

## Scholarship as Mission

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### I. Introduction: Why Scholarship?

In November 2014, I had the privilege of hosting a very memorable event in one of the largest lecture halls at Cornell—a Veritas Forum entitled "Genes, Atoms, or Something Else?" The speakers were Roald Hoffman, Cornell's Nobel Laureate in Chemistry and a holocaust survivor, and Praveen Sethupathy, a geneticist then at UNC Chapel Hill.

Praveen has an amazing testimony of growing up Orthodox Hindu and coming to faith in Christ during college. So why put him on stage to talk about genes and atoms? Why not just ask him to share his testimony?

The more general question is, why should we care about “thinking Christianly” across the disciplines? What difference does “Christian scholarship” make?

To put a finer point on it, *on a campus that already has fellowships and Bible studies and outreach efforts of all sorts, are study centers really necessary, and if so, why?*

The answer is that we need study centers because Christian scholarship is—and always has been—inseparable from Christian mission.

## II. Scholarship as Mission

One of the main insights of the study of World Christianity is that “Christian scholarship follows Christian mission.” This is according to the late, great missiologist Andrew Walls, an Oxford historian and the intellectual architect of World Christianity as a field of study. “A lively concern for Christian living and Christian witness,” Walls said, “has repeatedly called scholarly activity into existence.”<sup>1</sup>

This has been true since biblical times. Christian scholarship became a necessity “as soon as the gospel crossed its first cultural frontier”—that is, as soon as the gospel mission and message were carried by Jews to the Greek-speaking world. The mission to the Gentiles required not only translating the gospel into the Greek language but also into the Greek thought-world. The very act of proclaiming the gospel, Walls says, called forth “the scholarly virtues of insight based on knowledge, patient examination and disciplined imagination.”<sup>2</sup>

We get an initial glimpse of this with Paul. Paul was culturally sensitive—an attentive observer who dove deeply into Greek culture. On Mars Hill, for example, Paul appeals to his audience in part by quoting the Greeks’ very own poet Epimenides.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, in meaningful ways Paul remained an outsider to Greek culture, and so he needed Greek converts to carry the gospel message further still.

Enter Justin, a trained (pagan) philosopher who converted to Christianity. If Paul’s mode was proclamation, Justin’s mode was criticism—he interrogated his own culture and academic training, affirming and rejecting elements of Platonism (for example) in light of

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<sup>1</sup> Walls, “Christian Scholarship in Africa in the Twenty-First Century,” *Transformation* 19, no. 4 (October 2002): 217-28, 217.

<sup>2</sup> Walls, “Christian Scholarship,” 217.

<sup>3</sup> For “‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “‘For we are indeed his offspring.’” Acts 17:28.

Christianity, which he now taught as the true philosophy. Justin brought the gospel to bear upon Greek culture and learning in ways that Paul could not.

According to Walls, Paul and Justin represent the first two out of three stages in the conversion of a culture to Christianity. In the case of Greece, “this new tradition of scholarship began by borrowing from [its pre-Christian] inheritance (Paul), moved to critiquing it, in order to affirm or reject (Justin), and eventually to refiguring and reconciling the whole (Origen).”<sup>4</sup>

Origen, like Justin, was educated in Greek learning, but he was also brought up by Christian parents. This “dual inheritance” not only made for a powerful witness, enabling him to winsomely present Christ and lead others to faith, but also, remarkably, contributed to the renewal of institutions. In Walls’ words, “It was the Christians who renewed [the resources of the Greek tradition], and by that means, saved the Greek academy and prolonged its life. It was Christianity, a teaching that had at first appeared utterly irreconcilable with Greek culture, that helped to preserve it, giving new life to some of its vital and authentic elements.”<sup>5</sup> Because Origen saw in Jesus the fulfillment of and the answer to the biggest questions of life that philosophy had been asking for centuries, he re-centered the quest for wisdom on the person of Jesus, and by doing so he contributed to creating a vibrant and distinctive Christian intellectual tradition and institution.<sup>6</sup>

Walls goes on to provide additional examples of how this played out during the first millennium of Christian history—in China, Ethiopia, and England. The missionary trail, he says, “is also a trail of libraries.”<sup>7</sup> (We’re in good company!) But he writes primarily out of a care and concern for Africa. Here is his assessment: In twenty-first-century Africa, the

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<sup>4</sup> Walls, “Christian Scholarship,” 221.

<sup>5</sup> Walls, “Christian Scholarship,” 218.

<sup>6</sup> Here and elsewhere I am grateful for refinements suggested by Jimmy Myers and Justin Hawkins.

<sup>7</sup> Walls, “Christian Scholarship,” 218.

missionary work (“Paul’s part”) has been completed and the work of critique (“Justin’s part”) is well underway. But the work of refiguring and reconciling the whole (“Origen’s part”) remains.

### III. Application to Universities

What Walls says of Africa could also be said of the modern research university. Recall the insight attributed to our very own Richard Horner in James Hunter’s *To Change the World*—the Great Commission is not merely geographic. Going into all the world, Hunter says, may be interpreted as going into all spheres of life. The church must mentor and provide support for young adults gifted in and called to every field and vocation. If we do not, we have failed to “go into all the world.”<sup>8</sup>

Adapting Walls’ summary statement (inserting “university” for “Africa”), we get the following formulation:

“[The university] stands in need of Origen, of people who, brought up in the Christian faith and rooted in the Christian Scriptures, are certain of their Christian identity, and yet are also confident of their [scholarly] identity, confident enough to handle the...past as Christians and as [scholars].”<sup>9</sup>

*This is one way of understanding what Christian Study Centers do. We are not just “reaching out” to universities as if we were missionaries; we are bearing witness to faith in Christ as citizens from within.*

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<sup>8</sup> James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 256–57.

<sup>9</sup> Walls, “Christian Scholarship,” 221.

Put differently, universities stand in need of Origen because, at a time when some talk of burning the whole enterprise down, we have the opportunity to contribute to the revitalization of these institutions by reminding everyone of their age-old purposes—which, after all, include reasoning together about the nature of the good life and the good society as well as the shape of human flourishing. We are free to inhabit universities with a non-anxious presence because we are confident that whatever true knowledge is discovered belongs to Him whom we worship.

Additional examples of the integral relationship between scholarship and mission abound. In classical antiquity, St. Basil the Great founded a medical complex serving lepers and orphans and any person who required care. As our very own Justin Hawkins demonstrated winsomely at this year's Veritas Weekend, the very first hospital in the world did not come out of nowhere; it grew out of the Nicæan Creed.<sup>10</sup> It's really remarkable to consider—if not for the affirmation of personhood in the Creed, we may not have hospitals.

As for a more recent example of the Christian mind-mission connection, consider the prodigious output of Christian scholars during the tumultuous years of World War II. According to Alan Jacobs, scholars including C.S. Lewis, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Simone Weil, and Jacques Maritain sought nothing less than the reconstruction of “a world gone astray.”<sup>11</sup> Yes, these are poets and philosophers; and yes, even in wartime reconstruction is cultural as well as infrastructural.

In his book *The Year of Our Lord 1943*, Jacobs considers it of particular interest that these thinkers conceived of their task as a public (and in some senses even a secular) project. In their thinking, the West's vulnerability to the downright demonic forces of totalitarianism

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<sup>10</sup> Justin R. Hawkins, “Seeing Together: An Invitation to the Christian Imagination” (paper presented at the 2026 Veritas Weekend Conference, Boston, MA, February 6, 2026).

<sup>11</sup> Alan Jacobs, *The Year of Our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), xiv.

was due to a failure of moral formation, and because moral formation relies on the church, they believed that they—as Christian scholars—“had a responsibility to set a direction not just for churches but for the whole of society.”<sup>12</sup>

If, at first, “setting a direction for the whole of society” sounds triumphalist, consider the case of Maritain, whose stunningly successful advocacy for human rights was inspired by the gospel but which nevertheless won widespread support. As with the example of hospitals, if not for the study of the doctrine of *imago Dei*, we almost certainly would not have the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>13</sup>

Creating institutions such as hospitals and documents protecting human rights—initiatives that benefit the whole of society—is surely what Walls has in mind when he speaks of “converting the culture.” And, importantly, he notes that in the encounter between gospel and culture, culture is not the only thing that is transformed. The gospel itself is more fully revealed as it is refracted through a multiplicity of cultures.

#### **IV. What About today?**

What about today? Today, again, we face “a world gone astray.” Gradually in recent years, and now suddenly, we are facing fundamental questions about what is good, beautiful, and true; about what we owe each other and why; and about what, if anything, we can reasonably hope for. And, as always, there is the question under all the questions: What does it mean to be human?

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<sup>12</sup> Jacobs, *The Year of Our Lord 1943*. xi.

<sup>13</sup> We could say the same about the Civil Rights Act or South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report. Martin Luther King Jr. and Bishop Desmond Tutu were both “Reverend Doctors”—scholarly trained Christians who brought their dual inheritance or dual identity to their work.

At time when we are told that machines will do our thinking for us, what we need is twenty-first-century Justins and Origenes—scholars who can imagine promising solutions to our most perplexing problems not only for the church but for society as a whole. Which is to say, we need scholars who can translate faith-based insights for a non-faith-based audience.

Speaking of translation, “Language,” Walls says, “is only the outer skin of the consciousness we now call culture.”<sup>14</sup> What we need is thus not just linguistic translation, but translation into the thought-world of our respective disciplines.

*So, why are study centers essential?* Because this is what you are making possible. Because converting a culture—refiguring and reconciling the whole, in Walls’ words—requires entering into the discourse and thought-world of that particular place. Because “A lively concern for Christian witness [calls] scholarly activity into existence.”<sup>15</sup> And because without Christian scholarship, Christian mission would be incomplete.

We’ve just heard from Brad East and Meghan Sullivan, Christian scholars who are at the forefront of thinking about moral and spiritual formation in the face of challenges such as those posed by generative AI. They are navigating their dual citizenship in both the church and the academy, and your centers are giving scholars like them a platform for their work.

## **V. Conclusion**

Looking forward, I am confident that God will continue to raise up future Justins and Origenes, even among Gen Z. Where will you find them? You might find them somewhere in the crowd at Foundations Week in Charlottesville, or Carolina Way Camp, or Pascal’s

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<sup>14</sup> Walls, “Christian Scholarship,” 219.

<sup>15</sup> Walls, “Christian Scholarship,” 217.

Coffeehouse in Gainesville, or the most intimate fellows program with just four or five other students.

Or you might not. But that's another beautiful thing about the study center model—it doesn't necessitate identifying the best and the brightest. When I started Chesterton House over 25 years ago now, Praveen Sethupathy, who is today Department Chair of Biomedical Sciences at Cornell, was an undergraduate student. He's a classic Justin—a super sharp convert who found in Christianity answers to his deepest questions and now does the difficult work of translating that faith into his discipline. I didn't know him when he was an undergrad, and that's okay.

It's okay because we are not forming students directly so much as creating communities and places—habitats, if you will—in which they will be formed. It's an indirect process—a bank shot strategy of sorts. Have faith that your efforts are enough, even if you don't see an immediate return on that effort.

I'm always hesitant to invoke superlatives such as “the need for moral and spiritual formation has never been greater,” but you heard it last night from Meghan, so take it on her authority. In any case, I believe this is a “Kairos moment of Christian cultural renewal,”<sup>16</sup> and that by creating communities characterized by the pursuit of formation, integration, and deep translation, you are doing precisely what this moment most requires.

Whether your work will also save the academy remains to be seen. But I, for one, wouldn't bet against it.

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<sup>16</sup> Jacobs, *The Year of Our Lord 1943*, 205.