

IN CELEBRATION OF CURIOSITY:

An “R”chaeology of Christian Higher Education

Celebrate curiosity? Isn't that dangerous? After all, according to that familiar proverb, "Curiosity killed the cat!" Along with a hope of saving the cat, my goal for this article is to reflect on the nature of Christian teachers and what they do as part of a community of faith and learning.

Of the options for approaching this topic, I thought to begin at the end, where the outcomes live, and see what it might take to get there. Curiosity, which we celebrate here, drives us to the process by which we discover. Good stories are like this, at least mysteries are. Readers all know fairly early what happened. We just need to find out "who done it," how, and why.

There is no mystery, I would suggest, about what a Christian institution of higher education aims to accomplish. We lay out these sorts of objectives in statements of mission, then work and pray toward their fulfillment. We believe that for all of us to be educated Christians, we must form, maintain, and model the following: (1) critical and reflective thinking; (2) honest and authentic believing; (3) cultured and aesthetic appreciating; and (4) generous and gracious contributing to those around us. All of these outcomes are active verb forms. That is because education, like life, is active and not static, moving rather than stationary.

Two Approaches

How then do we achieve Christian higher education's objectives

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of producing thinking, believing, appreciating, contributing citizens?

Two major approaches occur to me: One focuses more on answers and assured results, the other more on questions and the quest. One values the security of knowing what we need to know and the fact that we know it, the other on the excitement of exploring the wide and wonderful world of faith and ideas. In archaeological terms, one focuses on the artifact, the other on finding and recovering it.

The former approach, when carried too far, has been described as "indoctrination," a style of learning that assumes there are known answers to virtually all questions. In the worst-case scenario, it applies coercion to force acceptance of a prescribed set of beliefs. Few if any of the people publishing on this subject today have much good to say about this approach. Robert Sandin is typical: "An indoctrinative approach to education is as counterproductive in a church college as in any other institution."¹ According to Arthur Holmes, in his book,

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The Idea of a Christian College:

"The Christian college must provide the opportunity and the atmosphere for an open discussion of new ideas and significant issues. Hackneyed clichés and parroted answers smack more of indoctrination than education. There is no substitute for the hard work of thinking and no escape from the ever-present possibility of misunderstanding."²

He adds: "Students need . . . to work their way painfully through the maze of alternative ideas and arguments while finding out how the Christian faith speaks to such matters."³

In an *Adventist Review* article on the Christian university several years ago, B.B. Beach lists as the very first potential pitfall of such institutions: "the danger of simple indoctrination instead of education. It is not the task of a Christian university to blindfold students to what civilization and culture can offer, but rather to open their eyes to reality."⁴ His second pitfall: "A defensive mentality: offering ready-made answers to pre-packaged questions."⁵

Do we then toss answers to the wind along with the certainties they convey? I don't think so. To represent this issue fairly, we should probably celebrate certainty as well as curiosity. Unfortunately, those more certain about certainty too often miss the fundamental educational essential of curiosity and the role of questions.

Pursuing Curiosity

At the risk of suffering the same fate as the cat, I'd like to lay out my purpose here: While not selling short the need for religious security and understanding within my religious tradition, I wish to pursue curiosity as a primary ingredient in the educational process—even, I would argue, in the formation of faith. Questions, far from being the sworn enemy of Christian education, are perhaps our very best friends.

For support, I cite Gordon Van Harn:

"Colleges do change students; that is the purpose of edu-

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cation. While the church and college should seek to develop in students a faith commitment consistent with denominational teachings, both should expect the expression of faith to change as students learn, experience, and mature. . . . The difficulty of balancing these two tasks [orthodoxy and challenge] is illustrated by survey results that indicate that the more insulated church-related colleges are less effective in accomplishing the mission of protecting orthodoxy; their activities are actually counterproductive to this mission, producing 'individual Christians who are less certain of their attachments to the traditions of their faith or altogether disaffected from them.'"⁶

If curiosity and questions really are superior to indoctrination for educating young Christians, how do we undertake this task in a manner respectful of both faith and learning? How do we create a climate favorable to curiosity, a Christian community committed to protecting and encouraging curiosity?

Archaeology and its seemingly insatiable quest to explore and discover may help in our search. I would like to recommend three R's of archaeology that may serve us well in discovering and illustrating how to celebrate educational curiosity in a Christian context. We are not talking here about the three R's of education we all learned in grade school—Reading, 'Riting and 'Rithmetic. There are three other R's with the potential to enhance what we do in Christian higher education.

Three R's

The first R has to do with how **Responsible** we are in undertaking either archaeology or the educational process. Our approaches to academics cannot afford to be slipshod or substandard. Mediocrity is not an option if we hope to be credible in our task. Only our best efforts will suffice. We owe this to ourselves and to others on curiosity's quest who are looking over our shoulders.

"Christian faith," according to Elton Trueblood (as cited by Holmes), "is the sworn enemy of all intellectual dishonesty and shoddiness. The Christian believes that in all that she does intellectually, socially, or artistically, she is handling God's creation and that is sacred."⁷

This is especially true

when it comes to those surprising discoveries that threaten to undo our understanding of the world and how it works. Siegfried Horn, my mentor in biblical archaeology, found this out the hard way. Joining a whole tent full of archaeologists whose excavation results could not locate evidence of the conquest of Canaan under Joshua, he would not sacrifice responsible research for assured outcomes.

Although excavations at Hazor in the north, Bethel in the center, and Lachish in the southern part of Israel have demonstrated destructions during the 13th/12th centuries B.C., the time frame when most archaeologists date the settlement of ancient Israel, other sites are more problematic. These include the one Horn dug during the late 1960s and the 1970s—Tall Hisban. Horn had hoped to find the biblical Heshbon there. However, the remarkably consistent evidence in locations like Jericho and Ai at least, points either to no occupation or to insignificant squatters' huts at the sites during this time. Horn's Heshbon had not even been established yet as an occupied town or city. The earliest remains found dated 100 to 200 years too late for the biblical story.

So, what's an archaeologist to do, especially one who went to Heshbon seeking the very evidence that eluded him? He could bury the evidence he did find, or he could adjust the facts a bit, change the dates typically assigned to artifacts, move the chronology a tad, twist the data. This way, he could guarantee the desired results. Or, as Siegfried Horn did, he could honestly accept the evidence for what it was, follow where it led, even celebrate some new possibilities. We have to be "mature enough," he noted in his extensive diary in connection with a letter Larry Geraty, president of La Sierra University, wrote to church leaders years ago, "to face problems which exist and which do not disappear by being ignored."⁸

Is this a problem? Of course. Should we with our trowels cover up and re-bury the evidence? I don't think so. Are there other ways of understanding the big picture that might help us make sense of the apparent facts and faith? Yes, indeed. The match between the archaeological evidence and the Book of Judges is remarkably close, suggesting we have more work to do in the Bible and in the field. But should any of this, whether apparently positive or negative, dissuade us from responsibly exploring what we do find? I hope not. That would be unfaithful to the discipline of archaeology and to responsible research. In fact, it is responsible study and research that provide one of the safeguards of curiosity.

In the same context, what is the task of the Christian college or university? The answer is clear: It must formulate, foster, and forever protect responsible policies of academic freedom. There is no escape from this task. However, this does not imply freedom FROM a church and its beliefs and practices. Rather, it is freedom TO serve both the academic enterprise and the best of Christian principles. Sandin recommends that:

"The Christian college must be in the vanguard of those who defend the right of the academy to inquire, insisting on the duty of every scholar to pursue truth wherever it

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Mt. Tabor, where the army of Deborah and Barak mounted their attack on Sisera's army, is one of the sites where archaeologists have searched for evidence of the conquest of Canaan by Israel.

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leads, in the realm of ultimate meaning and value as well as in the domain of empirical verification."⁹

He adds:

"Academic freedom is unlimited in the Christian college in the sense that the institution is committed to the pursuit of truth in every area of human experience and to the appropriation of truth, whatever the costs. The present challenge to religiously affiliated colleges and universities is to combine their concern for religious values with commitment to the highest ideals of teaching and scholarship, and to confirm the autonomy of the Christian scholar in the highest tradition of academic freedom."¹⁰

Are there risks inherent in academic freedom? Of course. On the other hand, are there dangers tied to squelching academic freedom? I think so—more so by far than the perils of freedom.

The Redemptive Dimension

A second R in our "R"chaeological quest to understand and safeguard and thereby celebrate curiosity in the Christian college is tied to **Redemptive** perspectives and behavior. We cannot call ourselves Christian without the redemptive dimension of our task. As a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and part of the wider religious community, I celebrate faith. I have always been personally and professionally committed to the journey of faith, to

the quest for deeper understanding and believing, to what my religious roots stand for. Siegfried Horn spoke for me, too, when he wrote in his diary: "What I have and am I owe to my church and I am grateful that my church has supported me and given me opportunities for growth and allowed me to pursue my various interests."¹¹

What makes what we do redemptive? Does it have to do with a sense of God's goodness and our well-being? How about the majesty and mystery of God and hope for the future? And

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Aiming for Relevance

Finally, the third R of our trilogy. If our work needs to be responsible and redemptive, then to bring both of these R's into the service of today's world and its needs, we should aim for **Relevance**. Relevance forms the bridge between our best academic efforts and religious affirmations and the world in which we live, helping us define who we are and who we hope to become. It ensures that what we do speaks not only to our own religious community in ways that address current issues and needs, but also to the rest of

the ever-shrinking global village.

Being relevant means dealing with the concerns facing people today, not those of the 1800s or 1900s. It demands that we study carefully both other cultures and our own in order to understand what makes sense in various settings. It requires that we explore how to help our students and their peers live authentic and productive lives. The search for relevance presses us to ask new questions formulated for new times, to let curiosity loose under new circumstances, ever keeping an eye on the future. To achieve this, teachers will need to broaden their view of the world and that of their students by engaging in and encouraging wider reading, travel, language acquisition, and an honest assessment of the beliefs and practices of others.

Traveling to Morocco one Christmas break with friends, I was struck by one particular mosaic among many at the spectacular Roman site of Volubilis in the northwestern part of the country. It pictures a donkey headed off in one direction with the rider mounted backwards, looking into the past. The question is: Are we learning from the past? Have we taken the results of our responsible research and our understanding of the redemptive role of Christian higher education and made them relevant for this time and for the future? It seems to me that we do not prepare students well if we only give them answers adequate for the past.

Thus, we have the three R's of Christian higher education: Responsible, Redemptive, Relevant. Being responsible suggests a vocation of integrity and honesty in which we care for the mind. Being redemptive suggests a vocation of faith and goodness—and caring for the soul. Being relevant suggests a vocation of service and generosity in the here and now. It implies caring about and for the world in which we live.

An Approach That Safeguards Curiosity

An approach to our work that is responsible, redemptive, and relevant also saves the cat. It safeguards curiosity. It ensures that a Christian college will be a place where continued exploration of available data, of God, and of the meaning and purpose of our lives in today's world are assumed, asserted, affirmed. At such a place, curiosity is celebrated as the best way to achieve our stated goals.

We have, then, come full circle in our quest to celebrate curiosity. We have encountered again the intended outcomes of a Christian higher education—that is, to cultivate and nurture a community of thinking, believing, appreciating, and contributing citizens, and to do so by being responsible, redemptive, and rele-

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An international team of excavators at Tall al-Umayri, Jordan, with Rhonda Root, dig artist from Michigan, at work behind them. They have been excavating two rooms of an important building from the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1350 B.C.), a time period with almost no building remains in central Jordan. But mysteries remain, and curiosity's cats still have work to do. Other rooms in the building will be cleared during the summer of 2002 in order to determine its purpose and function.

what about activities that confirm our faith and enhance our understanding of it? Could we add to these a commitment to making the lives of people around us more meaningful, to helping especially the marginalized in society, to enriching our understanding of and appreciation for people of other cultures? I believe all of these are true—and important. How about an appreciation of the beautiful as something redemptive? It certainly seems so to me. And what about curiosity? In the context of faith and our redemptive goals, can curiosity contribute to religious life, or might it kill the cat?

Holmes addresses the question of the redemptive nature of a Christian college. He notes that such an institution is an extension of the church but not the same as the church in function. It does not exist only or primarily to offer biblical or theological studies or cultivate "piety and religious commitment." (These are not abandoned, of course.) "Rather," he asserts in a call for total integration of faith and learning, "the Christian college is distinctive in that the Christian faith can touch the entire range of life and learning to which a liberal education exposes students."¹² He continues: "The college must therefore cultivate an atmosphere of Christian learning, a level of eager expectancy that is picked up by anyone who is on campus for even a short while."¹³

vant. Curiosity is thereby safeguarded and, like the cat, lives on. So we might be tempted to call it a day. But one more mystery awaits our attention.

Have we really explored all the facets of curiosity? It can kill cats, according to some. It can protect cats, I have suggested. We have talked about celebrating it, but how should we define what we are toasting? What *is* curiosity?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word *curiosity* has had many meanings historically, most of which focused on carefulness and proficiency and are now obsolete. More-current meanings include: desire to learn and know, inquisitiveness, a pursuit in which one takes an interest.

While these dictionary definitions are helpful, I have come to appreciate a description based in the Old Testament. The Book of Ecclesiastes constitutes a remarkable site for curiosity's cats to explore. Chapter 3 contains the memorable list of orderly events in the universe: "For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die," etc. At the end of the list, in verse 11, the sage makes a further observation: "[God] has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put [*olam*] into the human heart." What did God place into the human mind and heart? Some translations say "eternity." Others, "a sense of the past and the future." The word in the original language can be translated as: "duration," "from of old," "the future," "eternity," "the universe."¹⁴ So then, God placed in the human heart and mind a sense of the past and the future, the entire universe. Could this mean a sense of curiosity? Could it be that the whole universe and the quest to explore and understand it are actually a divine gift and that we should thank God for implanting it? Perhaps it is part of the human condition to be curious, to make like an archaeologist, to act like a cat?

Albert Einstein's words are suggestive: "The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. . . . Never lose a holy curiosity."¹⁵ Or, in the words of Holmes: "The first task of liberal education is to fan the spark and ignite our native inquisitiveness."¹⁶

So I invite you to celebrate curiosity. Yes, there are certainties. Indeed, there are solid givens. Of course there is security in places inhabited by faith and understanding. Paraphrasing the sage, There is a time for certainty . . . and a time for curiosity. We need to applaud what drives human beings to explore and to commend the questions that enrich and enlarge our Christian educational enterprise. We must honor the cat in all of us. Within each of us is an archaeologist longing to search for treasures that are just awaiting discovery

With embarrassingly unbridled enthusiasm, we must celebrate curiosity.

a little curiosity
a tiny question asked
seem to me to be the key
to education's task ✍

This article is an adaptation of the 2001 Distinguished Faculty Lecture at Walla Walla College in College Place, Washington, on the occasion of the author's receiving the college's peer-selected annual award as faculty member of the year.

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