Given that the aims of the conference were rather expansive, the 10 essays are loosely connected but all do support the basic premise that the Christian faith is at the bottom of all true intellectual community. Polkinghorne argues in chapter 3 that every intellectual community, sacred or secular, that seeks truth, whether they know it or not,

are ultimately searching for the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Polkinghorne goes further and claims that the quest for truth is a search for the work of the Word “by whom all things were made, and without whom was not anything made that was made” (John 1:3).

The primary audience of this book is Christian scholars, not student development practitioners - all the more reason that those of us in student affairs should read the book. We sometimes lament how our faculty colleagues do not understand our work and I’m sure they have similar feelings about us from time to time. An afternoon or day spent with *Christianity and the Soul of the University* gives one much insight into the motives, zeal and passions of our fellow educators.

In addition to helping us understand the academic enterprise and the work of the teaching faculty on our campuses, several of the essays have implications for the out of class educational pursuits of student affairs. I’ll share just a few examples below.

In the opening chapter, Richard Hayes, using 1 John, provides a rich explanation of the Biblical idea of community and the concept of “Koinonia”. He explains that Koinonia is more than fellowship, sharing, and social relationships. It is a deep bond of common interest and commitment that leads us to “know” the truth and “do” the truth. Hayes maintains that we must teach our students to do the truth – to seek holiness, justice, peace, and reconciliation. And to do this within community not as disembodied intellects but as a meeting of persons.

In chapter 4, Joel Carpenter reminds us that the center of Christianity is moving South and East and that Christian scholars must reorient their course (and courses) accordingly. As support he uses the example of Africa. In 1900 there were about 9 million Christians in Africa. Today the number is estimated at 382 million. Carpenter argues that these growth trends call Christian scholars to relocate their scholarship toward new interests and strategies to serve the growing church in

the Southern Hemisphere. This calls those of us in student development to ponder what it might mean for us to reorient our work toward the South and East. What would it look like for our student development programs to become more global in scope?

The success of becoming less centered on the concerns of Christians in the North and West may depend on our ability to practice hospitality. In chapter 7, Aurelie Hagstrom argues that Christian higher education must recover and appropriate hospitality as a moral category that benefits the development of community as well as the pursuit of scholarly inquiry. She also maintains that through the practice of Christian hospitality, colleges and universities can embody lively places of learning, stronger and more interesting than their secular counterparts, because of their religious identity.

In the ninth chapter, Mark Sargent and Daniel Russ reflect on something very close to the hearts of Christian student affairs professionals - the task of understanding the New Testament as a compelling moral vision and not simply a reductive behavioral code. Sargent and Russ encourage us to use our “moral imagination” as we consider two general streams of moral thought: the concern for personal integrity and piety and the concern for justice and redemptive action. The authors especially call us to do more to engage our students in imaginative thinking that works to promote social hope. Students need more than simple reminders about engaging culture and caring about the world's pressing problems. They also need practice and discipline in civic dialogue and civic engagement.

Christianity and the Soul of the University sets before us a challenge to work hard to pursue truth and to act truthfully within our college and university communities. In chapter 2, Jean Bethke Elshtain cautions us against accepting and substituting simplistic therapeutization for the rigorous life. She reminds us of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's dislike of mushy arguments and soft theology. While most of us in student affairs may not have a calling to rigorous scholarship, we do have the responsibility of intellectual labor. *Christianity and the Soul of the University* challenges me to undergird my student affairs practice with serious intellectual effort. The essays call us to live within our intellectual communities in ways that help us love God with “all our hearts, with all our understanding, and with all our strength” (Mark 12:33).