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Reconceiving the Christ-Centered College

Convertive Piety and Life Together

Roger E. Olson



FROM A PIETIST PERSPECTIVE Christ-centered education begins with the experience of knowing Jesus Christ personally.¹ Such a model of Christian higher education values *transformation* over *information* without discarding or demeaning information and critical thinking.

As this book has emphasized, the main purpose of a Pietist approach to higher education is the shaping of Christian character, helping students become “whole and holy persons.” Such transformation requires life-transforming encounters with God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Without setting aside critical inquiry or generous orthodoxy, it focuses on orthopathy and orthopraxy. The ultimate goal or telos of such Christian higher education is not mere knowledge or skill but character.

That means that Christian higher education is primarily about instilling certain dispositions in persons, dispositions that can be summed up in the word *integrity*—all of life and thought centered consistently around the person of Jesus Christ: his love, his justice, his peace, his care for persons. The ethos of such a Christian higher education community forbids duplicity, double stan-

¹For a contrasting view of what “Christ-centered” means in the context of higher education, see Duane Litfin, *Conceiving the Christian College* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), particularly chap. 4.

dards, revenge, punitive treatment of persons, excessive competition, harassment and apathy. It promotes compassion, honesty, justice, fairness, redemptive treatment of persons, forgiveness, cooperation, respect and dedication.

THE PIETIST ETHOS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: CHRIST CENTERED, PERSON CENTERED

I have had the privilege of working and living in two Christian higher education communities that strived, and I trust still strive, to embody this Pietist ethos. During my fifteen years at the first one I observed in amazement how, for the most part and most of the time, the faculty, administration and staff worked together for the common good under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Our common experience of him and commitment to his lordship rubbed off on students as we modeled it before them. A concrete example of that was my coteaching with three other professors a required freshman course called Christianity and Western Culture for nearly fifteen years. The four of us prayed together, collaborated, critiqued ourselves and one another in love, and demonstrated before the freshmen how Christian colleagues can work and teach in harmony in spite of very different personalities and intellectual styles.

I've been teaching in a seminary now for as long as I was on the faculty of that Christian liberal arts college. Upon arriving at Bethel College I recognized a Pietist impulse at work in the way the curriculum was designed, the emphasis on spiritual formation, and the person-centered ethos of the community. At the center of everything about the seminary is Jesus Christ and personal experience of his living, transforming presence. Professors as well as students meet weekly for hour-long "covenant group" meetings in which we practice *lectio divina* and pray for one another, our community and the world. In my covenant group we sing hymns and tell stories of our spiritual journeys.

My point is that there exists a distinctive Pietist *ethos* that shapes some Christian colleges, seminaries and other Christian educational communities. Because the ethos is Christ centered, it is also *person centered*. To use an early Pietist phrase, it sees the purpose of existence as "for God's glory and the neighbor's good."² Therefore, the purpose of education is to glorify God and form persons in God's image—that is, to heal and make whole God's image in them.

²See Gary R. Sattler, *God's Glory, Neighbor's Good: A Brief Introduction to the Life and Writings of August Hermann Francke* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1982).

I believe this ethos translates in many ways into the character of a Pietist-inspired institution of higher education. One way is that such an institution—or better, community—will be a safe place for sincere questioning. I believe a Christ-centered and Christ-serving college or university is one where community members feel safe entering into conversation with one another about constructing a Christian life and worldview that draws on and does justice to all the disciplines without prejudice. Vital higher education requires critical thinking and inquiry. A Pietist community of higher education should be one where people who dare to question “settled answers” intelligently and sincerely, without a spirit of iconoclasm or skepticism for its own sake, are affirmed rather than shamed into silence or punished.

One of the pathologies of Pietism, of course, is anti-intellectualism. Another is superspiritual otherworldliness. Yet another is legalism. None of these is necessary to true Pietism, but they are all manifestations of what I call Pietism “gone to seed”—Pietism that has lost its way and allowed certain dangers inherent in its spiritual emphasis to take over and control it. In reaction against these dangers, attempting to cure these pathologies, some respond to Pietism by throwing the baby out with the bathwater—something I continually warn against doing.³ My argument here is that true Pietism is Christ centered and therefore person centered and therefore never anti-intellectual, otherworldly or judgmental.

A PIETIST UNDERSTANDING OF “THE LIFE OF THE MIND”

The life of the mind is part of the image of God, and exercising it even with critical questioning of settled traditions is part of transformation, growth in the image of God. God is the creator of the world and Christ is Lord of it, so superspiritual otherworldliness that ignores justice here and now is antithetical to Christ-centered piety. Judgmental legalism is by its very nature crushing to persons; true Pietism is grace filled and compassionate.

Another of Pietism’s pathologies, however, is the tension it must negotiate between spirituality and intellectual honesty and excellence. Two things can happen within a Pietist ethos: it can lead to anti-intellectualism, or it can lead to dualism—a separating between the life of the spirit and the life of the mind so that they are never integrated. The challenge facing a Pietist-inspired com-

³As in Roger E. Olson, “Pietism: Myths and Realities,” in *The Pietist Impulse in Christianity*, ed. Christian T. Collins Winn et al. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), pp. 3-16.

munity of higher education is emphasizing equally and in a noncompetitive way both spiritual experience and critical, intellectual inquiry in all aspects and disciplines of the institution. This is part of the ongoing conversation and even debate that makes up the Pietist tradition. There is no easy solution; no rules or litmus tests can be given out.

The reason this is a tension that often turns into debate is that true Pietism, as opposed to liberal Pietism, holds to a cognitive content of Christianity. For true Pietism, going back to its roots in Philipp Jakob Spener, August Hermann Francke and others who founded the movement, Christianity is not only a feeling. It is that, but it cannot be reduced to that. True Pietists did not and never have tossed aside Christian orthodoxy or the Bible as authority for faith and practice—even as they held that transforming experience of God is primary for defining true Christianity.

It is simply a misunderstanding of Pietism to assume, as some have, that since person-transforming spiritual experience of God is what's permanent and most important in Christianity, there is no firm, definite, nonnegotiable cognitive content to Christianity. That would be like assuming that since persons are more important than rules, rules are unnecessary. Communities must have rules, but from a Pietist perspective they serve persons, not the other way around. So it is with beliefs and doctrines. They serve persons, not the other way around. But they are necessary. From a Pietist perspective, doctrines have a ministerial function, not a magisterial one.

CONTROVERSY WITHIN COMMUNITY

Okay, but that still leaves a question unanswered. What happens in a Pietist community, especially one dedicated to critical inquiry—"science" broadly understood—when a person not only questions but denies a settled, nonnegotiable doctrine? Sooner or later, every Pietist community faces this issue.

Of course, there's no Pietist formula for handling heresy. There's no Pietist rulebook that addresses the problem and tells how to approach it. So we are left to draw on Pietist impulses—the Pietist ethos, if you will—to discern how best to handle it.

It seems to me that if the person pronouncing the heresy is part of the community, the community itself has to take some responsibility for failing to nurture him or her in the right way. But it also has to consider the possibility

that the heretic is right and the community's tradition is wrong. Finally, being person centered, not rule or doctrine centered, the community ought to express to itself and the world around it that, even though this is not what the community believes, it values the person enough to keep him or her as a vital member and move on with dissent in its midst.

I am told that the Baptist General Conference (BGC), a denomination founded by Swedish Pietists, ran into this very issue during its formative years. A leading pastor named A. P. Ekman denied the doctrine of the atonement. John Alexis Edgren and other Conference leaders gently remonstrated with him. When Ekman persisted they affirmed him as a valued member anyway, prayed that God would help them deal wisely with the disagreement, and went their separate ways without excommunicating him.⁴ This story used to be often told by BGC leaders as an example of Pietist "irenicism." Eventually, however, as the BGC was affected by fundamentalism and then entered into the wider "generic evangelicalism" of the American evangelical movement, the story became something of an embarrassment. The point is, however, that authentic Christian Pietism, as a movement and ethos, always held firmly to the doctrine of the atonement while at the same time making room for those who had their doubts.

This Pietist irenic ethos was put to the test at the Christian college where I taught in the 1990s. Some constituents of the college and seminary judged that a professor had expressed heretical opinions and ought to be fired. Great pressure was put on the administration to do just that. The administration organized a "Day of Theological Clarification." The "jury" was composed of all the tenured professors of theology of the college and seminary. Some who were retired were invited to serve on it. Most of us disagreed with our colleague's controversial opinion, but we voted unanimously to keep him among us. The same result happened when the denomination took up the issue of what to do with him. I would say the institution and denomination passed the test with flying Pietist colors.

A PIETIST EPISTEMOLOGY?

Finally, is there a Pietist way of knowing, of investigating, of thinking about the phenomena of heaven and earth—the things we study and teach in higher

⁴The "atonement controversy" is covered (with obvious admiration for Edgren's handling of it) by L. J. Ahlstrom, *John Alexis Edgren* (Chicago: Conference Press, 1938), pp. 149-57.

education? I do think Pietism affects, colors and influences the *ways* we go about our investigations, but I don't believe in a "Pietist epistemology" as such. How does it affect, color and influence our ways of studying and thinking about heaven and earth?

I judge that there is real tension between classical foundationalism and Pietism. At best the two fit uncomfortably together. Pietism is not an epistemology, but it is a *posture*—a posture toward reality. So is classical foundationalism. I know I tread on thin ice here, so I'll tread lightly.

It seems to me that classical foundationalism *tends* to treat knowledge as objective; perspective is set aside, bracketed out. Only that counts as "knowledge" that can be proven objectively, or at least intersubjectively, using logic working from indubitable truths of reason or experience. "Faith" is ruled out as irrelevant at best and corrupting of the search for truth at worst.

While classical foundationalism may work well, as an ideal, in the so-called hard or experimental sciences such as physics, it seems less appropriate in the search for truth in the human sciences. Postmodern thought is showing us that even in the so-called hard or experimental sciences, however, something like faith, at least perspective, is inescapable. Cold, hard rationalism is at best an ideal. There is no "view from nowhere."

But Christian Pietism says there ought not to be a view from nowhere. Not only does such not exist; for the Christian it ought not exist. Kierkegaard's "passionate inwardness," faith in Jesus Christ as Lord of all, a transformed perspective on reality that puts God at the center, is part and parcel of the transformation wrought by the Holy Spirit in conversion.⁵ Conversional piety is the ongoing process of being transformed in mind as well as in character—to see everything in the light of God as Creator and Redeemer.

This Christian pietistic perspectivalism plays itself out, I think, in various ways, depending on the discipline. But all have in common "seeing the world *as*" God's good creation, loved by God and being redeemed by Jesus Christ, who calls us into being, created cocreators of a new creation with God through the Holy Spirit. They also have in common *love* for God's creation and *hope* for new creation—for redemption, for the promised liberation of creation from bondage to decay—and *faith* that our efforts, together with God's grace and

⁵For an introduction to the great Danish philosopher, see C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

power, can make a difference penultimately, even if only God can liberate creation fully and ultimately.

Put another way, Christian Pietism is a posture that “sees” all disciplines taught in the university as servants of the *missio dei*—of God’s mission in the world to heal it and draw it to himself.

“Integration of faith and learning,” then, from a Pietist perspective, is not so much subordinating every discipline to a rigid, detailed, rationally coherent worldview as regarding every discipline as a servant of the mission of God and therefore dedicated to healing, to making whole, to bringing harmony out of chaos and peace out of strife.

The issue for mathematics, for example, is not what difference Christian doctrine makes for how it’s practiced but what difference Christian faith, as participation in the mission of God, makes for viewing mathematics’ purpose. Why *be* a mathematician? A Pietist would answer, “For God’s glory and the neighbor’s good”—and creation’s healing.

In my own opinion, there are certain theories, ways of seeing reality *as*, that Christianity rules out. They may not be as obvious in mathematics as in, say, the social sciences, but they are probably somewhere in every discipline *as it is practiced by secular theorists*. I believe a true Pietist cannot embrace social Darwinism—a common alternative view of life’s meaning and purpose that infects both the “right” and the “left” in the modern world. Not so much an epistemology as a posture, Pietism does not require any one theory in any discipline. But I think it tends to conflict with rationalism and finds certain points of congeniality with postmodernism.⁶

In summary, a Pietist will always shine the critical light of faith in God as Creator and Redeemer on every theory and adopt and adapt only those that fit with the mission of God into his or her practice and teaching of his or her discipline.

⁶See Roger E. Olson, “Pietism and Postmodernism: Points of Congeniality,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 41 (Summer 2012): 367-80.

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FORMING WHOLE AND HOLY PERSONS

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While all stories in this book are true, some names and identifying information in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

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