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Response to José Ramón Alcántara-Mejía (from Christian Higher Education in the Global Context: Implications for Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Administration)

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RESPONSE TO JOSÉ RAMÓN ALCÁNTARA-MEJÍA

DOUGLAS G. CAMPBELL

Dr. Alcántara offers us some significant insights that deserve both careful consideration and further discussion. Of primary importance, in my view, is his observation “that the humanities have lost their relevance.” He attributes this loss of relevance, in part, to several shifts in educational methodology which have taken place since the middle of the twentieth century. So, instead of being seen as culturally central the humanities have been relegated to a minor role within culture generally and academia in particular. He goes on to observe that Christian higher education can choose this path, which relegates the humanities to a minor role, or it can choose an alternative, which takes into account a Christian worldview.

What I am most fascinated by is the view Dr. Alcántara credits to Nicholas Wolterstorff and Lucien Goldman, that “believing in the reality of a certain form is essential to mold it according to the principles that come out of the same belief, and to mold is to create culture from a worldview.” In other words, belief (which is defined as acceptance) is the basis for the shaping of culture. Reason, on the other hand is not a worldview; it is a method of thinking about nature and culture, a means for understanding but not a means of shaping culture. Therefore, belief is a step beyond reason. When we use reason, we analyze, look for causes, and work towards human understanding of whatever it is we confront. However, until we believe, until we accept (and reasoning may be part of this path towards acceptance), we cannot begin to act, to shape, or to form.

However, one views belief and reason, what is disconcerting is Dr. Alcántara’s observation that whether or not culture is based on belief in a worldview, or on the methodology of reason, cultural homogenization is the result. Therefore, there is a problem of importance that Christians in higher education needs to confront.

What then can be done to create an educational system that does not perpetuate this seemingly inevitable homogenization? Dr. Alcántara

suggests that we elevate the role of “local cultures” in a way that follows the Biblical mandate and is not misperceived as supporting cultural imperialism. Secondly, that more emphasis should be placed on the metaphorical approach to understanding intercultural interactions. The specific metaphor he suggests is the metaphor of the body, which models a more egalitarian understanding. This understanding recognizes the value of all parts of the body, or all cultures large or small, rather than allowing fist, or brain, or heart, or stomach to dominate.

Dr. Alcántara’s desire for Christian institutions to remove themselves from the practice of cultural dominance and assimilation is imperative given the fact that Western culture, though it may dominate Christianity financially and academically, plays a much smaller role in the world. Alternatively, in Lamin Sanneh’s (2003) words: “What is at issue now is the surprising scale and depth of worldwide Christian resurgence, a resurgence that seems to proceed without Western organizational structures, including academic recognition . . .” (p. 3). Thus, if Christians who come out of Western culture want a seat at the table they need to listen to the non-Western voices from within the body of Christ; and they need to do so with humility and grace. We Western Christians seem to have forgotten how to wash the feet of non-Western Christians; we have lost, if we ever had it, our ability to take on the role of the servant and listen to what other Christians have to teach us.

We also need to understand that a variety of points of view, including a variety of local points of view is part of a healthy dialogue, a dialogue with different and sometimes divergent points of view. As Philip Yuen-Sang Leung (2004) put it in relation to his own cultural experience: “Differences and debates between different groups of Chinese Christians should not be viewed as entirely negative. Arguments and differences are natural and sometimes necessary in a vibrant, creative, and energetic culture or faith system” (p. 107).

My own experience confirms much of what Dr. Alcántara presents. My background is art and art history. A recent trend in art departments in universities and colleges is that art history, admittedly an art history that has been focused primarily on Western cultures, is now being replaced with the study of material culture. So cultural studies are gaining prominence; but the emphasis is still on Western cultures at the expense of local cultures. So clearly, the emphasis on cultural studies is not one that counters the tendency towards homogenization. In more traditional art history, the tendency to homogenize is also dominant, especially in relation to art history survey courses. In such courses, the mainstream

of art history is the major focus, so Florentine art of the Renaissance is studied in depth because Florentine art fits within the concept of the mainstream. On the other hand, Sienese art is mostly ignored because it does not fit within what is considered the mainstream. This mainstream model “assumes that one style or conceptual model for art must dominate the artistic arena within each particular time and place” (Campbell, 2002, p. 2). This mainstream approach in art history also dismisses many “local cultures” that do not fit into major trends.

In closing, I must say that I wish Dr. Alcántara had spent more time in outlining his vision for a true “transformational model.” He makes it clear that the current academic paradigm will not work, since assimilation has been the typical result of academic pursuits in higher education. His use of the metaphor of the “body of Christ” offers great promise. I hope too that he will also focus on the trinity, which manages to combine three individuals into one, with no loss to any part’s unique and individual identity. Both concepts offer the possibility of true dialogue, true intimacy, and true oneness. Without such metaphors to guide those committed to Christian higher education, parts of the body will remain stunted and misshapen and the “body of Christ” will remain weak and disunited.

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