

## **BEYOND PERIPHERALISM**

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It is with pleasure and expectancy that I welcome you to one of the most exciting cerebral experiences you will ever have.

Few misconceptions entertained by students are as great as the belief that the Adventist element of an Adventist education is peripheral in the classroom.

This belief is pervasive and persuasive: it truly has its reasons.

From one thing, an abundant and seemingly sufficient amount of religious activity occurs mainly outside the classrooms, yet still within the campus, of an Adventist institution. You interact with Christian teachers and attend numerous religious services and even take prescribed religion courses. In doing so, one easily concludes, you imbibe the Adventist part of your tertiary experience. Then you enter the secular classroom for the meat of it—the classroom alleged to be empirical and value-free.

Add to this the fact that students are jealous for the integrity of their classes. Granted, religion is a very good thing, the rightful basis of a desirable environment or climate of learning. But introduce it *cart blanche* to the curriculum and you dilute and distort the subject matter and undermine its hoped for equivalency with public schooling. (In this regard students are appropriately wary: they have seen well-meaning professors bring religion into the classroom at the expense of everything else.)

Third, it seems endemic to our lifestyle, perhaps the Western lifestyle, to bifurcate the sacred from the profane. Our own church encourages it without intending to by voicing a separation that sounds like the purging of religion to public issues.

So peripheralism shouts out: religion is everywhere; protect our classes; be Western and therefore bifurcate!

However justified peripheralism seems, integration makes the stronger case. For its advocates, the Adventism of an Adventist college is fundamentally a classroom phenomenon because for them knowledge is acquired or learning takes place within a faith perspective. No one intends this to minimize the general environment, but simply to maximize the cognitive element of campus life.

We could digress here to the pitfalls of integration—such as the belief that there is only one way to do it in a given discipline, or the belief that one eventually gets it right (in contrast to the lifelong striving that it really entails), but I only acknowledge these in passing because I wish rather to describe why it is that the effort to integrate is so worthwhile, the assumption being that knowing the value of integration will compel us to try it.

So what is its value or what are its values?

First, the exercise called integration models what we wish our young people to become and be in the real world—whole people driven by, conditioned by, or at least contextualized by religion in all that they perceive or do, rather than compartmentalized people for whom the facets of life are not connected enough to be meaningful or even manageable. We know that we are role models in the areas of character, but it turns out that we are equally such in matters of the mind.

Second, the exercise of integration answers those who bemoan the high cost of college education (and who isn't bemoaning this). To consumer-oriented students and parents the persuasive demonstration of uniqueness is indispensable in justifying the cost of something, and integration locates that uniqueness at the most fundamental point of academic life, the classroom.

Third, the exercise of integration closes the gap between what we have been doing in our colleges and what we have been saying about our colleges in the public arena and especially the courts-wherein we have argued for decades that our schools must be shielded from public money and the possible violation of church/state separation because they are pervasively religious. I contend they will be such only when integration happens across the board; only then will our oft-repeated public claims be credible.

Fourth, the exercise of integration aligns our disciplines with a great deal of respectable scholarship today, and that is both remarkable and satisfying. In the disciplines of history and political science with which I am most familiar, one thinks of the now conventional wisdom that value-free commentary is not possible, that explicit bias and self-discourses, not feigned objectivity, bring us as close to what actually happened as we will get. Or one thinks of the long reign of realism as a measure of international or diplomatic behavior (Metternich to Kissinger) and of the widely acknowledged rootage of that theory in the Christian view of man.

Fifth, the exercise of integration is simply exciting—it becomes your project for life—like a very long book that you can't put aside but also cannot finish. And if teaching becomes your project in this sense, your teaching will not die as it is want to do (we call it burn-out) but rather it will grow in vibrancy and at the same time deepen with a sense of wholeness and completeness. Even as these sentiments of vibrancy and depth prolong your academic life, they will arrest the attention of your students and captivate them so that learning is in the best sense of the word their project too, a book that can neither be put aside nor finished.

For these five reasons, and no doubt others, let's determine, no later than today, to move beyond peripheralism and experience the rewards of integration.

Here, too, critics will lurk. Peculiarly, the loudest may be our religion teacher who bemoan one of the corollaries of integration, namely the diminished need for religion as such in core curricula that include integrated classes. To them you have an enticing rebuttal: ultimacy has reached the classroom—spiritual points of view that add to and never subtract from the legitimate work of students, tantalizing insights that direct the finite mind of man to the infinite mind of God. Who could want less?