

**Integrative Teaching and Living:
Christian Professors in Secular Universities**

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INTRODUCTION

What can we learn from the Christian professor who says, "There are echoes of God in any field or discipline," or, "I seek to bring students one step closer to redemption," or, "I cannot not integrate"? These comments and others like them are what we uncovered recently in our field research among Christian professors teaching cross-culturally in secular universities. Our intention with this research was to look more at the integrated mindset and less at specific classroom behaviors.

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

This research draws on works that explore worldview and education from a Christian perspective. We stand on the contributions of scholars in the area of faith integration (Dockery, 2012; Harris, 2004; Hasker, 1992; Marsden, 1998; Plantinga, 2002). We also rely on those who have clarified Christian worldview concepts (Naugle, 2002; Smith, 2009), explored Christian higher education purposes (Holmes, 1987), offered styles of faith integration (Chewning, 2001), and categorized methods of faith integration (Roller, 2013). Scholars continue to grapple with the "what, why, and how" of faith integration, often describing it as a gap that needs to be addressed. A common assumption is that due to the fall our faith and disciplines have become disconnected and must be restored to their intended fullness. While we agree with this "it's broken and we need to fix it" approach to faith integration, we find our greatest resonance with Glanzer (2008). He encourages Christian professors to imitate God by being creative and redemptive in their scholarship, "engaging in the unfolding of creation by participating in the creational work of God" (Glanzer, 2008, p. 44).

In light of this, we find the work of Dallas Willard helpful. Willard sees the Christ-formed life revealing clear purpose for one's place in the world. It is a recognition of one's nature as an "unceasing spiritual being with an eternal destiny in God's great universe" (Willard, 2006, p. 20), who is disconnected from God, creation, others, and self by sin (Bartholomew & Goheen, 2004), yet restored to God's intentions through Christ and living creatively in this world. As professors restored to wholeness, seeing one's academic field in view of God's ongoing work in His creation is a full engagement with the world in search for God's truth. The professor, then, can use one's academic field to experience God more fully, to understand one's self as God does, to see others as God sees them, and to restore creation to its fullness,.

Willard speaks of a process in which Jesus changes one's perspective, becoming the ultimate "in-former," through whom one is reformed with new "insides." (2006, p. 21). The need, then, is to transform one's heart, the center of character and choice, into one willing to embrace the revolution of Jesus in bringing God's kingdom to every aspect of human life (Willard, 2012). For the Christian professor, it means that we communicate much more than the content of our academic fields; we speak with our lives, which is the overflow of our hearts (Matt. 12:34). A professor's personal grounding in the transforming life of Jesus comes through individual and corporate spiritual disciplines in such a way that one's spiritual vitality permeates every facet of the teaching-learning process (Willard, 1998). In summary, the act and the art of the integration of faith and learning for Christian professors is to be mindful practitioners of the reality of God's rule in one's life and in the world (Willard, 1997).

Thus, our purpose in this research was to discover, through interviews and extended observation, how Christian professors in cross cultural contexts are living integrated lives and teaching with a view towards participating with God's ongoing redemption of creation. In this

paper, we describe our methodology and findings of this qualitative study, and we propose a simple model to illustrate those findings. We end with some suggestions for further study.

METHODOLOGY

This two-phase project was designed as a qualitative research study using face to face interviews and on-site observation. Interviewees were selected based on the fact that they are committed Christians, teaching at the university level, and living cross-culturally. The authors requested participation from the interviewees based on acquaintances with the authors of this research. Thus, it was a convenience sample. For Phase 1, we interviewed 15 professors across 11 academic disciplines who teach in secular universities in 11 different countries (outside the US). Interviewees represented a broad range of academic disciplines and were teaching in varied locations across Latin America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. These face to face interviews were conducted during sessions of a conference we were all attending in July, 2013 in the United States. Interviewees responded to questions categorized around purpose, perspective, and practice. Representative questions included: (1) “How does your academic field reveal God’s truth?”; (2) “What does your transformation in Christ teach you about being a teacher?”; (3) “What methodologies and practices that you employ in and outside the classroom most exemplify God’s purposes for you and your students?” It should be noted and emphasized that all of these professors were teaching in secular universities, with a wide range of tolerance (from none to a great deal) for discussions about religious belief on campus. All of these professors were teaching cross culturally, adding layers of interest, potential stress, and possible misunderstanding. The Phase 1 interviews were quite revealing, even inspiring, especially in demonstrating what the professors believe to be true about their faith, their disciplines, and how

they might teach in their non-Christian environment. We considered how to probe more deeply and planned Phase 2.

For Phase 2, we went to the professors' locations. While on sabbatical in spring 2016, we interviewed 20 professors across 12 academic disciplines who teach in secular universities in seven different countries in Latin America, Europe, and Central Asia. We spent several days, up to a week, with each professor in the country where they live and teach. Again, the academic disciplines and geographic locations of the professors were quite diverse. We conducted further face to face interviews and spent informal time with each professor observing their daily lives. Four questions during Phase 2 were: (1) "Please describe how God is revealed in your discipline."; (2) "Conversely, how does your faith in God inform your understanding of your discipline?"; (3) "How does your discipline help you see God at work in the world?"; and (4) "Removing any overtly Christian content or behaviors in class (such as, praying or devotionals in class), what determines your effectiveness or success in the classroom as a Christian professor?" These are thought provoking questions for most academics. Time was allowed for processing and thinking, and professors often responded over several days.

The interviews and conversations were enlightening, but equally important for our project was the time we spent with each professor observing them in the classroom, with students, during activities outside of class, with their families and church involvement, and in various settings in their communities. Our aim was to observe as much of their regular life as possible. During all of these activities and interactions, we paid attention to and attempted to document even the seemingly minor details.

As we completed our time in each geographic location, we reviewed our notes together to confirm our understanding of the responses before moving on to the next location. Once we completed all of the on-site visits, we both re-read all the notes to solidify themes.

RESULTS

Phase 1 consisted of face-to-face interviews in the United States, and Phase 2 consisted of face-to-face interviews and extended on-site observations. Participants, academic disciplines and country locations are summarized in Table 1. We were pleased to find a variety of perspectives based on the many disciplines and contexts represented. In spite of this variety, three consistent themes emerged from the interviews and observations.

Table 1
Interviewees, Disciplines, and Geographic Locations

PHASE	# of Professors	Academic Disciplines	Countries
1	15	Biology, Communication, English, Environmental Science, Education, Engineering, Music, Philosophy, Physics, Plant Genetics, Theology	Brazil, Bulgaria, China, Czech Republic, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Macedonia, Mexico, Nigeria, Uganda
2	20	Business, Communication, Cultural Studies, Engineering, Environmental Science, History, Leisure/Recreation, Political Science, Philosophy, Physics, Psychology, Theology	Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Mexico, Russia

Theme 1: God’s truth is in the academic discipline

Every professor indicated that they see God clearly in and through their discipline. As Glanzer (2008) notes, research in various fields is conducted and validated in different ways. We

found that even though they arrive at truth in different ways, there is agreement that each discipline reveals something important about God. And even with disciplinary distinctions, the interviewees indicated that the reality of God exists “in the subject matter.” The discipline itself holds truth. As many reminded us, all truth is God’s truth, and He has placed His stamp of truth in the subject matter. Indeed, He created all things, including the discipline. The responsibility of the Christian academic is to know the truth in one’s discipline, to know that God is the source of that truth, and that by seeking what is real there, one is seeking God Himself. As one professor stated, “There are echoes of God in every discipline.”

The analysis of the interview data reveals four characteristics of God that these academics experience while studying, teaching, and researching in their disciplines. More specifically, interviewees explained that their discipline reveals a God who is just, creative, communicative, true and beautiful.

Just. Knowing that God is a just God means that the justice we pursue, build, and communicate to others reflects God’s character. That is, we can further God’s kingdom by building justice into our structures, policies, and organizations. One business professor expressed that he communicates the “wisdom of Jesus” in the classroom through his discipline and understanding of justice. He further indicated that the richness of God’s justice far exceeds humanity’s limited perception of justice. Another professor, in the area of communication, emphasized seeing her discipline’s potential for “bringing forth God’s redemption” by dealing with injustices in the world in issues like gender relations and social discourse. Across the disciplines studied, professors expressed the steady presence of God as one who is just.

Creative. As a creative designer, God made the earth with systems and sub-systems where His design is evident. One professor explained, “How I view God and his creation are

nuanced and concretized views of the human condition that often show humanity's incredible resilience, creativity, and beauty while also detailing its derangement, delusion, and depravity." So, it is crucial, another professor indicated, that we follow God's lead by "designing systems that are functional, aesthetic, economically viable, and sustainable." Another professor stated, "God's systems are the best." As we mature and take on God's character (Willard, 1997; Willard, 2012), we too can become godly creators. Moreover, since these systems are interrelated, all of our work, play, and rest become expressions of God's creativity. One professor speaks of his discipline, leisure and recreation, as one that "starts as a whole and is not dichotomized." So, his teaching and research begin with that assumption of wholeness rather than a "pieces and parts" analysis. His desire is to help others see a whole God who works (creates), plays, and rests.

Communicative. As a communicator, God reveals Himself through His Word, as the Word made flesh. One professor stated, "The idea of the Word becoming flesh, the incarnation, suggests that words have possibilities." We encountered that sentiment from the several literature professors interviewed. Yes, words have possibilities, especially words about the Word. Another professor explained that communication is about the whole person and speaks to "personhood and identity." She continued by saying that it is "rich and complex" and also "open." This openness of communication brings the potential for meaningful relationships with God and others. "Communication is the way I see the world. I see God through communication," she said.

True and Beautiful. While the professors, as expected, spoke of truth, it often was tied to experiencing God's beauty. We look to God's Word for truth and beauty. But, professors also can find truth and beauty in the stories of literature, in the function of engineering levers and pulleys, in the intricacies of a biological cell, in the consideration of postmodern art, and in the

strength needed for a bolt to hold together two pieces of steel. Indeed, professors' lives are faith stories which demonstrate the truth, beauty, and reality of God. One professor of plant genetics summed it up well, "God enjoys beauty. It's not just about function." Life becomes true and beautiful, like God, when lived according to His design and rhythms.

Theme 2: The truth in the academic discipline can lead to God

Just as various academic disciplines reveal important truths about the character of God, scholars find various ways to express that truth. The powerful implication is that the truth of God within the discipline can draw people toward God, even when they are not seeking Him. For the Christian academic, this represents great possibility and responsibility. His or her job becomes peeling back the layers of evidence and helping students see the truth that lives there. The potential exists, then, to bring students closer to God through academic endeavors. As one professor stated, "The Christian professor has goals, outcomes, perspectives, philosophical content, and attitude. I have all of that to work with to express God's truth." This is good news for the professor teaching in a secular context where students often need a pathway to believe that God even exists.

The interviewees were unanimous in their belief that their discipline can make students ready for the reality of God. Offering a new or different perspective is not new in higher education, but many students have not yet been allowed to seriously consider the truths of God in academic subject matter. One philosophy professor said that his goal is to help students see relationships between God, theology, human beings, and art "without dismissing them out of hand because of previous institutional biases, whether about the Church, secularism, or communism." These professors are often preparing the soil, sometimes planting, but rarely harvesting. One professor said he is "just chipping up rock to maybe start plowing and sowing."

So, professors often spoke delightedly about students taking that first, single step towards God. Indeed, that first step may simply be the result of a gentle challenge to ungodly assumptions the students sometimes bring to class.

We discovered that Christian professors in secular, cross-cultural contexts are able to suggest new perspectives by keeping their teaching people-centered. Our research revealed professors who taught the content of their discipline with an eye on how it affected everyday life. As one business professor began, “It’s about people.” He went to application right away when he discussed teaching and mentoring students in areas of ethics, negotiation, and international affairs. “It’s about the treatment of people, employees, staff, customers and other members of society.”

Several Christian scholars we interviewed advanced these notions through scholarly research and writing. One professor contributed to a textbook on sustainable management, emphasizing the dignity of humanity. Another professor accentuated the geo-political implications of decisions made by leaders, including intended and unintended consequences that affect people today and for years to come. Also, one interviewee has found secular publishing opportunities in his field even though the content of his writing hints at spiritual and godly things.

To a great extent, we observed Christian professors intentionally seeking ways to make their teaching have significant impact in students’ lives. One professor made it personal by asking students to reflect on their own experiences with recreation and play in order to “tap into their own needs” for contemplation and to possibly allow space for God to show Himself. Another professor described how students’ desires to protect the environment brings opportunities to discuss the reality of a creator God. An interest in the environment hints at the

existence of God, and as one philosophy professor explained, proper “creation care” can draw one to the Creator. Several professors noted that students participating in humanitarian causes often leads to a “softening of the heart” towards other people and their living conditions. This awareness can prepare students to glimpse the kingdom of God.

In many academic disciplines, the related profession offers opportunities to participate in God’s ongoing redemption of creation. The several engineering professors we interviewed present a compelling case. One engineering professor insisted he is not “just teaching engineering.” He is offering students the chance to contribute to systems that matter in everyday lives. That is, by emphasizing “functionality, economic viability, aesthetics and sustainability,” the students are prepared to design roads, buildings, and bridges more in line with the Creator’s design. Likewise, professional codes, which are respected documents of the professional community, often express human worth, the excellence demanded of the profession, and the source (even Divine) of strength and inspiration (National Society of Professional Engineers, 2016). For non-Christians, being “good” at one’s profession allows participation in co-creation and redemption with God at some level, even if they are (temporarily) unaware (Willard, 1997).

Theme 3: Effectiveness is sustained by an integrated life

We found a consistent message about the significance of shared experience or the ministry of presence (Nouwen, 1975) with students and the community. This may be one of the more demanding ways that professors are bringing their students along the path to God. Professors we interviewed attempted diligently to demonstrate God’s relational character by establishing relationships with their students that relied on open communication. This was often a difficult task in cultural and educational contexts that did not support it. One philosophy professor expressed it like this:

Education is more about formation than information. How I am (or not) shaped and formed by Christ will in turn shape how I seek to form students. Who I am comes through in what I say and do both in and outside the classroom. Education is about both character and content. Students and colleagues (especially in a cross-cultural environment where your motives and actions are being scrutinized on a daily basis) are quite perceptive and know whether you care about them or not. So my life in Christ is crucial to my teaching. I don't see them as separate but as intimately related.

For Christian professors, this approach to relationships is rooted in their commitment to God and their desire to live it out holistically, supported by consistent faith disciplines of prayer and worship. Professors who are steeped in Scripture and attuned to the Holy Spirit through their own spiritual disciplines are prepared to speak the words when opportunities arose (Willard, 1998).

We heard stories of professors self-identifying as Christians and stories of student challenges in the classroom where the professors were able to express calmly their faith in an authentic way that was disarming to the unbeliever. Professors were not only articulate about their faith. They were also active in service, finding a broad range of activities that demonstrated the uniqueness and giftedness of the professor. Professors discussed, and we observed them, serving local needs at a Salvation Army orphanage, in a Roma neighborhood, and among Syrian refugees, giving students the chance to hear about and see real ministry, even when not identifying it as distinct Christian behavior.

Professors demonstrated invitational lives to their students. When the moment was ripe within the context of student-teacher relationships, the Christian professors we studied extended invitations to social activities—pizza parties, ski outings, book clubs. Professors frequently encouraged students to join them in the kinds of community ministry activities mentioned above. Students, even non-Christian students, seemed motivated and appreciative to participate in these endeavors in spite of the Christian intent. For those students seriously seeking deeper spiritual

understanding, professors extended invitations to a Bible study or a church service. There, students witnessed first-hand the prayer, worship, and study that provided the support necessary for the truthful academic life. In other words, these kind of opportunities revealed to the students that the content of Christianity that the professor had expressed in the classroom and conversations was sustained by devotional action.

The ministry of presence is demanding, yet it is so simple. Spend time with people. In this research, we found Christian professors living committed, whole, intentional, non-dichotomized, faith-first lives. Such lives open the pathways to belief in God.

DISCUSSION AND PROPOSED MODEL

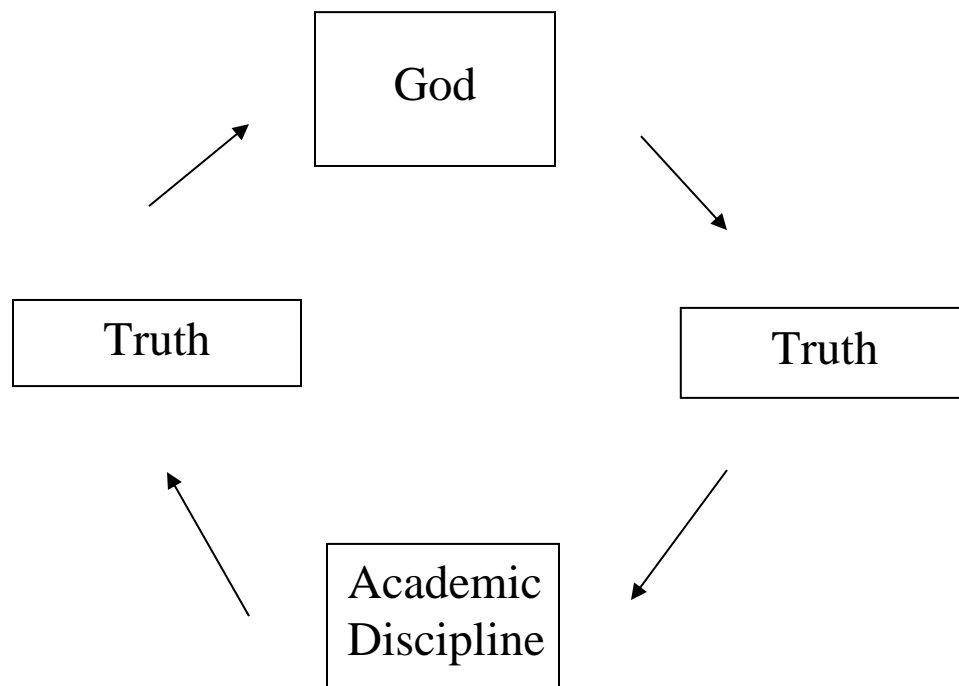
The first two themes of this research —“The truth of God is in the academic discipline” and “The academic discipline can lead to God”— highlight the nature of academic missionary teaching in a secular institution. The professors interviewed are committed to discovering those truths and are intentional in helping students engage those truths. We offer a simple model (see Diagram 1) to illustrate the dynamic of these first two themes.

God made the universe, including all disciplinary knowledge, so His truth is present in all of creation. The Christian professor generally starts with personal belief in God and then studies his or her discipline, with the understanding that God is revealing Himself in that discipline. In the first half of the circle (clockwise), God creates the discipline and His truth is in it. Through careful academic study, the Christian professor finds God there and thus gains the fullest understanding possible of the discipline. In the second half of the circle (continuing clockwise), the discipline reveals the truth of God. The Christian professor realizes that the starting point for most students, especially non-Christians, will be the discipline. So, meeting students where they

are is the Christian professor’s task. He or she helps students see disciplinary truth, which can lead to belief in God. This is how Christian academics share in God’s creation and redemption.

The third theme, “Effectiveness is sustained by an integrated life,” makes the model possible. Teaching truth is much more than transferring content. It is about lives lived. As Christian professors, we are offering our lives as a holistic view of God, the world, and our place in it.

Diagram 1
God’s Truth In and Through the Discipline



IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER STUDY

We believe the results of this study have implications for Christian professors teaching in a variety of contexts. Professors working cross-culturally in secular situations will probably find themselves in these stories. We hope they will be encouraged to begin or continue the intentional

study and delivery of their discipline with these results in mind. Professors working in secular institutions in the United States may also learn from these examples on integration in which institutional support often work against Christian belief. And, finally, professors working in Christian universities may well find that their attempts at faith integration can go deeper with a more holistic approach.

There are several ways that this research could be extended. First, the model could be presented and tested among professors in specific contexts, such as secular universities or Christian universities in the United States. Second, the four Godly characteristics discovered in this research (just, creative, communicative, true and beautiful) could be explored further among professors within particular disciplines or families of disciplines. Third, the model could be expanded to include effective pedagogical techniques. Fourth, one could go deeper in connecting Willard's ideas on discipleship with faith integration concepts.

CONCLUSION

What can we learn from Christian professors teaching in secular universities? When the support structures of the Christian institution are removed, can one still be an integrated scholar? The results from this study suggest a strong, inspiring "yes." We found Christian professors who recognize that God's truth is already in the discipline and that a holistic expression of the discipline can place students on a path towards personal belief in God. We found Christian professors actively doing, often under difficult circumstances, what many of us talk about doing. We found them participating in God's creative, redemptive work through their teaching and scholarship.

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