

# PEDAGOGICAL PAROCHIALISM: TOWARD A MORE ECUMENICAL INTEGRATION OF FAITH AND LEARNING

Frank E. Johnson

MidAmerica Nazarene University

I'm completing my eighth year as a history professor. I came to Christian Higher education as a newly minted Ph.D., confident that my arrival would mark a new era in the school's history. Thankfully, I had taught a great deal during graduate school and even briefly at the secondary level before assuming my full-time teaching load (which, in retrospect, was more akin to being "thrown to the wolves" than fulfilling my vocation: if I recall correctly, I had over ten new preps in two years). I love teaching and am privileged to have had some success over the years. Even after teaching at least one general education course every semester (including summers), I remain passionate about being in the classroom, enthusiastically embracing each new opportunity to engage students. My naysayers notwithstanding, the "welcome to the club, here's your office, these are your classes," baptism by fire evaporated most of my arrogance. Whereas several years ago I could not envision my professional performance as anything but extraordinary, these days I am all but dependent upon grace every time I enter a classroom.

This is not to say that we each don't have our bag of tricks. While no amount of acting can mask the failure of preparation, there is always a fair measure of theater in good teaching. I take as a given, then, the fact that most professors are duly equipped with appropriate credentials and some degree of charisma. Even so, it takes a while in the trenches to even begin to understand what Christian higher education is all about. I have come to learn that what I most desire to cultivate in my students rarely happens in the classroom. All too often the real transformative encounters occur at times and places that don't even involve me directly—but are dependent upon my teaching just the same. I love to hear that students have debated a class related-issue over dinner or shared it with a parent. In these moments students are genuinely processing the issues, assessing the relevance of the concept to their everyday lives.

Just when I feel like I have found sure footing as a professor, I have encountered a new challenge which makes the multiple new preps of my first years seem like a cake-walk: how does one teach in such a way that allows the greatest range of engagement by an increasingly diverse student population? Furthermore, is it possible to impede, if not injure, students' intellectual and spiritual formation by teaching from a theological perspective contrary to their own? In other words, if my work in the classroom is intrinsically colored by my worldview as I've always thought it should be (. . . hence vocation), is it possible that my teaching could potentially short change someone of the Christian higher education for which they pay a premium tuition?<sup>1</sup>

Before I attempt to answer these questions, let me provide a bit of context. While I will draw from material specific to my own institution, I believe it is indicative of many Christian higher education institutions. On my campus, census day is a key milestone of every Fall semester. Divisions go into full scramble to recruit and account for their majors, always seeking to show an increase from the previous year. One of the most intriguing reports in the annual *Databook* produced by our Registrar documents the religious diversity of our student body—and it is amazingly diverse. Enrollment by denomination as listed in our most recent *Databook* illustrates the point. There are forty-nine entries for which we collect self-identified, student religious affiliation data. This includes such innocuous categories as "non-denominational," "other," and "no preference indicated." We also have students from across the religious spectrum including various high church traditions, charismatics, Mormons (both LDS and RLDS), Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and an absolute potpourri of evangelical groups.

The Fall 2003 enrollment profile reveals that our students associate themselves with forty-one of the forty-nine "denominations" which have been identified to date. While 60.1% of undergraduates hail from the sponsoring denomination, Nazarene, obviously 39.9% do not; the contrast is even more stark among the graduate and professional population where a mere 7.2% of students are Nazarene. As an institution, the percentage of Nazarene students enrolling (at all levels) has steadily declined

over the last nine years from 53.4% to the present 38.3%. This, of course, is influenced by the dramatic growth of the graduate and professional ranks. Nazarene undergraduates have slipped only from 66.1% in 1994 to the present 60.1%, whereas graduate and professional programming has witnessed a decline from 12.4% Nazarene to the current 7.2% over the same time period. (It should be noted that these figures do not take into account those students not included in the census day enrollment “snap shot;” were they included the overall percentage of Nazarenes would undoubtedly fall precipitously). The following tables rank by size the top six denominations represented within our current student body.<sup>2</sup>

Total Enrollment (n=1925)

Nazarene	38.8%	737
No Preference	19.9%	384
Baptist	8.9%	172
Christian	6.2%	120
Catholic	6.0%	115
Non-Denominational	3.8%	73

Undergraduate Enrollment (n=1132)

Nazarene	60.1%	680
Baptist	8%	90
Non-Denominational	5%	57
Christian	3.8%	44
Catholic	3.5%	40
No Preference	3.1%	36

Graduate& Professional Enrollment (n=793)

No Preference	43.8%	348
Baptist	10.3%	82
Christian	9.6%	76
Catholic	9.5%	75
Nazarene	7.2%	57
Methodist	4.4%	35

What does this data illustrate? I believe it is evident is that the student population at my institution is anything but a people of one heart or mind. I should think that this range of religious affiliation is true, if not even more extreme, of similar institutions. This diversity only underscores my concern about the intersections of theology and pedagogy. It is imperative that faculty come to understand their own theological presuppositions; without such knowledge, we can indeed alienate the very people we seek to reach through our teaching.

This point was made especially plain to me not long ago. One of my stock lines which I offer repeatedly every semester is “Don’t forget that there is Church on Sunday.” I make a point of saying that I remember well how easy it was as an undergraduate at a small Christian liberal arts institution to use the Sabbath as a day divinely ordered for homework and ping pong (actually, there was more ping pong than homework if I recall correctly). I remind my students that they don’t have to go to a Nazarene church per se, but they should participate in corporate Christian worship at some point over the weekend. I add that I would be willing to help students find a church “home” if they desire some assistance. In thinking about this topic over the last couple years, I have attended a wide array of churches (Christian and non-Christian) in my area. One student recently took my up on my offer. She was looking for a Church of Christ congregation. It so happens that within ten miles of the university is a rather sizeable church that could have fit her like a glove. It turns out, as we discussed the service over dinner at our house, that this particular congregation was a bit too liberal for her tastes. My family and I were amazed to hear this student describe what she felt was appropriate worship, what she knew and was looking for in our area. The lack of instruments was a hurdle not too hard to get over, but the fact that, for this female student, women had no business “assuming airs of authority” in the church especially caught my two daughters off-guard. The student made it plain that I would deeply offend her—and put her in a very awkward position—were I to ever ask her to pray if men were present in the same class. The fact that I might offend her in this way had never occurred to me.

We had a good time of food and fellowship before she headed back to campus. I could not help but ponder on this student's perspective in the days that followed. I've been to numerous services where female evangelists preached with convicting authority. In fact, the Church of the Nazarene at one point had more registered female preachers than any other denomination in America. My theological presuppositions regarding women and the Church could have caused something of a train wreck were I to have inadvertently put the student in what she felt was a compromising position. In reflecting on this, I have had to give considerable attention to my own understanding of the issue.

Richard Hughes indicates that such openness to dialogue with those from traditions and vantages other than one's own is central to not only a vital faith, but faithful teaching. He makes this case in a brief volume which should be required reading for every Christian educator.<sup>3</sup> *How Christian Faith can Sustain the Life of the Mind* speaks to the novice as well as the veteran. Among many other things, Hughes challenges his colleagues in Christian higher education to embrace paradox, to consider it something of a traveling companion for those who purposely teach from a Christian perspective. One of the most refreshing aspects of this work is the way in which it gets to the heart of the matter: seeking to articulate and then engage with students, the "ultimate questions." Here Hughes offers some truly liberating counsel. We often devote so much time to preparation for our professional lives, be it graduate school, or constructing courses each semester, or as time permits, writing and giving papers at conferences, that we fail to come to grips with our own presuppositions—whether they are theological or the result of just being human. Hughes, as per Paul Tillich, proposes that this self-awareness is a pivotal ingredient which will simultaneously facilitate faith and the life of the mind.

I am not concerned that my scholarship and my teaching differ dramatically from what is generally considered sound scholarship and good teaching in the academy at large. But I am concerned that if I am able to reach the highest levels of scholarship and teaching, I do so precisely *because of* my commitment to the Christian faith, not *in spite of* that commitment. Put another way, I am concerned to allow the presuppositions of the Christian faith to provide the underpinnings and the framework for how I envision my work, for how I think about my discipline, for how I structure my arguments, and for how I teach in the classroom. Or put another way still, I want to think "Christianly" about my teaching and about my scholarship. If, in the process of doing so, my work finally resembles that of other academicians—even secular academicians—who are generally regarded as serious scholars and teachers, then I can only rejoice that, at least in some measure, I have successfully integrated my Christian faith with my life's work.<sup>4</sup>

Such "Christianly" teaching is exactly what so many of us were called to, yet we are uncertain of how to coordinate means and ends. Ironically, or paradoxically as Hughes would say, it is in being vulnerable before our students that grace can transform our classrooms into hallowed halls. Hughes would readily concur with Mark S. McLeod who contends that "God can extend his grace to me as a teacher only if I push on the edges of understanding so hard that I fail to understand."<sup>5</sup>

Let me very briefly mention a second work that bears investigating by colleagues of all theological stripes. Quite simply, Robert Benson's recent *The Body Broken* is a must read. This work tells of a faith journey that is anything but complete; Benson is something of a self-professed poster boy for the spiritually confused and disaffected. He hinges his thoughts on the analogy of windows through which we attempt to see and encounter God, contending that there are numerous windows to one Mystery. "Some of us have become courageous enough to look through other windows, and some must be gracious enough to respect the windows that we have not yet looked through. All of us must become more aware that the window that we love is not the only window."<sup>6</sup> Mind you Benson might be too extreme for some. He contends that "unity in the body of Christ [is] going to be hard to come by if we . . . keep the Light of the world in a box marked 'for members of our group only.'" He expands on this thought, arguing that "this dividing is surely not the reason why the Body of Jesus was broken in the first place, but it may well be among the reasons why the whole Body of Christ is difficult to find in our world. We who claim it sometimes cannot even share it with each other." But Benson does not stop there. He contends that most Christians, though "pretty good folks . . . would be even better folks if we actually believed the Gospel." For Benson, believers cannot take the cause of Christ seriously and continue on our present course of disregard or divisiveness for each other.<sup>7</sup>

Benson, like Hughes, is drawn to the ultimate questions or central purpose for the Christian life.

We are not bound together by dogma or doctrine or form of denomination. . . . We are bound together because we are trying to learn to pray, because we are trying to learn to listen for the voice of the One Who made us and the One Who came among us, and the One Who will lead us into all truth and eventually lead us home. We are bound together by our willingness to honor one another's witness to that voice in all we do. We are bound together because we have begun to realize that a part of our work as members of the Body of Christ is to honor one another's attempt to be faithful, recognizing our brotherhood even as we acknowledge our differences. We are bound together because of our core beliefs.<sup>8</sup>

It is imperative, though, that one have a clear understanding of their core beliefs. Neither Hughes nor Benson would presume to dictate these essentials, but would undoubtedly recommend serious study and reflection. Having culled just a couple quotes from Benson, I do not want to misrepresent the work. He does not serve up an indictment of the Church per se, but a loving rebuke instead.

I find Hughes and Benson much more than complimentary volumes. They offer both a challenge and path to a solution for those of us who teach in Christian higher education. In short, we must use our own spiritual journey as a vehicle of engagement in the classroom; likewise, we must use our position as academics to foster informed unity through meaningful dialogue. This takes me back to my dilemma: can I do disservice or injury to my students by purposefully teaching from my own world view? The answer is a resounding, no. If anything, I must teach from my world view for my teaching to have purpose and ultimate meaning. Emboldened to forge ahead, I must also bear in mind that my world view is not the only "window" as it were. Failure on this point could have serious repercussions. I want to structure my classes in such a way that allows all perspectives to be engaged and a wide variety of Christian perspectives to be validated. To do so, I will have to keep my focus on quality instruction. But I also will need to worship more with my students, do a better job of allowing my faith to infuse my teaching, and I will need to keep asking myself why I believe as I do—constantly updating my articulation of the same as I grow deeper in Christ. Most importantly, I will need to embrace the fact that my students are on the same journey. To be sure, I am the professor, the authority figure in the classroom. Someone must put the exams together, grade the papers, guide the discussions, etc. Yet, I want to employ this authority to a much greater end than I have over the last eight years. Benson offers a convicting challenge in this regard:

We are not called to be right; we are called to be his. We are not called to be scholars; we are called to be students. We are not called to explain the Christ; we are called to follow the Christ. We are not called to build walls that keep his friends apart from each other; we are called to build the kingdom together.<sup>9</sup>

If I adopt this perspective, I will be able to more effectively connect my Christian faith with the life of the mind, and hopefully help my students do the same regardless of their theological orientation.

## Endnotes

1 I wish to thank the *Rhodes Consultation on the Future of the Church-Related College* for helping me begin to make such connections, for fostering the freedom to even ask such questions. In particular, I thank my colleagues from the Consultation who, over the last three years, expanded my horizons through provocative conversations, great fellowship, and way too much food. Most of all, it was the fact that we seemed so different, our institutions so dissimilar, yet our cause so common, that compelled me to dig deeper.

2 *MidAmerica Nazarene University Databook 2003* (Office of Institutional Research, 2003), 35-38.

3 Richard T. Hughes, *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind* (Eerdmans, 2001). Other excellent monograph resources include Parker Palmer *Courage to Teach* (Jossey-Bass, 1998) and *To Know as We are Known* (HaprerCollins, 1993); Mar Rose O'Reilley *Radical Presence* (Boynton/Cook, 1998); George Marsen *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (Oxford, 1997); Robert Benne *Quality with Soul* (Eerdmans 2001); and V. James Mannoia, Jr. *Christian Liberal Arts* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

4 Hughes, *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind*, 136-137, emphasis in original.

5 McLeod, "The Teacher's last Temptations: Being Silent/Being Secular, *Faculty Dialogue* v. 13 (Winter 1990): 76-77.

6 Robert Benson, *The Body Broken*, (Doubleday, 2003), 17.

7 Benson, *Body Broken*, "unity in the body," 61; "this dividing," 67; "pretty good folks," 75.

8 Benson, *Body Broken*, 124-125.

9 Benson, *Body Broken*, 82. To be fair, Benson is not proposing an end to scholarship, but a perspective adjustment. In fact, Benson would likely celebrate Hughes' articulation of Christian scholarship.

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