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## A Review of "Compromising Scholarship: Religious and Political Bias in American Higher Education"

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## BOOK REVIEW

### **Compromising Scholarship: Religious and Political Bias in American Higher Education**

By **George Yancey**

Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011. xiv + 265 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-6025-82682

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In *Compromising Scholarship*, Yancey argues that politically conservative persons, religiously conservative persons, and especially politically, religiously conservative persons face a disadvantage when seeking either employment or a fair hearing in the contemporary American academy, especially in the social sciences and humanities. Several times while reading this book, I recalled a job interview of my own at a university in Canada. One interviewer asked whether my religious convictions might undermine my ability to teach courses in a program that prepared teachers for service in Saskatchewan's public schools. I noted that, while the question was illegal under Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms, I welcomed it because I believed that all professors carried out their work on the basis of one vision of the good life or another and that my own worldview was consistent with the very dispositions that Saskatchewan desired in its teachers. I added that, politically, I was likely well to the left of anyone else in the room. Alas, my leftist politics proved unequal to the needed redemption of my faith convictions, and the job went to another person, presumably someone lacking bias or prejudice.

Yancey, were he to read my story, would assure me that my experience was not unique. His book will likely provide the same kind of assurance for many of his readers: a search committee may well be populated by biased people and may judge one as unfit for a post if one holds religious or political views that committee members consider conservative. To make his case, Yancey proceeds methodically, sometimes almost laboriously, through definitions and examples of bias and its possible sources. He consistently explains the research methods he used, how those methods work, and why we should trust the results those methods produce. Initially, I found Yancey's book to be slow going and wanted him to move more quickly to his destination. However, for readers of *Compromising Scholarship*, patience has at least moderate rewards because Yancey does identify factors that he concludes are most important in academic hiring in the United States.

Based on 435 responses in an online survey of sociologists, Yancey identified characteristics that enhanced or diminished one's chances of being considered a desirable colleague in a sociology department. Somewhat predictably, the responses reveal a bias toward Democrats, greens, and members of the American Civil Liberties Union, as opposed to Republicans, libertarians, or members of the National Rifle Association. If one identifies as Mormon, fundamentalist, or evangelical Christian, one's chances of a sociology post are diminished compared to atheists, mainline Christians, Muslims, Catholics, or Jews. Yancey's survey results may provide the cynical with fodder for some imaginative questions about possible combinations of qualities: Would

cohabiting (which enhances one's job chances slightly) help overcome one's being a hunter? Would being a vegetarian under 30 years of age (both of which help) somewhat reduce the ill effects of one's fundamentalism? More seriously of course, Yancey identifies quite clearly the most potent combination if one is seeking a sociology post: Republican, fundamentalist, and hunter.

Most readers of this journal could likely nuance the differences between a fundamentalist and an evangelical more carefully than members of the typical search committee about whom Yancey writes (in fact, he notes sociologists' habitual failure to make that distinction on p. 95). That secular academics blur the categories may not surprise Yancey's readers and certainly will not cheer them. Readers of *Compromising Scholarship* (or applicants for academic posts) who name Christ but cannot imagine joining the NRA will especially find Yancey's conclusions sobering. This situation gives Yancey's title some of its poignancy, for the academy indeed compromises itself when it passes over good candidates because of search committee members' own lack of liberality concerning the alleged lack of liberality among others.

A potential danger of Yancey's book is that it may confirm to some Christians that all the fault lies on the side of the academy, when, in fact, some religious persons perhaps should be denied academic posts. As have most readers of this journal, I have met Christians whose thinking fits a pattern inimical to the kind of enquiry and wonder needed in and characteristic of the academy when it functions at its best. In fact, some Christian believers will not be dissuaded of even the most patently nonbiblical and baldly irresponsible beliefs. In the year before I wrote these words, one pastor made a public and international spectacle of his burning of the Koran. He named Christ and, from all I read and heard, was closed to all attempts to engage in rational discussion of his hateful views. Granted, he was not applying for a post in a sociology department. But a nonbelieving sociologist who lacks the categories and skills to distinguish the Koran-burning branch of the church from the other branches might have good reason to confess to Yancey a degree of prejudice about fundamentalists.

Perhaps this line of questioning reveals a weakness in Yancey's logic. He explains to his readers how he cast the original online survey in the language of collegiality, asking, "Who would you prefer as a colleague?" rather than, "Against what groups are you biased?" Fair enough, social researchers slant their questions to get better information. But Yancey's 435 sociologists may have made a kind of prophetic utterance that we need to hear. What if Yancey's results reveal something not just about sociologists but also about fundamentalists (whose chances are most diminished, according to Yancey's participants)? Were I on a search committee confronted with the choice between an applicant who claimed to be a fundamentalist and another applicant, I would certainly want to move carefully around the fundamentalist, a wish arising not out of some residue of my upbringing but out of my desire for departmental colleagues who can contemplate the logical possibility of being in error, who can come to work in the morning without imagining new ways to convert me, and who can disagree with me without questioning whether I really believe that Christ died for my sins.

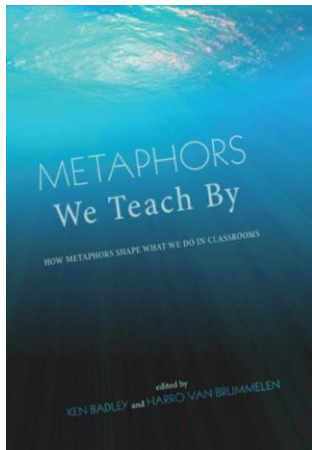
Yancey confirmed his statistical data by reading sociologists' blogs (and those of doctoral students in sociology). He quotes material from several blogs that confirms his survey data and reveals a collective failure to distinguish religious conservatism and political conservatism. The blogs Yancey reads seem to view the two forms of conservatism as either identical or coextensive in the American population, but he is careful to caution his readers that the blogs did not reveal a "continual rant" (p. 105) against religious and political conservatives.

Checking more widely, Yancey conducted an online survey (similar to his survey of sociologists) among academics working in anthropology, political science, history, language, philosophy, chemistry, experimental biology, and geophysics. In general, the views of these professors fit the same patterns as Yancey's sociologists. Fundamentalists, evangelicals, and Mormons would face the most resistance when applying for academic posts in these respective disciplines, while Democrats and members of the ACLU would gain competitive advantage in the same search processes. In comparison to sociologists, these professors indicated differing degrees of acceptance or rejection, but the favored and disfavored groups remain the same.

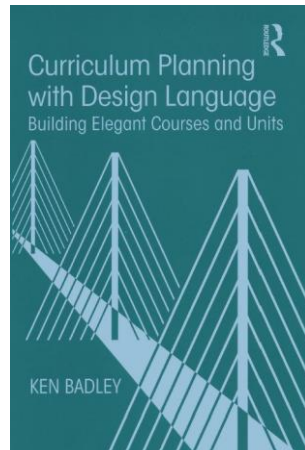
Those readers who don't find Yancey's findings sobering enough had best heed his discussion and recommendations. He notes, for example, that a conservative Christian applying for an English or anthropology post might want to keep her faith secret. But having done so, when does that new professor come out, post-hiring? Yancey makes clear that the problems for the targets of prejudice do not end once one gets the desired post. The irony is not lost on Yancey and will not be lost on his readers that prejudice finds such rich soil in the academy, that ostensible defender of free inquiry, especially when so many academics deny or remain unaware of their own biases. Ultimately, the academy's politics of identity harm not only those desiring employment but the academy itself. Yancey devotes his last two chapters to a discussion of the character of scientific enquiry and how the biases he has explored undermine that character. When scientific enquiry is no longer free, then it fails as scientific enquiry. On Yancey's account, once the public sees that the academy has failed to meet its own demand for free enquiry it will stop looking to the academy for answers to its questions. To address the situation he describes, Yancey proposes adapting the kinds of programs meant to increase awareness of cultural diversity and bias, an idea which some of his readers will affirm, but, I fear, one that the most blindly biased in the academy would consider unnecessary.

Without doubt, libraries should order this book. Individuals wanting to understand secularism, bias, the social sciences, and even the academy in general will thank Yancey for his work. I have noted that it holds little to surprise. But inasmuch as it further confirms what it does, many will find *Compromising Scholarship* of benefit.

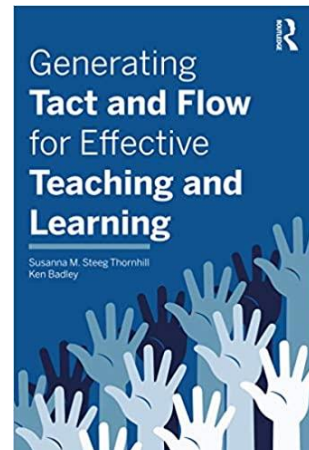
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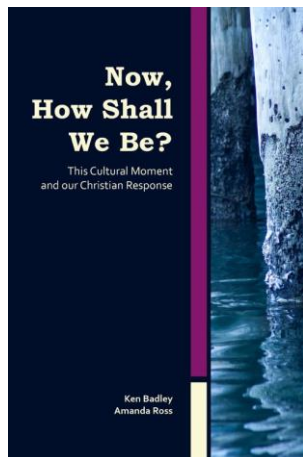
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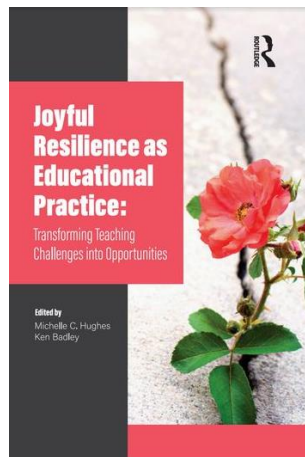
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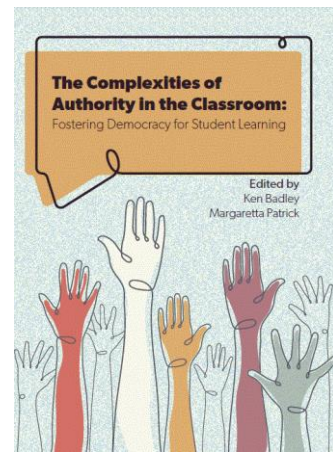
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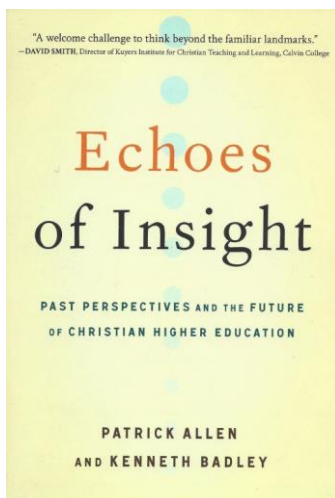


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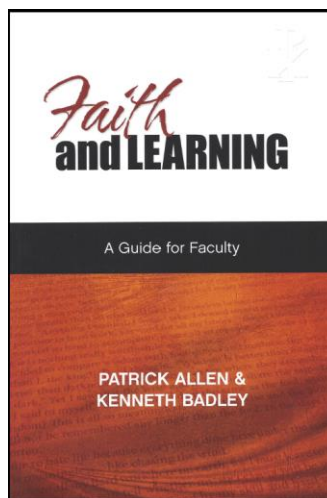


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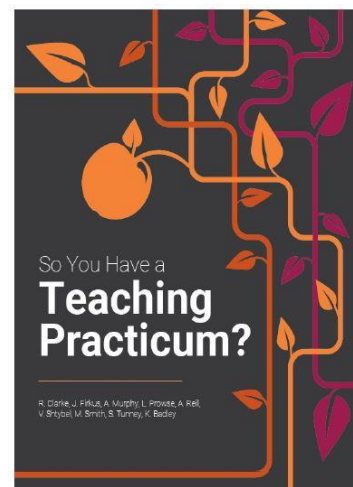


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