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Beyond Integration: Inter-Disciplinary Possibilities for the Future of Christian Higher Education

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Beyond Integration: Inter-Disciplinary Possibilities for the Future of Christian Higher Education

Ream, T. C., Pattengale, J., & Riggs, D. L. (2012).
Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press.

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Reviewed by Ed Jordan

Sensing an impending need to shift the presuppositional focus of current Christian scholarship, the editors, Todd C. Ream, Jerry Pattengale and David L. Riggs, undertook to reexamine the philosophical underpinnings of the dominant “integration model” driving scholarship at most Christian colleges and universities. The editors all hold faculty posts at Christian Universities, have collectively published numerous articles, monographs and books, and hold prestigious fellowships and scholarly research posts. Their goal in the present work is “to draw together a number of prominent voices who are beginning to reflect upon the nature of Christian scholarship as it may exist beyond the influence of the integration model” (15). The contributors all hold terminal degrees in their respective disciplines (save Jade Avelis who is currently a fifth year Ph.D. student at Notre Dame) and represent a spectrum of age and experience which serves the collective project well by providing a balance of fresh and seasoned perspectives.

The title refers to the approach to scholarship popular with many contemporary Christian scholars, especially those at Christian colleges and universities, i.e., the *way* they approach their work regardless of the type of school at which they are employed. The closest thing to a definition of what the contributors seek to move Christian scholars beyond is offered in the first entry by James K. A. Smith when he summarizes his review of the integration model by stating that it is “a kind of Christian scholarship that is actually a mode of syncretism” where “one could simply add Christ to existing structures and commitments” (24) similar to the issues Paul addresses in his letter to the churches in Colossae. The contributors are collectively advocating a “*unity* (not the integration) of faith and learning” as Van Leeuwen and Avelis state directly (129, emphasis theirs). The aim of the book is to move beyond this model because integration, by definition, requires disparate parts coming together; faith becomes an additive to the ingredients of various disciplines. The exhortation from the contributors is instead to engage academe more holistically from a posture of *being*, rooted in who we are in Christ, rather than primarily a posture of *knowing* and thereby avoiding ascension to a false dualism wherein one somehow divorces faith from reason.

The first chapter by James K. A. Smith is easily the longest in the collection and serves as a formal introduction to the topic at hand. Readers more familiar with this type of academic discussion may breeze through in a single read, but others may require at least one re-read to fully grasp all that Smith lays before them. The extra toil is worth the effort because his work serves as a sort of hitching post for the other contributors and is essential for understanding the issue(s) they individually seek to address.

In the Foreword, John Wilson explicitly and correctly states that the essays “can’t readily be assembled to form a coherent picture” (10). That is not to say that the contributors are incoherent just that the collective result reads more like a thematic anthology than a focused collection of essays. Still, there is a loose structure most contributors follow consisting of a brief historical overview of the discipline including Protestant influences, the present milieu of the discipline and suggestions for moving forward without compromising evangelical beliefs. This loose structural pattern provides some predictability without plodding. In this form each chapter reads well, independent of the others, allowing prospective readers the opportunity to focus on disciplines of personal interest while skipping others with the exception of Smith’s contribution (see above). However, Wilson’s assessment of a general incoherence is probably why I am still unresolved on the *reason* for the assembling of the present work. It is clear, as stated, that the editors intuitively feel a shift in philosophy is necessary, but the rationale and justification for doing so remains unclear.

That said, the project possesses value in providing a starting point for conversation about *how* Christians in academe can and should approach their respective disciplines – a conversation with implications for Christians across sectors and industries though the broader discussion is addressed in other works, e.g., Tim Keller’s recent *Every Good Endeavor*. Wilson concludes his Foreword by surmising the organization of the present volume “suggests an occasion for a sequel” (12). Perhaps a sequel will allow the conversation to advance more coherently now that it has begun since this work does sufficiently introduce the reader to current development in scholarly thought with future implications for Christians in the academy.

Because of the academic leaning of the essays, the work will probably most interest those currently working in Academic Affairs more so than those specifically in areas of Student Affairs/Development. There is some value for those involved at administrative levels since it provides helpful insight into the academic portion of our co-curricular world. While new professionals in Student Affairs/Development may find elements of the project helpful or interesting, they will be largely unaffected by the specifics of the contributions and may find better resources to spend their time consuming in their formative career development. Perhaps a future work that more sufficiently addresses the “*why*” aspects of moving “Beyond Integration” will hold broader appeal, but the present work may only find a niche readership. 