1992

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Recommended Citation
Badley, Ken, "The Community of Faith as the Locus of Faith-Learning Integration" (1992). Faculty Publications - School of Education. 169.
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The Community of Faith as the Locus of Faith-Learning Integration

Kenneth R. Badley

Educators have now voiced their concern for educational integration and curriculum integration for all of a century. For almost half that century, the integration of faith and learning has been the goal of men and women of faith who have aimed to express what shape education should take when informed by supernaturalist convictions. Yet one wants to know what the integration of faith and learning means. Precisely what do those who popularize this phrase envision for education? What will happen in classrooms? What will transpire in students' minds? What will take place in the church?

Despite achieving popularity as a slogan, "integration" still lacks precision in at least four ways. First, the term can denote fusion, incorporation, dialogue and transformation: four different things. Second, integration could be a process or a product. Will we always find ourselves called to integrate faith and learning, or can we hope to finish at some time and then embody our findings in a canon? Third, we need someone to clarify how integration connects to psychological adjustment and personal life, even to sanctification. Finally, debate continues as to where the integration of faith and learning occurs. Does this integration happen in a student's consciousness? Or does it embed itself in curriculum designs as a consequence of the careful discussions of those who plan the substance and sequence of courses?

In what follows, I will respond to the questions about the locus of integration. To do so, I will trace and then try to wed two discrete lines of reflection: Christian thought regarding education and educators' thought regarding integration. In weaving these two lines of thought together, I will contend that the community of faith is the optimum context for integrating faith and learning.

The Church and Education
To begin, what has the church ever done about education? The short reply, of course, is "almost everything." People of Christian faith have always cherished a special interest in education. We may grant the truisms that Greek thought shaped learning in Western culture. We should note promptly, however, that Christian effort spread that learning. To be fair, we should look at the Christian attitudes at the time of declining Roman power. Some held that Christianity should have nothing to do with its surrounding culture. Tertullian clearly expresses this outlook in his paraphrase of 2Co 6:14:

What is there in common between Athens and Jerusalem between the Academy and the Church? ... away with all projects for a "Stoic," a "Platonic" or a "Dialectic Christianity." ... The Son of God was born, I am not ashamed of it because it is shameful; the Son of God died, it is credible for the very reason that it is silly; and, having been buried, He rose again, it is certain because it is impossible.

Jerome also alludes to Paul by inquiring, "How can Horace go with the psalter, Virgil with the Gospels, Cicero with the apostles?" Comparable interpretations did not die with Tertullian and Jerome, with Alcuin centuries later, or even with some fundamentalists in our century. Throughout church history there have always been some Christians who have persistently viewed separation from culture as essential to correct expression of biblical faith. The conviction that education cannot befriend faith usually figures as part of the separation stance.

Not all patristic or medieval Christians agreed with Tertullian and Jerome, however. As early as the second and third centuries Clement of Alexandria and Origen endeavored to reconcile Christianity with classical philosophy. They articulated what in effect was an early form of scholasticism and fashioned the base for the Christian philosophizing which reached its zenith in Thomas Aquinas' attempt to recover Aristotle and make Greek philosophy more palatable to late medieval Christians. The goal of Thomas, and Thomism after him, was nothing less ambitious than the synthesis of theology with all knowledge.

Contemporary with the success of this monumental synthesis of theology and learning, the universities of Europe came to life. The
church found itself comfortably ensconced in power politically, and, in the curriculum, theology reigned as the “queen of the sciences.” As it had done for several rather bleak centuries, the church sponsored schools at all educational levels, and should take credit for fostering much of what literacy and learning remained in Europe at the time.

However, the scientific spirit of Renaissance learning and exploration appeared in this milieu and, eventually, forced the church to adapt and retreat. Church dogma faced increasing difficulty making its traditionally dominant contribution to the organization of knowledge, perhaps because it had completed its job of articulating the grand vision based on theology. Medieval speculations and synthesis proved inadequate to the new task of discovering the world. As a result, for some five or six centuries, thinkers saw it as their role to expand the stock of knowledge through science and exploration. Observation and reason, rather than authority, became the final measures of epistemological matters. Christendom stared its own dismantling in the face, a dismantling nowhere more evident than in académie. Simultaneously, the influence of the church upon everyday public life declined. To a greater degree than it had done for centuries, the future life people expected in heaven shrank in importance relative to present life on earth.

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, another new breeze began to blow in the universities. The spirit and the fruit of the Enlightenment manifested themselves in a shift toward the natural sciences and the professions. This shift came accompanied, especially in America, by a corresponding loss of interest in training ministers. Puritans, for example, established Harvard and Princeton. But those universities shifted in the nineteenth century to regard the whole realm of knowledge as their proper domain. The universities allowed the sciences and philosophy to dislodge theology from its standing as chief. Scholarship required objectivity. Higher education could make no more room for dogma and indoctrination, the ostensible hallmarks of education informed by faith. On another front, the elective system replaced the fixed curriculum. Yale, Michigan, and Virginia led the way toward offering a new type of higher education where student choice determined the course of study.

The twentieth century completed the secularizing process in all levels of public education. It also watched many more confessional colleges become universities with divinity schools attached. Some went further, creating departments of religious studies in which students studied Christianity alongside other major religions. Repeating the steps taken a century earlier, teaching and learning were to be freed from the doctrinaire style that allegedly characterized church-sponsored education. The liberal-conservative controversies at the beginning of this century created a special problem for people of evangelical conviction, especially in North America. Evangelicals lost control over the prominent seminaries and found themselves exiled to the margins of higher education. The ecclesiastical monopoly on education was broken. Academic Christendom ended. Viewed from the other side, that which had consistently furnished the “uni-” in university was banished. But, having shaken off its confessional past, higher education now confronted a new demand: it had to procure alternative ways to craft a cosmos from the dozens of competing disciplines, worldviews, and values that, lacking any organizing hub or principle, produced only competition, dissonance, atomization, and chaos. We have followed educational developments into our own century. The chaotic state we find there leads us now to turn our attention to integration.

Educators, Integration, and the Locus of Integration
What have educators had to say about integration? Again, the short reply is “almost everything.” A brisk survey of the territory educators have claimed for integration in the last hundred years reveals abundant optimism and zeal. They have maintained that integration in or of the curriculum relates to curriculum sequencing, choice of subject matter, teaching methodologies, and, according to some, even mental health. The first expressions of concern for integration began to appear in the 1890s. Without attributing causality prematurely, one can recognize that following closely on the eclipse of supernaturalist epistemologies, Thomistic and otherwise, interest in educational integration began to increase. This is not to argue that educators of the nineteenth century saw around them disintegration. Nonetheless, by the century’s end, interest in educational integration had put down roots and was growing. In the present century, this regard for integration flourished three times. The integration of faith and learning made its appearance as part of the second of those flourishes, in the 1930s.

Why do educators keep calling for educational integration and, inside the kingdom, for integrating faith with learning? One can accept or reject the argument that a Christocentric worldview had previously provided the coherence in education. Regardless of the church’s part in educational history, a survey of the educational landscape now will uncover deep concern about educational disintegration. Education faces charges of fragmenting, pigeonholing, compartmentalizing, splintering; of haphazardly adding without connecting, and of becoming trivial and
isolated? This unhappy state of affairs has elicited hundreds of calls for integration and thousands of separate efforts to forge integration. In the midst of this clamor, the locus of integration persists as one of the controversial questions surrounding integration. Yet no one has ever explicated the concept adequately. The parallel question of where faith and learning should or will be integrated has likewise gone unanswered.

Educators have proffered three different answers to the locus question. Two of the answers approximate the opposing sentiments in the debate often labelled "the logical versus the psychological." A third approach considers both elements as necessary for integration to occur.

Some educators look at integration, and, by implication, faith-learning integration, as a process that happens within the consciousness of students. On this account, integration is the fruit of several psychological or pedagogical processes. One can distinguish two lines of thought within this view. One line emphasizes personality adjustment. It focuses on the student's construction of a coherent and worthwhile cognitive whole from the various elements of the curriculum. Some Christians explicitly view faith-learning integration in this way. They have been quick to appreciate the explanatory value of the concept of Weltanschauung in trying to articulate their conception of faith and learning integration. "Worldviewish integration," by which one sees the connections among the various disciplines of thought and between thought and daily life, makes intuitive sense to some students. The Christian student who sees his or her own mind reconstructed in God's hands (Ro 12:1-2) often gains an insight into the meaning of education to which other students are not privy. The kind of perspectival transformation or integration spoken of in Romans 12 fits, albeit roughly, into the "student-as-locus" answer to the question at hand.

Others give a quite different answer. Rooted in a logical or epistemological frame of reference, they view the curriculum as the primary locus of integration. When one emphasizes the logical aspects of integration, the planning and sequence of the curriculum contents become paramount. Designed right, the curriculum will foster integration. Designed wrong, the curriculum anneals the compartmentalization and splintering that already bedevil the modern university and mind. A typical expression of the notion that integration occurs in curricula or in knowledge appears in Webster's Dictionary. Webster's definition of integration reads: "The organization of teaching matter to interrelate or unify subjects usually taught in separate academic courses or departments." One finds many other definitions of "integration" within educational literature affirming that the curriculum is the locus of integration. Additionally, much of the criticism of curriculum focuses, for example, on curricular or institutional departmentalization as the opposite of integration, and calls for specialists to draw together so the relationships between their specialties can become apparent. In these accounts, the curriculum, not the student's consciousness, explicitly functions as the locus of educational integration. Outside specifically educational thought, one finds a long line of thinkers attempting to unify knowledge by classifying the fields of knowledge in various arrangements. A brief review of intellectual history brings to mind the major attempts of Aquinas, Dewey, Plato, Bacon and Hegel, along with the lesser known attempts of Wundt, Comte and Bentham. In most of these schemata where knowledge requires no knower, the person seems to slip from the picture.

A third group of thinkers envisions twin loci: the student and the curriculum. Careful curriculum planning and student effort figure as necessary conditions (or at least as typical conditions) for educational integration to occur. In these accounts, it is individual students who do or do not achieve integration. Integration is dependent on the learners themselves successfully grasping the relationships between disciplines, and between curricular contents and daily life. This requirement recalls the description of the "psychological" answer to the locus question. Educators cannot produce integration for learners or hand it to them somehow ready-made. However, they are actively to foster integration by the thoughtful way in which they arrange and offer content. This requirement recalls the "logical" answer to the locus question. It also recalls the attacks against subject-based curricula: unsuitable curricular arrangements hinder students from seeing the relationships that exist between the areas of knowledge. Put negatively, we see that the interactive answer to the locus question is this: integration is not only a curricular affair to be planned by committees, deans, curriculum designers and professors. Nor is it a strictly internal matter, a project best left to students themselves. Curricular and institutional arrangements do matter. But students must assemble a cognitive cosmos for themselves. Neither condition is sufficient. Both are necessary.

What should one make of this three-sided debate? Classroom experience points to the efficacy of the more demanding, interactive view. While bad pedagogy can hinder integration, good pedagogy will not ensure it. And although good pedagogy will not ensure integration, we do not want to discourage it. Conceivably, a student might emerge from the most chaotic curriculum with an education we could accurately label integrated. This possibility shows the importance of the student's
mindset and worldview to the integration of faith and learning. We are compelled to admit that regardless of what happens in curriculum, if integration ever happens anywhere it happens in the consciousness of students.

The Community of Faith and the Integration of Faith and Learning

Educational thinkers have carried on the locus discussion largely without reference to faith. Yet the answer we accept to the general locus question directly affects our understanding of how students will integrate faith and learning. If integration in general cannot be guaranteed by logical curriculum design, then neither can the integration of faith and learning. The corollary to that statement, of course, serves as a charter for any Christian in higher education: if the student’s consciousness is the locus of integration, then those of us wanting students to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2Co 10:5) ought to attend as carefully to what goes on in their thinking and in their development and understanding of their theistic worldview as we do to our course syllabi and class preparation.

In the divine economy of higher education today, four distinct kinds of institutions have found a part: the public university, the Christian liberal arts college, the Bible college and the seminary. We do not expect to find hostility to faith in the last three institutions named. Thus, their students should find it simpler to reconcile their faith with their course contents. But in the public university, we expect that course contents will not be pre-interpreted by people sympathetic to Christian faith. Professors will not teach in such a way as to reconcile the course contents with Christian theology or convictions. No one will point out in advance for the student the points of agreement, disagreement, and connection or common interest between a given topic and Christian thought. The course contents, where they are hostile to faith, will come to the student in their harshest forms, unmediated with any eye to maintaining faith or enhancing understanding from a Christian perspective. Whatever we may think about integration in general, we thus grasp that the curriculum, in the public university at least, is clearly not the locus of faith-learning integration.

If I have described this particular educational milieu accurately, students in it live in a vulnerable position. They must face the challenges of the world of thought while assuming no conflict exists between the truth therein and the truth of Scripture. Presumably they do so with God’s help, but, as I have described it, they will do so without any supporting social structure. In such circumstances, many students will become discouraged, lose faith altogether, or maintain faith only by lapsing into religious schizophrenia. In view of these possibilities, the whole church must consider its part in the process of integrating faith and learning.

We all maintain our beliefs—of any kind—in the face of others’ questions and sometimes our own doubts. And we find our beliefs easier to maintain when some around us believe as we do. We might call this the “social component of belief.” Periodically, we may also remember the minority status of the Christian at university. Typically, these young Christians find Christian belief challenged in their first weeks of university. They face questions—almost daily—not only about the tenets of their faith, but about their epistemology, their views of marriage, family and culture, and their convictions about the final source of meaning. Under this questioning, students come to feel keenly and existentially that they are in a cognitive minority. Further, they sometimes feel the creeping doubt that they are wrong after all, and the majority right about which worldview makes the most sense of life.

As we come to appreciate these aspects of belief, especially the cognitive status of the Christian in university, we might respond by asking how we can aid students in keeping faith while facing the daily onslaught of analysis and critique. We can aid our students by coming alongside them in the midst of their tensions. When we do, we shift the locus of integration by implicitly inviting them to continue their struggles, not alone, but within the relative safety of the faith community. Integration finally happens within the consciousness of the student, but the student can approach the task in a far better frame of mind if he or she sees that others have pulled alongside.

What qualities does the community of faith possess that make it the superior context in which to integrate faith and learning? Part of the answer lies in exploring community. Perhaps the best-known analysis of community was that offered by Ferdinand Tonnies a hundred years ago in Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft. In this book, translated as Community and Society, Tonnies portrays community in opposition to society.6 Industrial society severs natural affiliations in its pragmatic, impersonal, rational concern with production and efficient organization of life. People still need Gemeinschaft-type connections, however, and they will seek those connections in family, friendships, other voluntary relationships, village and church. From Tonnies’ splitting of community and society, we now derive the not-always-negative sense that community implies a polarity of us and them.
Who are the "us" in Tonnies' picture? All communities ask this question, but especially when we speak of the community of faith, we want and need to understand if we are merely an aggregation of separate individuals or if something larger unites us together. We shall see ourselves as sharing some of the characteristics of a federation, an association, a fraternity, a company, a lodge, a caste, a union, an order, a group of settlers, a consort, a guild, a troupe or a troop. Regardless of which comparisons strike us as most truly apropos, we shall realize that we have no reason to revert to the separationist stance of Tertullian or Jerome with regard to faith and learning. Rather, we can embrace the reality of Christ's work in us and in our behalf, a reality that makes us different from other communities. And we can embrace the admission that our common sympathies engender trust. The safety that the group perspective provides for its individuals implies that those individuals support each other and stand with each other, burying smaller disagreements in favor of larger common commitments. In this kind of context, we shall be able to support those who struggle to reconcile their faith and learning. When they face opposition, students can take re assurance from the fact that others believe as they do. They are therefore safe. Although physically alone, students can stand knowing the church stands with them. But they cannot take such reassurance unless we have given them warrant to do so by our actions.

Baldly, the church does not integrate faith and learning. The persons doing the learning will be doing the integrating. But the church can help. In my own attempts to help, I meet different university students for coffee from time to time. At some point in the conversation I ask, "How is it going?" or even, "Well, are you still a Christian?" These simple questions often lead quickly to the student's recounting to me the questions that Blake's poetry or Skinner's psychology have raised for Christian faith. Three threads seem woven into the experience of most Christian university students. These threads repeatedly appear in my conversations with students. First, they want to keep their faith. Second, they want to participate fully in their classes and, more broadly, in the intellectual life of the whole university. Third, they feel that their congregation does not understand their existential discord.

In attempting to reconcile these desires and perceptions, these young adults face two problems. They need to persevere through their own periods of doubt. And they desperately desire some word about resolution where will they find it, can anyone help them, and how long it will take? For these Christians, the integration of faith and learning clearly connects to what they see as the very survival of their faith. Curriculum design is the furthest thing from their minds. But older Christian adults can move into students' situations at the very point of these tensions. Face to face with the students we know, we should underline that we think tough questions about faith are justified; anyone in their circumstances would undergo the same doubts. If the assessment that integration occurs inside the student is even half right, then one task of the community of faith is to remind our students day after day that we do share in community. We should remind them that, in the midst of their struggle to reconcile their faith commitments with what they are learning, we love them. We should show them that they are among us and not outside us during their university years. We should remind them that God loves them, that we can survive their period of doubt, that they can survive their period of doubt, that fine Christian people at all times have contemplated the perplexities of existence, meaning, evil, and identity, and that one is neither silly nor ungrateful for asking these questions. We share their doubts and their joys. Their intellectual burdens may be theirs. But we have made their burdens ours as well; we want to help carry those burdens. Our students may be able to reconcile—integrate—their beliefs with their learning alone. But they are more likely to succeed in that integration as we invite and draw them, their efforts, and all their tensions into the community of faith.

Notes: