

## **Religious Liberty for Christian Higher Education and the Common Good**

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There are so many clouds and controversies on the horizon for Christian higher education that charting a course for the near and intermediate future is a daunting task. While there have always been challenges unique to Christian colleges and universities, the mission and means to achieve such education in decades past seem in retrospect more straightforward than in the current climate. Perhaps it is always so with the benefit of hindsight and the tyranny of the present. But whereas the challenges of the past primarily dealt with *how* Christian colleges could be both faithfully Christian and academically robust (even when measured by “secular” standards), the challenge before us now appears to be *whether* we will be allowed to pursue this mission in a society that increasingly finds our theological doctrines and moral convictions at best strange and at worst discriminatory and vile.

In this brief offering, I want to comment on two fundamental misconceptions that can complicate efforts to cultivate the specifically Christian life of the mind while also contributing to the common good. Both misconceptions concern what we are doing when we advocate in the public realm for our unique mission, our institutions, and the students and communities our institutions serve. The first misconception occurs when Christians in higher education view our relationship with government and its agencies as a strictly internal/external connection. The second misconception is to fear that our advocacy for our mission and practice is somehow self-centered or a case of special pleading dressed up in religious garb.

The first misconception pertains to the relationship between Christians in higher education and the government. We can be tempted to understand this relationship as if it consists of two entirely different entities: the part of the body of Christ involved in higher education, and the government described by Paul in Romans 13 as being established by God and responsible for protecting the good and punishing the wrong-doer. Everyone is to submit to the governing authorities, and there is a long line of respected Christian thinking—including Luther and Calvin—that applies this submission both to good rulers and tyrannical rulers. And, of course, in one sense that understanding is correct. Christian higher education is, to borrow from Abraham Kuyper, an organic sphere of life, and the government is a distinct, and mechanical, sphere.

Nevertheless, one potential consequence of this understanding of our relationship to the state is that it encourages a binary, internal/external perspective. There is us, people of faith, and then there is the external state doing something to us. Couple this mindset with Paul's admonition to submit to the governing authorities, whether they are just or not, and we have the grounds for an unnecessarily antagonistic view of government, and a potentially quietist mentality when governing authorities interfere with our mission or threaten to shut it down altogether. After all, "we" must submit to "them".

This perspective made a great deal of sense when politics was more explicitly top-down. However defensible this approach was during the monarchical days of Calvin and Luther, it doesn't apply as neatly to Christians living in a constitutional democracy. When we apply Romans 13 to our time, it's not simply a matter of submitting to an external political authority. In the American political experiment, "we the people" *are* the grounding authority, even if the practice has never quite lived up to the theory. We are in a curious position compared to our forebears in the faith. We are, as Paul instructs, called to *yield* to authority, yet in a constitutional democracy, we also *wield* a certain sort of authority. Politicians are called public *servants* for a reason, even as we may be tempted by cynicism in this political season. To complicate matters even further, we *share* that authority with nonbelievers whose conception of the earthly good life will overlap with ours in some ways, and sharply diverge in others.

Recognizing this more complex dynamic should encourage us to see government officials and bureaucrats as potential partners as much or more than as potential adversaries. The recent controversy over California's SB 1146 illustrates both the virtue of working with our public servants as well as the real danger they can pose when they pit the interests of some of their constituents against others as if we are locked in a zero-sum game. (In 2016, SB 1146 originally sought to remove access to state financial aid for students at campuses that did not comply with then-current applications of civil rights regulations, especially regarding LGBT interests. The bill was modified after intense public scrutiny, especially from concerned people of faith.)

In addition, we in Christian higher education should be even more intentional, more pro-active, and at times more politically bothersome than we have been.

This intentionality, however, raises the second misconception, which is that when we press our claims in the public square we are engaged in something untoward or tawdry. Is there not something self-serving about advocating for our own campuses and jobs and students? Aren't Christians supposed to be meek and turn the other cheek, even in, or particularly in, the political realm?

This is an understandable concern given the misadventures of various Christian political movements and campaigns in the past, and there is always a danger of elevating one's particular interest over and against the common good. Nevertheless, Christians in higher education, and members of the Body of Christ generally, should advocate for religious education in general and Christian higher education in particular with discernment and enthusiasm. I say this for three reasons.

First, while some political advocacy can be special pleading, our work in the public square to protect the rights of religious groups to teach and practice their faith in comprehensively religious colleges and universities advances the good of not only Christians, but Orthodox Jews, Muslims, Latter Day Saints, and other people of faith. There are very good reasons to believe the freedom to practice one's religion is not merely a *Christian* good but a *human* good, and we need not agree with others' theological convictions in order to agree they have the right to operate colleges and universities according to the teaching of their faith.

Second, it is simply false to describe the work of Christian colleges and universities as insular or self-serving. While many Christian campuses struggle with the "campus bubble," it remains the case that our students, faculty, and staff are involved in scores of community projects that contribute a great deal to the common good. At my home institution, Calvin College, students tutor disadvantaged children, faculty teach courses at a nearby prison, and students and faculty are engaged in an extensive effort to clean up a local waterway. These are only three examples that could be multiplied several times over at Calvin, and Calvin is only one of hundreds of schools making such contributions to the commonwealth. This doesn't even take into account what our graduates do once they leave our campuses. Governmental policies which threaten to curtail the carrying out of our educational mission will hurt more than just "our tribe", and so when we defend our calling, we defend more than just our own interests (cf. Gal. 6:10, 1 Peter 2:11-17).

Finally, when we resist well-intentioned but misguided governmental policy we contribute to the common good by reminding our public servants that they work for us *and* our neighbors and that politics need not be a zero-sum game. As unpleasant as our challenges may be for proponents of SB 1146 and for advocates of other issues of religious liberty in the public square, we simultaneously serve them in their having become more familiar with our mission and the good we bring to our diverse society. In thinking about how to navigate the challenges of Christian higher education in an increasingly pluralistic society, we would do well to steer a middle course between aggressively fighting for "our rights" because they are ours on the one hand, and meekly

accepting as a foregone conclusion the irrelevance that some would impose on us through this or that regulation or requirement. That middle way should be marked by humility and courage, enthusiasm and discernment, and a commitment to living well with our neighbors while remaining steadfastly committed to Christ and his calling.

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