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The Passionate Intellect: Incarnational Humanism and the Future of University Education

Norman Klassen and Jens Zimmermann; (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006).

Reviewed by David M. Johnstone

The world of philosophy has always been somewhat elusive, esoteric and puzzling to me. In college, discussions about philosophy would often turn to reflections on Kant, Locke, Sartre, Nietzsche or Russell. They would flow around the nature of knowledge, the implications of economics, and the struggle with defining a “prime reality.” Frequently, I would refer to my pocket dictionary in order to understand the words used by my friends and would then desperately struggle to comprehend what they were explaining. Now, many years later, I realize that many of these conversations were actually full of bluster. They were attempts by my classmates to bolster their image and confidence by articulating newfound vocabulary and knowledge. However, I need to confess that I still find some (many) philosophical conversations unassailable, particularly due to my strengths, training and interest.

This feeling that certain knowledge is inaccessible sometimes is translated into the view that those who do not understand are actually uneducated. An example of this was observed aired in the 2006 U.S. elections. In an interview with David Kuo on “60 minutes,” the author of *Tempting Faith* suggested, “I think that Christians need, particularly evangelical Christians, need to take a step back, to have a fast from politics. People are being manipulated” (Reinhard, B8). While there may have been a true concern expressed, there was also an underlying arrogance and belief that evangelical believers were uneducated, unsophisticated and easily duped. In discussing this interview, a newspaper editorialist reflected back on a 1993 *Washington Post* article that stated conservative Christians “are largely poor, uneducated and easy to command” (Reinhard, B8). This intellectual arrogance and disdain is reflected both in popular media and within secular academia.

In a solid attempt to teach young evangelicals how to engage and not fear the “world,” Norman Klassen and Jens Zimmermann have written *The Passionate Intellect*. In response to the disdain that suggests evangelicals in higher education are anti-intellectual or even childlike, the authors have sought to present an accessible survey of philosophical worldviews and a possible understanding of how to line up these views within a Christian worldview. Even more basically, they have tried to reflect on the implications of gaining knowledge and living as a follower of Jesus. They have responded by not only explaining the philosophical distinctive of each form of humanism explored, but have also discussed the “social dimension to the acquisition of knowledge” (p. 9). For the authors, gaining knowledge and growing in understanding is congruent with faith in Jesus.

Klassen and Zimmermann have taken the challenge of whether a person of faith can navigate through this world of humanist philosophy and the mind. They argue the case for faith-based humanism (*Incarnational Humanism*) as a legitimate intellectual and academic discipline. They also help the world of humanism become understandable and accessible to the uninitiated. Using language that is familiar and

unpretentious, they present the distinctive qualities and development of humanism over history.

Klassen and Zimmermann's intention is focused on providing a resource for undergraduate college students in both faith-based and secular institutions. They do not intend to provide an apologetic arsenal to fight secularism. They seek to provide knowledge and understanding which will reinforce a student's faith. The authors also affirm that it is possible to be a thinking follower of Jesus. They desire to augment a student's confidence in the face of the academic argument that Christianity is anti-intellectual. They are concerned that the force of these academic arguments may cause many believing students to question their own suitability for a university education (p. 185).

As they begin to trace the roots of humanism, they observe that "[d]isembodied truth, existing in a neutral nowhere, is not a biblical notion" (p. 31). The authors identify that within the Christian tradition, a "genuine self knowledge is impossible without an external measure of our humanity" (p. 33). They further identify a sense that the thought and intelligence necessary to understanding the human experience is common within Christianity. Therefore, they travel back to the thoughts of the medievalist Thomas Aquinas who, as a holistic thinker, was "able to balance respect for reason and for the mysteries of revealed religion" (p. 47). Beginning at this point, they survey the many forms of what became known as humanism as it developed through the centuries.

Even as late as the 16th century, scientists and philosophers "saw no conflict whatsoever between their scientific endeavors and the Christian faith" (p. 73). René Descartes (1596-1650), a seventeenth-century Christian thinker, began to separate sensory observation from deducing knowledge from reason. There became an increased emphasis on reason being the only legitimate means by which truth could be discerned. Therefore, "reason, freed from the trammels of tradition, history, and language, would discover the true ends of human existence" (p. 79). These ideas became the catalyst for the modern notion of separating faith and sensory observation from reason. Formally, this separation birthed dualism, which became one of the hallmarks of the Enlightenment humanism. This dualism was defined by a "great chasm open[ing] up between the realm of the Creator and the created order" (p. 86). God was perceived as removed and distant; certainly a creator but no longer active with his creation.

As the decades and centuries unfolded, humanism changed further until it was assaulted and undermined by the rise and development of post-modernism. However, Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) reminded the world "that humanism was founded on the concept of human dignity, essential for all human intellectual and social activity" (p. 130). Following this lead, Klassen and Zimmermann have suggested using humanism as a legitimate platform for the development of a discipline which is congruent and coherent with rigorous study, thought and faith. They call this discipline "Incarnational Humanism." They suggest that within this discipline the dualism previously found in humanism can come to an end. A holistic approach to knowledge is once again possible where "all knowledge is united...under the lordship of Christ because in him the divine and the human are firmly joined forever" (p. 149). While they are much more articulate and thorough in their explanation, they see this model of humanism "as the foundation of university education" (p. 149).

The authors then pointedly address the reader by writing, “Given the saga of the university, the way humanism has turned on Christians, and the crisis of the contemporary university, you may well wonder how you can thrive during the years you spend there” (p. 155). They go on by encouraging the reader by stating that “... since all truth is God’s truth, you can learn in the environment of any contemporary university. You can connect on the issues that concern many people today” (p. 155). The dualism which separates the spirit, emotions, relationships and community is no longer adequate. In Incarnational Humanism, reason is meshed with faith into a holistic view of the universe which is entirely congruent with being a follower of Jesus.

The authors begin to wrap up their observations with some counsel and reflections directed at future and current Christian university students. They challenge them by saying, “Never separate faith from learning” (p. 186). They note that a true liberal arts university “allows the student to integrate acquired skills toward a universally acknowledged goal of character formation and of growth into a greater understanding of what it means to be human” (p. 191). Klassen and Zimmermann caution that dualism leads to a separation of “academics from moral-spiritual development” (p. 192). In essence dualism stands in opposition to a holistic liberal arts education. Most significantly, the authors make the following assertion about education: “Only when our deepest assumptions are challenged will we be able to hold our faith with the kind of intelligent conviction that makes us credible witnesses of the new humanity instituted by Christ” (p. 194). Reason and faith must be linked in education.

Klassen and Zimmermann succeed in helping readers understand the many streams of humanism and how and where they might oppose, diverge or agree with a Christian worldview. For the novice philosophy student, of whom I would include myself, this volume provided plenty of insight and cause for reflection. However, more important than the analysis of humanism in its many forms was the challenge to readers to be wise and knowledgeable about the worldviews that drive academia. The authors’ thesis has articulated and with insight laid the challenge not to be fearful or disrespectful of academia or the educational enterprise.

As I sit contemplating my final words, my thoughts are regularly interrupted by conversation and reflections centered on a local tragedy which occurred this week. Five days ago an alum was killed in terrible car accident. My memories of him span his college career and his post-graduation work as one of the town’s most proficient baristas. Our many conversations revolved around botany, music, pop culture, faith and the meaning of life. My guess is that his depth of thought and character began before entering college. Yet the refining, sharpening and development of his intelligence, humor, faith and ability to extend grace occurred during his experience at college. At a very basic level, Klassen and Zimmermann are encouraging a synthesis of knowledge, relationships and things of the Spirit. The alum mentioned above reflected the life hoped for by the authors. *Soli Deo Gloria*.

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Reference:

David Reinhard (2006, October 19). Evangelical Christians, don’t forget to (not) vote. *The Oregonian*, p. B8.