

Advice to Those Who Would Be Christian Scholars

Nicholas Wolterstorff

<http://esn.intervarsity.org/resource/advice-those-who-would-be-christian-scholars>

Nicholas Wolterstorff, Noah Porter Professor of Philosophical Theology Emeritus, Yale University, has been one of the leading voices in Christian philosophy for decades. In October 2009, he spoke at the Veritas Forum at the University of Tennessee, presenting a talk entitled "The Role of God in Social Justice" and debating David Reidy on the question "Good Without God? The Problem of Justice and Human Rights". While he was there, Dr. Wolterstorff spoke to Christian graduate students, and he has graciously allowed us to publish his remarks here.

1. What advice can I give to you whose sights are set on becoming Christian scholars?

My first piece of advice is that you get clear on what you understand by the project of being a Christian scholar. When I travel around and talk to Christians in colleges and universities, and when I read what Christians say about the contemporary university, I over and over come up against one or another of the following three attitudes.

Some assume that what goes on in the contemporary university is pretty much OK as it is, and they look for ways of supplementing that with some distinctly Christian thought and activity. Sometimes this supplementation takes the form of Christian organizations, housed in the region of the university, inviting students to weekly Bible study, to Sunday worship services, to twice-a-year camp-outs, etc. Sometimes it takes the form of Christian scholars adding theology to what goes on in the university, adding biblical scholarship, adding philosophical reflections on the epistemology of religious belief, etc. This additive or supplemental approach was in fact the basic strategy of most Christian colleges in the U.S. until around thirty years ago.

Second, some of those who believe that what goes on in the contemporary university is pretty much OK as it is reject the additive approach because they find tension between Christianity as they understand it, and what goes on in the university; so they propose revising Christianity until the tension disappears. Often this takes the form of what I call a "band wagon approach." Some development takes place in one or another of the disciplines, and shortly articles appear arguing that one can be a Christian and accept this new development. Post-modernism appeared, and soon a spate of articles turned up arguing in favor of the compatibility of Christianity and post-modernism. In my own field, John Rawls became popular in political philosophy, and shortly a spate of articles appeared arguing in favor of the compatibility of Christianity and Rawlsianism. Evolutionary psychology turns up, and shortly a spate of articles appears arguing for the compatibility of Christianity and evolutionary psychology. Of course, developments come and go in the disciplines; so the person who adopts a bandwagon approach must be ready to leap off his currently favored bandwagon and onto some new one that comes along. You may assume that it is especially liberal Christians who are ever willing to revise their understanding of Christianity in order to make it compatible with the latest fad in academia; but I find evangelicals often doing the same thing. Let me not conceal the fact that I find this approach disgusting and demeaning; I want to say: Think for yourself!

And third, there are those Christians, usually outside the university, who are content to lob grenades at the contemporary university: preachers, free-lance writers, and the like. The university, they say, is godless, aggressively secular, reductionist, relativist, liberal, post-modern, captive to political correctness – you name it.

2. It's my view that there is some element of truth in each of these views; the problem is that each view takes that element of truth and runs with it.

The first position is correct in holding that not everything that goes on in the contemporary university is unacceptable to the Christian; it is quite another thing to assume, however, that basically everything that goes on is acceptable. The second position is correct in holding that sometimes one should revise one's understanding of Christianity in the light of what turns up in some discipline; it is quite another thing to assume, however, that that is always the direction one's revision should take, that one's Christian faith should never lead one to critique some development in the discipline. And the third position is correct in holding that there is a lot of reductionism in the contemporary university, a lot of relativism, and the like. But that is by no means the whole of it; and let me assure you that lobbing grenades from the sidelines will have no effect whatsoever.

3. So how do I think of the overall project of being a Christian scholar?

To put it in a nutshell, I think the project of being a Christian scholar is the project of thinking with a Christian mind and speaking with a Christian voice within your chosen discipline and within the academy more generally.

Let me unpack this a bit. Recently I heard a talk in which the speaker argued that teaching intelligent design is incompatible with the nature of natural science; if intelligent design is to be taught anywhere in the curriculum, it must be taught in philosophy classes. In thus arguing, the speaker was making the common assumption that natural science and philosophy both have an essence, a nature; his claim was that discussion of intelligent design is compatible with the nature of philosophy but incompatible with the nature of natural science.

I think of the various academic disciplines very differently. I think of them as social practices, some, like philosophy, with a long ancestry, some, like molecular biology, of recent origin. And I think of these practices as constantly changing due to all sorts of developments both inside and outside the discipline. I hold, thus, that natural science does not have an essence, nor does philosophy. What they have instead is traditions that are constantly changing, sometimes slowly, sometimes abruptly.

The application relevant to our topic is this: the Christian scholar participates as Christian in those social practices that are the disciplines. Those practices are not a project of the Christian community, nor are they the project of some anti-Christian community. They are human; they belong to all of us together – just as the state is not for Christians nor for non-Christians but for all of us together.

And now to make my opening point again: the mode of the Christian's participation in these on-going, ever-changing, social practices is to think with a Christian mind and to speak with a Christian voice. When engaging in, say, sociology with a Christian mind, one will sometimes find oneself critical of what is going on in some part of sociology: one will find the assumptions being made about human nature mistaken, one will find the emphasis skewed, one will find the issues discussed unimportant, and so forth. One will then find oneself launching a critique of this part of sociology, and beyond that, trying to do it differently and better. At other times, when thinking with a Christian mind one will find what is going on in some part of one's discipline quite OK. Being a Christian scholar requires this sort of discernment.

I mentioned that many different things contribute to those social practices which are the academic disciplines taking the form they do take – new technological developments, for

example. Among the most important things shaping the academic disciplines are worldviews. I think the Christian scholar will be especially attentive to those worldviews, and will be especially alert to those points where the discipline-shaping worldview conflicts with the worldview embedded in Christianity.

4. Those were some comments about thinking with a Christian mind. What about speaking with a Christian voice?

Well, for one thing, the Christian voice will be a voice of charity; it will honor all human beings, as Peter puts it in his letter in the New Testament. It will never be abusive. But there is also a more subtle matter to be raised here. The voice with which one speaks must be a voice such that one can be heard – a voice such that one genuinely participates in the dialogue of the discipline. Every now and then, when teaching at Yale, I would have a student who did not know how to speak in the voice appropriate to philosophy; invariably this was an evangelical. Evangelicals often interpret the response they get as hostility to evangelicalism, or hostility to Christianity. Sometimes it is that; but not always. Sometimes it is just that the person has not learned to speak in the appropriate voice.

5. So how do you arrive at the point where you can think with a Christian mind and speak with a Christian voice?

Let me throw out some suggestions, and then open it up for questions.

First, be patient. The Christian scholar may feel in his bones that some part of his discipline rubs against the grain of his Christian conviction, but for years, and even decades, he may not be able to identify precisely the point of conflict; or, if he has identified it, he may not know for years or decades how to work out an alternative. Once he does spy the outlines of an alternative, the Christian scholar has to look for the points on which, as it were, he can pry, those points where he can get his partners in the discipline to say, “Hmm, you have a point there; I’m going to have to go home and think about that.” He doesn’t just preach. He engages in a dialogue – or tries to do so. And that presupposes, once again, that he has found a voice.

Second, to arrive at this point, the Christian scholar will have to be immersed in the discipline and be really good at it. Grenades lobbed by those who don’t know what they are talking about will have no effect. Only those who are learned in the discipline can see the fundamental issues.

Third, to be able to think with a Christian mind about the issues in your discipline, you have to have a Christian mind. As I see it, three things are necessary for the acquisition of such a mind. First, you have to be well acquainted with Scripture – not little tidbits, not golden nuggets, but the pattern of biblical thought. Let me add here: beware of the currently popular fad of reducing acquaintance with scripture to worldview summaries. Second, you need some knowledge of the Christian theological tradition. And third, you have to become acquainted with the riches of the Christian intellectual tradition generally, especially those parts of it that pertain to your own field. Too often American Christians operate on the assumption that we in our day are beginning anew, or on the assumption that nothing important has preceded us. You and I are the inheritors of an enormously rich tradition of Christian reflection on politics, on economics, on psychology, an enormously rich tradition of art, of music, of poetry, of architecture – on and on it goes. We impoverish ourselves if we ignore this. Part of our responsibility as Christian scholars is to keep those traditions alive.

Fourth, Christian learning needs the nourishment of communal worship. Otherwise it becomes dry and brittle, easily susceptible to skepticism.



Nicholas Wolterstorff, shared these words while at Veritas, October 9, 2009 at the University of Tennessee. He received his BA from Calvin College in 1953 and his PhD in philosophy from Harvard University in 1956. Before taking the position of Noah Porter Professor of Philosophical Theology, he taught for thirty years at his alma mater, Calvin College.

After concentrating on metaphysics at the beginning of his career, he spent a good many years working primarily on aesthetics and philosophy of art. In more recent years, he has been concentrating on epistemology (e.g., *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology*, Cambridge U. Press, 2004), philosophy of religion (e.g., *Inquiring about God*, Cambridge U. Press, 2010; *Practices of Belief*, Cambridge U. Press, 2010), and political philosophy (e.g., *The Mighty and the Almighty: An Essay in Political Theology*, Cambridge U. Press, 2012). Dr. Wolterstorff regularly teaches lecture courses in philosophy of religion and aesthetics, and seminars in epistemology, hermeneutics, and philosophy of religion. *Photo credit: net efekt's Photostream*

Appendices

“Earning a voice”, interview with Nicholas Wolterstorff by James K.A. Smith - Better title, “Learning a voice, earning a hearing”

<http://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/3931/earning-your-voice/>

JS: So how does that work? How do you say, "I'm going to think through, say, these matters of justice, and here's my starting point. But I don't just want to write for an enclave. I want people to hear this as a viable argument in the public sphere of ideas." How do you do that without losing people who don't share your starting point?

NW: Roger Lundin, from Wheaton, once suggested to me a good metaphor for this. He said to me, twenty years ago, I suppose, "You philosophers found a voice long before the rest of us did." That's a very good metaphor. You have to **find a voice** whereby what you say can be heard....

JS: Interesting. Part of finding the right voice is knowing how to translate yourself for wider audiences and, I guess, expecting a certain sympathy—or hoping to **earn a certain hearing for your voice**, because you're being hospitable by meeting people where they are.

NW: Exactly. How can I tap into their mode of speech, their concerns, their wishes and questions? In my experience, what often happens is that evangelicals speak in a thoroughly non-accommodating evangelical voice, to which they get a perplexed if not hostile reaction, and then they say, "See? There you have it once again. The university is hostile to evangelicals." My reply is, when you talk like that, what are the other people supposed to do with what you say?

“Nicholas Wolterstorff: It's tied together by Shalom”

<http://www.faithandleadership.com/ga/nicholas-wolterstorff-its-tied-together-shalom>

“At its heart, the Old Testament word *shalom* means “flourishing.” And it's what Christian institutions -- and the gospel -- are about, says Nicholas Wolterstorff: the flourishing of others....

NW: “When the Scriptures talk about love, commanding “love your neighbor as yourself,” you may ask, “Well, what's the goal of this? What's it after?” It seems to me it seeks the flourishing of your fellow human beings in all dimensions. I had various personal interests: art, justice and so forth. I had to ask how I was going to integrate them. It seemed to me that the category that unites these instead of splitting them apart is the category of shalom. That's what the gospel is about: how humankind can flourish.