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An Essay on the Integration of Faith and Learning

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I lay it down that all knowledge forms one whole, because its subject-matter is one; for the universe in its length and breadth is so intimately knit together, that we cannot separate off portion from portion, and operation from operation, except by a mental abstraction; and then again, as to its Creator, though He of course in His own Being is infinitely separate from it... yet He has so implicated Himself with it, and taken into His very bosom, by His presence in it, His providence over it, His impressions upon it, and His influences through it, that we cannot truly or fully contemplate it without in some main aspects contemplating Him... .

I consider Knowledge [sic] to have end in itself. For all its friends, or its enemies, may say, I insist upon it, that it is as real a mistake to burden it with virtue or religion as with the mechanical arts. Its direct business is not to steel the soul against temptation or to console it in affliction. . . . Knowledge is one thing, virtue is another; good sense is not conscience, refinement is not humility, nor is largeness and justness of view faith. Philosophy, however enlightened, however profound, gives no command over the passions, no influential motives, no vivifying principles. Liberal Education [sic] makes not the Christian, not the Catholic, but the gentleman.

John Henry Newman,
The Idea of a University

By the middle of the nineteenth century British universities were in the initial phases of secularization. Given the ascendancy of enlightenment skepticism among English academics on the one hand, and the founding of England's first non-sectarian institution of advanced learning--the University of London (est. 1836)--on the other, contemporaries sensed that institutions of higher education had begun to slip their religious moorings.

John Henry Newman was particularly well-positioned to address such developments. A don at Oriel College, Oxford, in
the 1820s, a minister in the Church of England, and a central figure of the Anglo-Catholic Oxford movement, Newman was eventually led by his convictions into the Catholic priesthood, a step culminating in 1879 with his appointment as Cardinal. In education as in faith, Newman saw himself as an apologist for Christian traditionalism. Thus, when in 1851 he was invited to deliver a series of lectures in Ireland regarding the merits of establishing a new university on religious foundations, he eagerly accepted the opportunity to outline his views on the meaning of Christian education—discourses that were to become his *The Idea of a University*.

In many respects, Newman's observations are apposite to present considerations of Christian liberal arts. The common denominator, perhaps, is a feeling of beleaguerment—the perception that people of Christian conviction are not taken seriously in the academy, moreover that the university itself, absent its religious orientations, lacks integrity, both in the sense of cohesion and of moral character.³

Newman offers a twofold response to rally the faithful. First, he maintains that as truth is unified under the Creator from whom it proceeds, the branches of knowledge around which liberal education is organized are intimately related—each reflects the activity of God. From a Christian perspective the university is necessarily integrated, its various fields of study collectively aspiring to the end of universal knowledge. Thus all academic disciplines have theological justification as partial revelations of God’s truth in creation.

But second, and more boldly, Newman rejects sectarianism for liberal academic engagement. Even in a "Christian" college, few strictures should be placed on the direction and content of the search for truth. According to Newman, the task of the church must not be confused with that of the university; the former aims to cultivate moral judgment, the latter to cultivate the intellect.

For that reason the proscription of certain themes from the classroom for causes of religion is ill-conceived. Newman is well aware of the risks in permitting liberal education to pursue its own course. He writes that "it concurs with Christianity a certain way, and then diverges from it; and consequently proves in the event, sometimes its serviceable ally, sometimes, from its very resemblance to it, an insidious and dangerous foe."³ Yet he will not abide a curriculum whose essential purpose is to transmit religious dogma. He insists that the university is not a convent, not a seminary, rather a place to educate people of the world for the world. And one needs intellectual freedom to explore that world—its natural and social order—to be prepared for it.

That is not to say that Christianity and higher education are antithetical—far from it. To begin, as an academic discipline explicitly concerned with the knowledge of God, in Newman's view theology must have a place at the university table. And since each branch of learning bears on the cosmic
significance of the others, the inclusion of theology in the university syllabus may serve as a partial corrective to disciplines that neglect or at the limit are hostile to religion.

But more than this, what makes a university Christian from Newman's perspective is not the substance of the curriculum but the ethos of the place. Religion's influence is evidenced through teachers who embody Christian virtues, who temper intellectual inquiry and achievement with humility and charity, and who place themselves in the service of their students. Clearly, Newman expects that Christianity will prove appealing by reason of example. But if there is a practical end to liberal education--and Newman is reluctant to cast his argument in such terms--it is to train good members of the polity, individuals possessing civic discernment and largeness of spirit, be they Christians or not.

Because there is much in all this that I find compelling, I want to use Newman's observations as a template to organize my own. University faculty operate in at least two professional capacities (their administrative tasks duly noted)--as students of their respective disciplines and as instructors in the classroom. Consequently, I wish to address two questions: (1) How does Christianity relate to my study of politics?; and (2) How does Christianity influence my teaching of politics? Following Newman's lead, the paradoxical answer will be that Christianity has everything to do and little to do with the way in which I approach my profession.

I. Christianity and the Study of Politics

From a Christian perspective, politics is an especially appropriate field of study. Theologically speaking, the pursuit of political knowledge is part of an attempt to understand God's truth regarding the organization of social life, government a manifestation of God's providence for the human condition. Political theorists with religious sensibilities--Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Mornay, Locke, among the most prominent--have often maintained that the state is in some sense a divinely ordained institution, that political legitimacy turns on conformity to the moral principles inherent in creation. And even those theorists whose Christian credentials are more dubious have often recognized the politically integrative effect of religion--the civic faith of Machiavelli and Rousseau, for example.

My own concept of politics is instrumental: politics is a means of making collective decisions that afford life in community. To be sure, these are social decisions of a special kind--authoritative in that they ultimately have appeal to coercion, exercised through the agency of the state, to ensure compliance. (That is not to suggest, however, that superior coercive ability is definitive of political authority.) In this manner politics mediates the tension between selfish-interest--on the Christian view a manifestation of sin--and sociability, two conflicting yet arguably innate human dispositions. Operating
from a different set of assumptions but to much the same end, Aristotle called politics the "master science," seeing it as a method of giving skills, social activities, and group interests priority in rival claims over the scarce resources of the polity. The political process brings order to the polity, reconciling alternative and often self-serving calculations of individual wants and needs with a simultaneous desire for a rich and peaceful social existence, and thereby making possible the achievement of collective aspirations. Simply put, for most people the solitary life is not as satisfying as life in community, and where there is no politics there can be no stable community.

The theological import of politics aside, there are also good empirical reasons why students of politics should pay attention to matters of faith. To state the obvious, religion can be a central variable explaining political belief and behavior. At the widest level of analysis, religion is often a critical factor in forming a nation's political culture—the matrix of beliefs and attitudes that citizens have about the political order and their place in it. So, for instance, the liberal political culture of the United States—liberal in the classical sense of a commitment to individualism, the essential equality of all persons, negative liberty (freedom from government), and the free market—is often attributed to the dominance of Protestantism in the early years of the republic, especially of the low church variety. Indeed, Tocqueville claimed that American history was determined by the first Puritan who touched American soil, and that by regulating domestic life, religion was able to regulate the state itself. But even more directly, Americans have tended to invest their country with spiritual significance, political leaders placing religious language in the service of the national interest. From the "city on a hill" of the seventeenth century, to the "manifest destiny" of the nineteenth, to the fight against "godless communism" in the twentieth, the moralistic strain in American political culture has been evident.

Relatedly, religion can serve to legitimate government—an insight found in numerous Marxist and functional (e.g. Durkheim, Parsons) accounts of politics. No doubt the authority of the church can be used to buttress political power. In Europe, for example, it is no coincidence that where the established church has been the most authoritarian—Greece, Italy, the Iberian peninsula—democracy has taken the longest to root. Yet the reverse is also true. With respect to Christianity the experience of Eastern Europe and Central America is instructive, likewise the Islamic resurgence in the countries of the Persian Gulf, North Africa, and Southeast Asia: where the political authorities have attempted to suppress religion, religion has sometimes emerged as a force opposed to the powers that be, though not always a democratic force.

In liberal-democratic societies religion may also be an important variable in explaining voting decisions and
partisanship. Electoral research suggests that people often choose to support this or that candidate far less on rational than on morally intuitive and religious grounds. In the first instance, it must be remembered that certain parties have explicitly religious origins—the influence of Methodism on the formation of the British Labour Party, of the social gospellers on the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in Canada, of the Catholic Church on various European Christian Democratic parties. And although most parties have moved beyond specifically sectarian appeals (though not all—e.g. the Indian and Israeli party systems), the tie between the way a person votes and his or her religious orientation can prove durable. Thus for much of its history the American party system had a distinct religious configuration: liturgical Protestants and Catholics tended to vote Democratic, pietistic Protestants tended to vote Whig and Republican. So too in Canada where at the federal level, at least until the 1980s, the Liberal Party benefitted from impressive Catholic support. Even in countries where the most conspicuous manifestations of religion—church membership, church attendance, and so on—are diminished, religious belief can yet be a clue to partisan cleavage. Hence in Western Europe, despite a generally a-religious social climate, nominal religious affiliation has been the best predictor of voting behavior for most of the post-war period, even better than class position. In short, students of politics ignore the independent effect of religion on government and politics at their peril.

It might be said with equal emphasis, however, that students of religion are well-advised to consider the influence of government on their discipline. To put the case most dramatically, in some sense the very survival of religion depends on politics. The preservation of religion as a public force of consequence is, at least in part, related to constitutional provisions affecting the distribution of political power. So, for instance, it is often remarked that the structure of American government has heightened the salience of organized religion in the United States. Since for most of the republic’s history churches have had the constitutional status of voluntary organizations, favored neither by special legal privileges nor unduly encumbered by legal prohibitions, diverse religious institutions have been left with considerable room for maneuver. Further, given the decentralized nature of American government relative to other liberal democracies, religiously inspired interest groups have had numerous access points for civic influence. And as the first amendment provisions of the US constitution—specifically, the establishment and free exercise clauses—leave open the precise relationship between church and state, questions concerning government regulation of religion have remained politically relevant.  

More than this, religious practice can reflect existing political-economies. Thus a recent book on the shape of religion in the United States relates the ways in which the American church has conformed to the realities of capitalism, a
circumstance allowing organized religion to survive, indeed to thrive if in the author's opinion at the expense of theological depth and integrity. Of course the direction of influence between capitalism and religion can run the other way, too, as Max Weber most famously noted. From a Christian perspective none of this should be surprising—politics and religion, and the study of politics and religion, are linked because, pace Newman, knowledge is of a piece, united through the Creator.

Finally and more narrowly, faith may impinge on the discipline of politics with respect to the means by which political understanding is advanced. That is not to claim that there is a distinctively Christian response to the technical questions of political science. Christians no less than any other students of politics should be pleased to dine at a methodological "cafeteria of the center", welcoming diverse approaches to political inquiry. And it is equally incumbent on Christians that their research conform to the highest standards of disciplinary integrity—work that passes the litmus test of internal consistency, coherence, and accordance with the facts.

With respect to issues surrounding the scientific status of political study, however, a scholar's faith perspective may well be pertinent. Broadly construed, political science qua science refers to a systematically constructed and organized body of knowledge regarding the subject of politics. Most likely this is the way that a majority of political scientists understand their discipline. But for certain students of politics this is not enough. On this stricter and more recent view, politics can appropriate the name science only if it is modelled after the standards of the natural and physical sciences; that is to say that politics must become a positive science, relying exclusively on the empirical observation of political behavior and using such data to formulate general laws with which to explain and ultimately predict political behavior.

About this more exacting notion of political science scholars of faith can afford to be skeptical. That is not to diminish the contributions of behavioral and rigorously quantitative methods to political understanding—electoral analysis has been particularly advantaged, for example. But questions can be raised concerning the hard scientific approach to politics in at least two respects. First, Christian students of politics are correct to challenge theories or approaches that underestimate human agency. Created by God in the image of God, human beings are free to make choices—to reason, to innovate, to live in harmony with creation and God—and are held accountable for such choices; on the Christian view it is hard to accept that individuals are essentially the captives of impersonal social forces. To illustrate, at the level of a "grand theory" of politics the dialectical materialism outlined in Marx and Engels' early essays—on which basis the two claimed to be scientific socialists—suggests social determinism. To claim that there are natural laws of political development, that there is a necessary
and immutable relationship between economic and political power, that historical change of a certain sort is inevitable, diminishes individual choice as a factor of independent political importance. In retrospect, of course, class conflict in Western Europe and North America did not result in the revolutionary assumption of power by the workers but was moderated through trade unionism, party politics, and the welfare state. And one suspects that the predictive power of classical Marxist theory was thus found wanting partly because it lacked a nuanced view of human psychology.

A more recent and sophisticated instance of the same problem may be found in rational choice/public choice approaches to politics. This methodology, borrowing from economic models of decision-making, posits the citizen as a consumer of public goods and services, regards society as a collection of consumers who are rational and egoistical—that is to say each person is assumed to act so as to maximize personal satisfactions at minimal cost—and construes the public interest in utilitarian fashion as the optimization of all individual goods. One difficulty with this is that the analogy between political and economic activity is inexact. Whereas the costs and benefits of economic decision-making can be expressed via a common unit of measurement—money—not so in the instance of politics (i.e. what is politics' common currency—power, influence, status, happiness?). Further, from a Christian perspective there is something counter-intuitive about expressing the public good as merely the sum of all individual selfish interests. But equally indicting, as people of faith should attest, is that individuals are not narrowly rational in all instances—surely there is room for tradition, habit, selflessness, and altruism as additional social scientific explanations of human behavior. Consequently, for many students of politics the merit of alternative qualitative and hermeneutical methodologies lies precisely in the attempt to explore more thoroughly a political actor's motivations and intentions—including those having a religious cast.  

In addition, scholars with Christian commitments have good reason to contest exaggerated claims about the possibility of value-free social science. The objections are well-known. A neutral observation language does not exist; all data are "theory-laden". Researchers import values into their work with respect to the questions they wish to address, the methodology they adopt, the formulation of the key concepts that will guide their work, and the manner in which they present their findings. Moreover, as Charles Taylor has argued, it is not only that social scientists may smuggle value preferences into their research, but that such values are integral to any framework of political explanation. Political theories are necessarily built on and give support to specific conceptions of human needs, wants, and purposes. As individuals (one hopes) of heightened ethical discernment, Christian students of politics should be especially aware of and honest about this. Not that scholars
have licence to fabricate or distort data. Once a photographer selects his or her subject, camera, film, lens, exposure, and angle of approach, the success of the photographic event is a function of how accurately the equipment records what it sees. Similarly, there is no substitute for carefully collecting, investigating, and authenticating the data of political life. There is a considerable difference between good work and bad, a researcher's theoretical commitments notwithstanding.

II. Christianity and the Teaching of Politics

"A university," maintains Michael Oakeshott, "is not a machine for achieving a particular purpose or producing a particular result; it is a manner of human activity." On Oakeshott's understanding, teaching is not equivalent to imparting a set list of ideas and beliefs—what he calls "furnishing the mind". Instead, learning is a conversation, an opportunity for students to hear the many voices that comprise their intellectual inheritance. The strength of a liberal education is that it facilitates this conversation, a discussion which by its very nature is open-ended and whose excellence is judged independent of its conclusions. In the event, students refine their powers of judgement and extend their moral sensibilities. Newman speaks of liberal education in much the same way, seeing its purpose as the development of a "habit of mind" whose attributes include freedom, calmness, equitableness, moderation, and wisdom.

Christian scholars, including those who teach at institutions that profess to be Christian, need not fear this analysis. On the contrary, such an outlook should be embraced exactly on Christian grounds. As St. Paul cautions, even the faithful see through the glass darkly. It is this limited vision, a function of human mortality and fallibility, that makes liberal education possible, indeed makes it mandatory. Through a process of free inquiry the liberally educated student moves towards the affirmation of truths—social, natural, aesthetic, philosophical, theological—that although they may be supported by empirical evidence, logical argumentation, even a modicum of intuition, are yet provisional. Understood from a Christian vantage point, what recommends liberal education is its modesty; a diversity of perspective is entertained in the belief that a pluralistic academic dialogue is the best way to consider truths that are only imperfectly revealed. In no way does this deny the monistic nature of Christian ethical value—to use the cliche, all truth is still God's truth. But there are theologically, thus educationally, sound reasons to doubt an individual's ability to discern the precise content of that single moral system. Hence Christian education as conversation, not apologetics.

Consider the alternative, a model of Christian education that in the interest of preserving theological orthodoxy
circumscribes the boundaries of acceptable academic discussion. As Newman suggests, there is a functional problem here—it is not the responsibility of the university, or the university lecturer, to be the guardian of orthodoxy, rather the church. Moreover, such a reading mistakes the purpose of education. A university cannot be the custodian of orthodoxy because the academic conversation it fosters must be open-ended, even subversive, with regard to established beliefs—protecting religious creeds is not in its bailiwick. Further, there is always the possibility of good faith disagreements between equally devout individuals over issues of theological significance; surely epistemological humility—the appropriate stance for Christian scholars—extends to many matters of religion, too. And even if these objections could be overcome, and the task of Christian higher education was in fact determined to be the propagation of Christian doctrine, it is not clear that restrictions on the substance of what is taught would best serve that end. As John Stuart Mill argued in his famous essay, "On Liberty," the cause of truth, even Christian truth, is not automatically advanced by restricting freedom of thought and expression. Confrontation with "false" opinions is yet invigorating: our deepest convictions are strengthened when we are forced to defend them from attack. Absent such challenges, cherished beliefs atrophy into empty dogma.

Consider a further possibility—that the purpose of Christian higher education is to fashion an academic program regarded as distinctly Christian. Not simply that the intellectual force of Christian scholars—including their theological insights—should be brought to bear on given fields of study, but that discrete disciplines should be established, educational alloys of Christian doctrine and professional training. To be sure, in certain instances such a curriculum is judged the sign of a reliably Christian university and the reason for its separate institutional existence.

Once more, Christian academics should be wary. To begin, the foregoing risks overstating the distinction between scholarship that bears the marks of Christianity and scholarship that does not. If Christians are committed to the idea that the truth of creation is holistic, then that truth can be discovered in many quarters. Ideally, the context within which a Christian professor works, be it State U. or Church-related Liberal Arts College, should matter little. In either environment an individual's religious convictions will be equally relevant—and irrelevant. The test of good teaching and research should not be whether the Christian message is conspicuous, but whether the highest standards of disciplinary integrity have been observed. Or to put it another way, the theological value of scholarship should not be that it is identifiably Christian—that it pursues Christian subject matter, poses questions of theological interest, employs the Biblical text, has as its object the construction of a Christian worldview, and so forth—but that its methods and findings ring true. If the scholarship is true, then
it is Christian.

Christian higher education hazards marginalization to the degree that an idiosyncratic curriculum and research agenda are its rationale. If, at a minimum, the role of Christian educators is to instruct students in their chosen fields of study, they must do so as these fields have developed in the broader scholarly community, not as they would have them develop. Again, scholars with Christian convictions are right to shape the wider dialogue that takes place in their disciplines but not to replace it. In good evangelical style, the emphasis should be on participation not isolation.

None of this is to deny Christianity's singular importance for the teaching of politics. To the degree that Christianity informs a scholar's understanding of the discipline, even more fundamentally his or her social discourse, faith commitments will find their way into the college classroom. That is as it should be. Who I am will determine what I will do and how I will do it. Yet the particulars of what is taught—the material that a Christian scholar communicates—need not be overtly religious to be thoroughly Christian. To reprise Newman's distinction, the charge of the church is to advance Christian virtue, the aim of the university is to advance knowledge. Faculty status obliges Christians no less than non-Christians to promote the dissemination of knowledge, full stop. Conversely, faculty who use the lectern to initiate religious instruction or advocate certain religious practices (professors of theology excepted), risk confusing their teaching responsibilities and exceeding the bounds of their pedagogical authority.

As Newman advises, the common denominator among Christian educators should be found less in the content of their lecture notes than in their commitment to service. Ideally, Christian faculty will foster collegial relationships on the basis of honesty and trust, will exhibit patience and understanding for persons with alternative points of view, will evince compassion for the needs of others, will display disciplined work habits, will be tenacious in the pursuit of wisdom, academic and otherwise—in brief, they will be scholars of character. If they are fortunate enough to be part of a university that has this as its institutional ethos, so much the better. From a student's perspective, such a place will have the merits of Descartes' house—a secure environment from which to expand his or her intellectual horizons. 18 From a faculty member's perspective, one could hardly wish for a more congenial atmosphere in which to pursue academic excellence.

2. See, for example, George Marsden, The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Non-Belief (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).


5. See, for example, Gordon Smith, Politics in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984), pp. 18-26.


18. Describing his rationalist philosophical method, Descartes writes, "(A)s it is not sufficient, before commencing to rebuild the house which we inhabit, to pull it down and provide materials and an architect . . . unless we have also provided ourselves with some other house where we can be comfortably lodged during the time of rebuilding, so in order that I should not remain irresolute in my actions while reason obliged me to be so in my judgments, and that I might not omit to carry on my life as happily as I could, I formed for myself a code of morals for the time being . . . The first was to obey the laws and customs of my country, adhering constantly to the religion in which, by God's grace, I had been instructed since my childhood . . . "