



# INTERSECT

*Thoughts and Themes on Teaching the Two Kingdoms*

## A University Narrative

In a recent Table Talk, a colleague reported an incident while teaching New Testament as the class neared the close of their study on Mark's Gospel. Our professor had noted how Mark features many encounters Jesus had with a variety of people, and then invited class members to share examples of their own encounters with Christ. His invitation drew two initial and challenging responses. The first student announced he was an atheist and didn't believe in any such encounters. The second student also declared his atheism and said he could hardly keep from laughing at the nonsense he was hearing in this course. After class, our colleague visited charitably with both students, and both indicated that they could successfully complete the course despite their incredulity.

This report stirred some concern during and after our Table Talk as we responded not just sympathetically but also empathetically, thinking about our own challenging situations with students. However, our Gospel author, Mark, would not have been much surprised:

They came to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and Jesus saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. And when he had entered, he said to them, "Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But he put them all outside and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him and went in where the child was. Taking her by the hand he said to her, "Talitha cumi," which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise." And immediately the girl got up and began walking (for she was twelve years of age), and they were immediately overcome with amazement. Mk. 5:38-42

Nevertheless, our colleague's anecdote is significant. It reminds us that our students come to us in various spiritual conditions including atheism and that ours is not a one-size-fits-all ministry. Most of our students possess an active and meaningful Christian faith. Our experience also confirms that a number of these students are Biblically literate and liberally informed (or being formed) by the arts, sciences, and humanities. We are blessed to have them. But our classes also include the skeptics, the confused, seekers, the distracted, and some unbelievers. Still, they are all students and in need of formation.

In that same Table Talk, another colleague pointed us to the research of sociologist Christian Smith whose

extensive study of American adolescents and emerging adults finds most of them to be religious but not especially orthodox.<sup>1</sup> Rather, they are what Smith describes as "moralistic therapeutic deists": they believe that God exists, God expects them to be good, God should be a comfort to them when they are not good and tell them everything will okay—but otherwise has little to do with our lives. Not exactly the Nicene Creed. Moralistic therapeutic deism is not what we hear from our stronger students who speak up, but it is detectable among some other students when we listen closely.

Following that Table Talk, faculty hallway discussion included the question of whether those two atheists in the New Testament class were athletes. The implication is that some student athletes are here not for Christian education but for the opportunity of college sports, a discussion not new to this campus. The implication is not unreasonable, neither is it conclusive. It is one more variant to consider in the spiritual diversity of our thousand-plus students.



In response to the hallway athlete question, another colleague reported a student (and athlete) in another class who has recently—in the student's words—been drawn to faith by the Holy Spirit from a life of dismissive hostility to Christianity.

Anecdotal cases get our attention, especially when they correspond to our own previous experiences and stir a reaction. But we must guard against letting case studies define a population, and then determine practice and policy (just as we teach our students not to do).

These anecdotal cases do prompt some questions, however. What spiritual conditions do our students bring to us? Are they as diverse as the populations to whom Jesus and, later, Paul ministered? Is our right-hand kingdom work with our students chiefly outreach to unbelief? Or is it mainly in-reach for discipleship and formation? If a preponderance of our students brings to us a non-biblical narrative, is higher education a realistic context for outreach and evangelism?

More broadly, what meta-narrative about life, existence, and reality do our students actually practice? Is it the same one they confess? (Recall C.S. Lewis's comment about Christians living as "practical atheists".)

And as a university, does Concordia effectively communicate to students a narrative that **unifies** the **diversity** of our instruction, disciplines and activities? For instance:

- Does our Adolescent Psychology course investigate human development in terms of Christian formation as well as current theory and research?
- Do our athletic programs pursue Christian humility and love of neighbor as much as excellence and success?
- Does our pre-sem program instill pastoral care in addition to a mastery of the Biblical languages? (None of this is to suggest that the answer to these questions is no.)

Our students who bring with them an orthodox Biblical narrative—the majority of our enrollment—need to organize and apply that narrative to their lives and pursuits. They will benefit by examining different ways the church has understood and practiced this narrative across history (here at Concordia using the Lutheran tradition as a baseline). And they need to know and understand competing narratives about their world today. This work is the regimen and discipline of Christian higher education, whatever our professional disciplines may be, guided, encouraged, and perhaps sometimes goaded by faculty and staff who know more than their own disciplines.

Our atheist students in the New Testament class are operating with some notion of what's going on in life and in the world, whether they can articulate it or not. Evidently theirs is not a Biblical narrative (though we must be careful of our assumptions here given such interesting cases in the Bible itself such as Zacchaeus, Gideon, and the rich young ruler—things are not always what they seem). So what might their narrative be? Here are five meta-narratives in circulation that we might examine with them, each of which requires its own articles of faith:

1. Scientism and philosophical naturalism: a particular version of rationality gives us access to knowledge and truth.
2. Secular humanism: meaning is located in solidarity, pragmatism, and progressivism.
3. Popular spirituality: "I'm spiritual but not religious."
4. Islam: whether conventional or radical, a monotheism of law.
5. The Biblical narrative of salvation history.

In the view of many Christian commentators, current campuses of higher education no longer

function as universities.<sup>2</sup> Rather, they are multiversities with a buffet of narratives distributed across versions of philosophical naturalism in the sciences and various forms of secular humanism in the humanities; or they are utiliversities, pragmatically serving the instrumental and occupational demands of commerce.

*In the view of many Christian commentators, campuses of higher education no longer function as universities.*

In contrast, Concordia can serve its students as a genuine university, presenting and exploring its disciplines, content, and life together in the unifying context of what God has done in Christ. How tight or loose that unity and "university" should be is part of our continued discussion. Perhaps we can also interest our two atheist New Testament students in that discussion. It's happened before.

~R. Moulds

1. See *Soul Searching: The Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* by Christian Smith (Oxford, 2005).

2. See, for example, *The Idea of a Christian College: A Reexamination for Today's University* by Ream and Glanzer (Cascade, 2013).

**A Colleague responds:** The essay articulates the challenge that is ever before us: to assist our students to understand the biblical worldview and hear God's call to incorporate their own stories into it. Former synodical president Gerald Kieschnick quips about the LCMS: "This isn't your grandfather's church." And we might well say, "This isn't our grandfather's Concordia." Whether we long with nostalgia for an idealized past or extoll the possibilities of an idealized future, the fact remains that right now God has given us a more diverse enrollment to serve with the goal of growth in both kingdoms. I rejoice that, so far, our vision remains to be a university focused on Christ, and not a multi- or utiliversity. In my judgment, demographics have led the CUS as a whole to shift from a primary focus on in-reach for discipleship and Christian formation to outreach to our non- or nominally Christian students. This increases mission potential—at least theoretically. I am led to wonder, however, at what point demographics become such that the strategy reverses direction. If student population at some point shifts to a majority of nonbelievers or marginal believers, can the identity necessary for mission still be effectively maintained? CUNE is, of course, nowhere near that tipping point, thanks be to God. But it would seem that now is the prudent time to investigate that question and strategize accordingly.

~ T. Groth