

## Multiculturalism and the Practice of Faith Integration in English

W. Todd Martin, Department of English, Huntington University

In "Worldviews, Modernity and the Task of Christian College Education," Brian Walsh suggests that worldview is a "framework of belief"; however, this does not mean, he emphasizes, that we will reach the same conclusions based on these shared beliefs (17). Instead, Walsh insists that some of the troubles concerning Christianity begin when individuals are so entrenched in their respective worldviews that they are unable to consider a revision of it. This is not to say that one must abandon key components of one's beliefs, especially those tied traditionally to Christianity. However, one's worldview, like one's personality and one's faith, is a work in progress. Complementing this point, Arthur Holmes, in The Idea of a Christian College, states:

. . . a worldview is exploratory, not a closed system worked out once and for all but an endless undertaking that is still but the vision of a possibility . . . . It explores the creative and redemptive impact of the Christian revelation on every dimension of thought and life, and it remains open-ended because the task is so vast that to complete it would require the omniscience of God. To begin requires an intelligent understanding of the Christian revelation, and from this first glimpse of truth as a whole endless inquiry grows. . . . Christian perspectives are possible, but not a complete and definitive system. (58-59)

Many Christians, however, find this difficult to accept. They rigidly resist any challenge to the Christian paradigm they have accepted. But, Daniel Taylor argues that in many of these cases, when individuals become defensive about their worldview "they are not defending reason, or God, or an abstract system; they are defending their own fragile sense of security and self-

respect" (25). He believes that these individuals need the assurance of having a conclusive response to reassure themselves of their beliefs; they are uncomfortable with uncertainty.

Such resistance, however, can cause one to remain stagnant in one's faith. Thus, a key role of Christian higher education is to help students first identify what their worldview is, what is at the core of all of their beliefs and actions, and then help them to maneuver through difficult material, accepting what rings true to them and rejecting what does not. The Christian educator must force them to confront alternative worldviews. Part of this process requires their forming a more accurate view of the world in which we live. Otherwise, they will go into the world and find that the world challenges their perceptions, a situation that could in turn cause a crisis of faith that could lead them to abandon their faith. Our role as Christian educators is to help them to do such exploration in the context of the Christian environment, guiding them through the process so that they are not left on their own to struggle with this problem.<sup>1</sup>

Literature plays a vital, two-fold role in this effort. First, through literature, students can explore more fully what the "real" world is like and (as both Walsh and Daniel Taylor would encourage) begin making the necessary adjustments to their worldview in order to more effectively encounter that reality. Second, as Arlin Meyer notes, "Great fiction enables readers by vicarious experience to bring to bear on their own myriads of lives not their own. By

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Holmes confirms this role of the Christian educator in The Idea of a Christian College. Rather than indoctrination,

students need rather to gain a realistic look at life and to discover for themselves the questions that confront us. They need to work their way painfully through the maze of alternative ideas and arguments while finding out how the Christian faith speaks to such matters. They need a teacher as a catalyst and guide, one who has struggled and is struggling with similar questions and knows some of the pertinent materials and procedures. They need to be exposed to the frontiers of learning where problems are still not fully formulated and knowledge is exploding, and where by the very nature of things indoctrination is impossible. (46)

immersing oneself in the experience of others, there is more of oneself that can be Christian than there was before" (264).

Each of these results contributes to what Nicholas Wolterstorff identifies as the next stage of Christian higher education. In "The Mission of the Christian College at the End of the 20th Century" Wolterstorff gives a brief history of the development of the Christian college, beginning with its pietistic roots and moving into its transformation to focus on a broader understanding of culture. He posits, however, that the Christian college must continue to evolve in order to maintain a clear and effective purpose. The next stage, he argues, should be one which does not neglect social responsibility. The ultimate goal, according to Wolterstorff, is to work toward changing the world through action (41-44). Literature does not specifically provide any means of action; however, in light of its role in the curriculum, it equips one with understanding: an understanding of oneself as a Christian and an understanding of those unlike oneself. With such acumen, the Christian graduate will more effectively be able to act.

One of the current trends in higher education that fits nicely with this mission is multiculturalism. If, as Joe Rieke suggests, perceiving others through literature "widens our grasp of the truth" (9-10), then this would be especially true of our understanding of those who come from different cultural backgrounds. Students who read literature about other places and people gain insight into the culture in which these individuals live and empathy for the people themselves through specific characters. By comprehending cultural differences, one will be better equipped to choose the right and proper action when encountering a member coming out of this cultural context.

More importantly, one can more effectively know how to approach the subject of Christ so that his or her witness is effective and not lost due to cultural misunderstandings. The only better preparation for such encounters, it seems to me, would be a direct encounter with a culture

through study abroad. This is the reason that I make it a point to include minority literature in my EN151 Perspectives on Literature course. I have taught such authors as Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Maya Angelou (African-American); Louise Erdrich (Native American); Chaim Potok (Jewish); Edwidge Danticat (Haitian); and Chinua Achebe (Nigerian). Likewise, I am very conscious about including both women and minority authors when I create a course syllabus--particularly in courses such as EN311 American Literature I and EN321 American Literature II. I have also offered sections of EN331 Special Topics which emphasized minority literatures: I offered African American Literature one year and Caribbean Literature another year. However, even in those courses for which such inclusion is difficult, such as EN411 Nineteenth Century British Literature, one of the key means of approaching authors is to explore their basic assumptions as well as those of their time. The goal is not exactly the same as with multicultural literature, but it instructs the students in how to determine cultural contexts.

A more general value of multiculturalism is that reading about and appreciating another's cultural differences prepare us to accept those culturally different from us as brothers and sisters. Susan Gallagher, drawing on postcolonial theory, explains the perceived faults of the West--and perhaps particularly Christianity. That is, the predominantly white West has historically seen those with whom it has come in contact as "other" (337). The result is that the "other" is objectified. What we need to do as Christians is to more fully understand who these people are and learn to appreciate their cultures so that we approach them with appropriate respect.

We must first and foremost, despite cultural and religious differences, accept those unlike us as valuable human beings who have something of value to offer. The thrust of Gallagher's argument, though, lies in the fact that Christianity is shifting from a predominantly Western religion. She notes, "A huge demographic shift is underway. In 1900, eighty percent of the world's Christians lived in Europe and North America, but in 2000, sixty percent of the world's

Christians were living in Africa, Asia, and Latin America" (331). This shift also brings with it different cultural interpretations of the scriptures. We need to more fully understand our Christian brothers and sisters in these newly vitalized nations as fellow believers despite potential theological differences. In this light, it would seem valuable for students outside of the discipline of English, particularly those in Missions, to explore the literatures from these various developing Christian nations. For this reason, I was disappointed that there was no representation from this department in the recent course that I offered on postcolonial literature. There is much to learn from the theorists and authors about the attitudes of the people in these areas, cultural information that is invaluable for anyone wanting to interact with these individuals.

Chinua Achebe's novel, Things Fall Apart, which I have taught in Perspectives on Literature, is particularly insightful in demonstrating the value of understanding the cultural context in which one finds oneself. In this novel, Achebe describes the tribal customs and explains the religious beliefs of the Ibo tribe of Nigeria. He sets this up in the first two-thirds of the novel, and in the final third he introduces the Western intrusion into this society, particularly in the guise of two missionaries. One tries to understand the customs of the people and gains their respect; the other imposes an all-or-nothing Western perspective on the potential converts to Christianity. So, more than even giving insight into the culture itself, Achebe gives instruction on what he perceives is the most appropriate method for reaching a people, a method that requires a respect for the culture into which one ventures.

While Achebe provides an easy example, not all such multicultural novels are so neatly applicable to missions, but the insight into the culture that they provide enables readers to avoid the same mistakes made by the second missionary. One tendency a reader of multicultural novels might run into, however, is to too easily reject a novel that is clearly antagonistic to

Christianity or to too easily accept Christian references at face value. A perfect example of this would be Edwidge Danticat's Breath, Eyes, Memory, which combines Catholic and Vodouistic images. What must be understood, though, in the cultural context, is that in Haiti Catholicism and Vodou have to varying degrees become conflated in the minds of many of the inhabitants. More particularly, many Haitians see little conflict in going to mass in the morning and attending a vodou ritual that same evening. Thus, in an essay that I published in Literature and Belief, I pay close attention to the Catholic image of the Blessed Virgin who is often equated in Haiti to the Vodou goddess Ezili. In the novel, the figure of Ezili gains dominance over the Virgin Mary, thus undermining the Christian image in order to supplant it with the more indigenous religious figure, a typical method used by postcolonial writers to empower their own cultures over the West.

Such a reading, while it does not promote a Christian worldview, provides a careful and honest reading of the novel's Christian elements. As with any theory, Christianity should not be forced onto a text where it does not apply. One must avoid reading a text as sympathetic to Christianity when it may not be, as is the case with Danticat's novel. A Marxist critic, for example, may bring to light valuable insights into a particular work; however, in some cases, the theory can become an end in itself. The result of this is that the Marxist critic often finds what he or she is looking for--whether or not there is historical or biographical support for such a reading. The same is a danger of faith integration. Any approach to a literary text must be considered as a tool and not an end in itself.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I addressed some similar issues in the Faculty Forester Lecture that I presented in the spring of 2004. In this lecture, which focused on science fiction, I emphasized the fact that some readers make any Christian image into a validation of Christianity and often reject books that appear to be non-Christian but which may support ideas compatible with Christianity.

One of the challenges of multiculturalism, however, is its tendency toward relativism. Responding to structuralism, which attempted to map out the potential meanings of a text, poststructuralism began to suggest that the mere fact of the plurality of potential meanings suggested that meanings were impossible to know. Subsequent theories capitalized on this premise to leverage for themselves a place in the theoretical discussion. If meaning is relative, then who has a right to silence their perspective? This was appealing for postcolonialism, which focuses on the subaltern for whom postcolonial critics claim to give voice. Because of such developments, theory becomes one of the key challenges in the field of English for integrating faith. For me, this does not come into play too fully in the regular literature classroom as I have a more historical perspective. That is to say that I emphasize the historical and cultural context out of which a literary text comes, usually playing close attention to the defining characteristics of a particular movement. Many theories, however, question the premise of authorial intentionality, drawing again on the relativism of poststructuralism. I think, however, that an author's biography and sometimes even his or her own letters and writings give clues as to his or her values and purposes in writing in general as well as in a particular work. The result is that I am not generally engaged directly in issues of relativism in the typical literature course. EN485 Senior Seminar, which focuses on critical theory, would be the main exception.

Still, understanding such assumptions on which certain theories and conclusions are based is one of the key means of integrating faith and learning according to Bill Hasker, specifically as one explores what he calls the "Disciplinary Foundations" (26), a term that seems comparable to Holmes' "Foundational Approach" as described in The Idea of a Christian College. As Hasker suggests, though, knowing the foundations must extend into some assessment of the discipline, an assessment that leads to one of three ways of intrinsic integration: the compatibilist, the transformationist, or the reconstructionist. In this particular

example--as with most literary integration--the best way to describe the discipline's connection to Christianity falls somewhere between the compatibilist and the transformationist options, depending on the cultural context out of which the literary piece is conceived or the faith assumptions of the individual author.

In the relativism of some current theories, one could apply Hasker's model for transformation, for relativism is not necessarily incompatible with Christianity. While relativism calls into question knowable truth, it does not preclude absolute truth--though this may be the belief of some practitioners. Instead, as Taylor suggests, one's "inability to know any absolute absolutely does not prove such things do not exist, only that [one's] limited knowledge of them is not grounds for certainty" (92). Thus, while relativism seems contrary to the general Christian understanding of truth, it coincides with what seems to me a valuable qualification some Christians make for truth. That is, it seems to me, that one can believe in absolute truth without insisting that one may fully know that truth. This notion brings us back to the issue of whether worldviews are rigid or malleable. So, these trends toward relativism do amend the tendency of many Christians to claim to have a corner on truth.

On a practical level, such relativism pushes one to take others' views more seriously rather than easily dismissing them, and this has led to an emphasis in literary studies towards the disenfranchised, which seems to be a valuable asset to the Christian worldview, particularly as it ties to the Christ-like understanding of the "other" and the need to understand and value others who are not like us (as discussed above). As noted above, one of the courses in which addressing multiculturalism is most appropriate due to the general audience would be EN151 Perspectives on Literature. In this course, I often choose a novel by a minority author to help students understand the differences in experiences that the minority protagonists have, experiences that may have helped in forming their respective worldviews. In principle (if not in

fact), addressing these perspectives creates a sense of greater respect for these people and provides a degree of insight into their differences. On a more theoretical level, this perspective has much to teach Christians about past inequities and possible means of adjusting attitudes towards those we consider “other” as well as giving insight into how more effectively to reach some of these individuals. The political emphases of such theories as postcolonialism, address social issues and peoples about whom Christians should also be interested.

Thus, in response to both Hasker's and Holmes' call to understand the basic assumptions of the discipline, one finds that the compatibility of both the theory and the literature itself enables the scholar to resist the more extreme "reconstructionist" method of integration. Still, while such compatibilities exist, there is a need for something more along the lines of a Marxist or feminist theory: a Christian Literary Theory. To this end, when I taught our EN485 Senior Seminar, which emphasizes theory, I helped the students to understand the values and weaknesses of each of the secular theories. Then I had them draw on these to begin conceptualizing what they thought might work as a Christian literary theory, which they wrote up and presented to the class. A specific Christian literary theory, though, would be controversial even within the ranks of Christian scholars, for, revisiting the malleability of worldview, the question becomes: On which of the foundations of worldview would such a theory be built? Such a Christian literary theory, however, is on the horizon. I recently found a book by Luke Ferretter entitled Towards a Christian Literary Theory. In this work, he shows how some of the various popular theories do not preclude Christianity and could actually be used by Christian scholars to achieve a Christian Literary Theory. Such efforts will help to provide an apparatus for Christian scholars to think about their work in the same way that a Marxist or feminist critic draws from its champion theorist as they build their cases. It won't replace more generalized integration, but it will serve a needed purpose.

Multiculturalism and moving toward a Christian Literary Theory, of course, are only a beginning in pursuing faith integration. They provide, however, good examples of how Hasker's paradigm of faith integration, developed in "Faith-Learning Integration: An Overview," can be applied in the field of English. More particularly, they address current movements in the field which, though seemingly incompatible with Christianity, can be understood and used to the advantage of the Christian teacher-scholar who thinks deeply and effectively about how Christianity and English intersect. He or she does not have to look far for opportunities to integrate. The benefactors, however, are the students who are forced to engage in understanding cultures and peoples that are different from them, for it prepares them for the realities that they will face in whatever "mission field" they find themselves in; they will have a broader, more realistic perspective of the people with whom they will come into contact. They will have already been challenged to recognize that their worldview cannot remain rigid if they are to grow in understanding of the world and their own faith. This lesson will prepare them, I think, to mature in their faith in ways that those who fight to maintain a neat and "complete" worldview will never know.

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