EASTERN ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY AND AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Theological, Historical, and Contemporary Reflections

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

Piecing the Puzzle of Eastern Orthodox Christian Involvement in American Higher Education

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Over the last two decades the American academy has engaged in a wide-ranging discourse on faith and learning, Christianity and higher education. Among the Christian voices that have weighed in on these topics, Orthodox Christians are not merely underrepresented; they are not represented at all. This is not because no one has cared to listen but because scholars of the Orthodox tradition have rarely participated in these conversations. The first question that provoked the compilation of this volume is the simple one, why are the Orthodox absent? Why is it that when Orthodox Christians—who trace their spiritual and theological heritage back to the earliest Christian schools of thought—immigrated to the United States, they did not set out to build their own set of colleges?1 A generation or so later, when Orthodox Christians had reached a measure of financial success and the ability to be philanthropic, why did they not contribute widely to funding professorships and chairs at colleges and universities?2 In broader terms, why do we not find among Orthodox theologians and scholars in America a robust and sustained discussion around the relationship of faith and learning—especially within the last
several decades, when Protestants and Roman Catholics have been hard at work in these areas?³

The questions become even more interesting—and the stakes in an Orthodox response potentially even higher—when we observe the current contours of the literature on the relationship between faith and knowledge, religion and the academy in the United States. From this literature, questions and ideas emerge that highlight that this topic is not a quaint idea meant for dusty library volumes, but is pressing for anyone involved in twenty-first-century higher education. This introduction begins by highlighting key elements of this wide body of scholarship in a way that helps illumine the importance of the conversation today. It next turns to how and why this particular collection of essays emerged, and offers historical responses to our initial questions. The third section suggests some themes that surface from the essays organically and gives a rough outline of some key issues that the Orthodox naturally address on this topic. The conclusion looks at where we go from here, suggesting where the conversation might next lead.

CURRENT SCHOLARLY LANDSCAPE

Since the 1994 publication of George Marsden’s The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Disestablishment to Established Nonbelief, the academy has produced well over fifty volumes on the relationship between faith, religion, and higher education. A few of the volumes describe the demise of the relationship between faith and higher education—for both religious higher education and the relationship of Christianity to the secular academy—but most of the volumes offer new models and insight with intellectual rigor.⁴ In 2000, the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University sponsored a conference entitled “The Future of Religious Colleges”; the introduction to the proceedings begins, “A student of religious higher education could describe the last decade of the twentieth century as a time of revitalization.”⁵ Over a decade later, the revitalization continues: 2012 saw Oxford University Press publish No Longer Invisible: Religion in University Education, in which Douglas and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen convincingly demonstrate the “return” of religion to
higher education based on their visits to more than fifty campuses across the United States. In the academy today, the conversation about the relationship between faith and learning, religion and higher education is gaining increased attention and traction.

How Is the Story Told?

Over the last two decades, a recurrent topic in the scholarship is the mainline Protestant heritage of “pace-setting” universities—such as Harvard, William and Mary, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, Brown, University of Pennsylvania, Rutgers, Dartmouth. These institutions had founding missions that were clearly designed to support a vision of a Protestant Christian nation and produce pastors to lead this effort—institutional missions that many academics at these institutions today might find surprising. Indeed, as one scholar notes,

Perhaps the most peculiar of contemporary academic biases concerns religion. In many scholarly circles, religion is generally regarded as one of two things: a matter of personal preference, like one’s taste in clothes; or else, embarrassing evidence of a mind not quite trained in . . . “twentieth-century modes of thought.” As far as many faculty are concerned, religious convictions are well and good, so long as the believer understands that they are on the same level as a desire to eat chocolate.

Amidst this bias, Protestant scholars spearheaded the recent effort to re-examine this heritage, yet not with a wishful hope to reinstitute a Protestant establishment but rather with a tempered, self-critical approach. This historical reckoning does not then lead them to advocate for the ultimate retreat of Christianity from the academic sphere. Rather, it finds them opening doors to the possibilities of new varieties of the ways in which faith and learning may relate. With this, the literature not only raises issues that should resonate with Orthodox academics, but actually asks for Orthodox involvement.

The aforementioned study by George Marsden, professor of history emeritus at the University of Notre Dame, traces the dramatic change
from the strongly Protestant heritage of the pace-setting American universities to an academic landscape that has all but forgotten this legacy. He argues that the push to relegate religion to the periphery of American universities was justified essentially on academic grounds that trace their roots to Enlightenment ideals. Religious viewpoints were seen to be not only unscientific, but also socially disruptive. There was an increasing realization that the Protestant establishment had excluded Jews, Roman Catholics, and others from the front ranks of American education in the name of building a united society. Recognition of the discriminatory dimensions of faith-based higher education was one of the major factors forcing final disestablishment.

Marsden’s aim is to present this disestablishment as “a good development with ironic consequences”: the zeal led to an overcorrection that left higher education with inadequate ways to accommodate faith-informed scholarship. Marsden, a product of the Calvinist Reformed tradition, tells the story in a self-critical way. His analysis—as we shall see below—does not ultimately determine the faith-learning relationship to be fatally flawed, but opens new doors and raises new, perhaps better questions.

In addition, scholars from a range of theological traditions are looking back in order to open possibilities for broader contemporary discussion. One important example of this is by a team of academics led by Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, who examine the faith-learning relationship that prevailed among Christian colleges during the last half of the twentieth century. A commonly championed phrase of this era to describe the relationship was “the integration of faith and learning.” The Jacobsens argue it stood for a model that “basically meant that faith has the right, and indeed the duty, to critique learning but that learning has no authority to critique faith.” In order to open space for alternate understandings of the way the faith-learning relationship can be conceived, they critique this dominant model.

Scholarship of this kind often ends up being both derivative and pedantic. It is derivative because it waits for the academy at large to produce new ideas and then critiques them on the basis of Christian faith, and it is pedantic in its pose as the long-suffering teacher who must repeatedly instruct the recalcitrant academy in the folly of its ways. In its worst forms, this attitude can blend into what the Christian philosopher Merold Westphal has called the sometimes “criminal arrogance of religion” in the
realm of scholarship: the haughty illusion that our views of God, the world, and ourselves are both incontestably true and unquestionably God-blessed. Westphal recommends that a harsh hermeneutic of suspicion be applied to all such claims. While faith may provide Christian scholars with certain important clues concerning the deep nature of the universe that others lack, the ways Christians interpret those revelatory clues are as subject to error as the thinking of anyone else. There is no room for epistemological arrogance in Christian scholarship.¹⁶

The Jacobsens observe that the integration model promotes conflict rather than conversation, because in it the task of Christian scholarship is promoted as one of conquest: an antisecular crusade for truth.¹⁷ It implicitly defines the singular path that all Christian scholarship should take regardless of a scholar’s own understanding of faith or his or her particular discipline. Moreover, this approach contains an attitude towards Christian scholarship that is “hyperphilosophical,” for it asks Christian academics to temporarily become philosophers—instead of being physicists, biologists, artists, engineers—whenever they want to attempt the specific activity of doing Christian scholarship.¹⁸

The Jacobsens critique this historical trajectory of the faith-learning relationship in order to open space for more possibilities and ways of conceiving of the relationship. They point out that most of the champions of the integration model have been Reformed, out of the Calvinist tradition, and while they have not broadcast their Calvinistic predispositions in their writings on Christian scholarship, that tradition undergirds the approach.¹⁹ Reformed theology emphasizes the radically fallen nature of the world; at its very roots, creation has gone wrong. Christians are supposed to model how God intended humanity to live, and are supposed to resubdue the created order, helping the world to acknowledge God and submit to God’s will. The integration model is therefore part of the larger aim of bringing a distinctively Christian perspective to the effort to understand the created order. The Jacobsens argue that this Reformed vision—while posing a powerful and coherent picture of the way faith and learning should relate—is only one way of understanding the relationship:

Scholars from other traditions can gain insights from the integration model, but other Christian scholars—whether the Catholic, Wesleyan, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Anabaptist, or any other non-Reformed
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tradition—will probably feel they are speaking a second language of sorts if they try to adopt the integration model in its entirety. Some of the core theological concerns of non-Reformed Christian traditions simply do not translate into integration-speak. Thus there is a need to acknowledge and nurture the development of other models of Christian scholarship that can stand alongside and complement the Reformed, integrationist approach.20

As the Jacobsens suggest possibilities for future work, they mention the Eastern Orthodox tradition among others as having a theological tradition that, if taken seriously, will “produce visions of Christian scholarship that differ from the dominant model of integration.”21

The most dominant alternate model, of course, is the example of Roman Catholic higher education in the United States. While Roman Catholic higher education predated Protestant higher education in Europe, with the first universities evolving out of cathedral and monastery schools, it was a latecomer in the United States and was treated as distinctively second-class.22 Early Colonial vitriol towards all people and things Catholic was fierce. Thomas Albert Howard notes, “Like much else in American history, it perhaps all started in 1620 with the Mayflower, when William Brewster lugged across the Atlantic an English translation of the Venetian historian Paulo Sarpi’s venomous attack on the Council of Trent and the institution of the papacy.”23 The Protestant establishment understood education as a way of assimilating other traditions into an American heritage and treated Catholics as second class for persisting in having their own schools.24 Marsden notes that by the turn of the twentieth century there were many Roman Catholic colleges and universities, but these were small, having a total collegiate enrollment of less than seven thousand.25

The character of these institutions was substantially different from Protestant colleges of the time, for they were staffed by members of religious orders and had not adjusted to American curricular patterns, typically offering six- or seven-year courses for boys only that combined preparatory and collegiate courses on a European gymnasium model. Rome was often heavy handed in asserting its control over both the colleges and their faculty.26 It was not until the 1960s that Roman Catholic colleges and universities fully “shed the ghetto mentality” that was a strong marker of
Catholic life; they now strive to preserve a distinctively Roman Catholic character while fully integrating into the American academy.27

As Roman Catholic scholars look back on their own history of higher education in the United States, they also critically appraise the mistakes of the Roman Catholic Church and its presence in American higher education. Mark W. Roche of the University of Notre Dame, in his essay “The Intellectual Appeal of Catholicism,” asserts at the outset the need to clearly assess the darker moments of the Roman Catholic tradition: “In defending the idea of a Catholic university, I seek to emphasize the highest dimensions of the Catholic tradition, those which have allowed the church to criticize its own most deficient moments and those which can foster a great university.”28 We also see a keen interest in an active dialogue between Roman Catholic and Protestant scholars around the relationship between faith and learning for higher education.29 Leading Roman Catholic institutions and scholars are moving the conversation forward in ways that should, at the very least, intrigue the Orthodox.

What we surmise from a cursory review of historiography is that Christian scholars are now looking back at their heritage in higher education not with a wishful hope to reinstitute a golden age of a Christian nation but rather with a tempered, self-critical approach—an approach which invites scholars today to be open to the possibilities of new varieties of the ways in which faith and learning relate in twenty-first-century American higher education. This not only allows Orthodox Christians to be more comfortable with the trajectory of the current conversation, but also specifically posits the Orthodox tradition as a source for significant learning, serving as an invitation to join.

What Is the Relationship between Faith and Knowledge?

Critical distance between faith, religion, and the academy is often seen as a sign of progress, especially given the ways in which they have related historically. Yet increasingly scholars are arguing that the modern dichotomy between faith and knowledge, while having certain positive ramifications, has had ultimately negative consequences for the academy.30 The Jacobsens’ most recent book is in many ways the story of how the American academy is now recovering from the split.31
Douglas Sloan, professor emeritus of history and education at Teachers College, Colombia University, expounds on how the understanding of the relationship between faith and knowledge is slowly changing in the academy.32 An “onlooker stance in knowing” that dominated modern times has been seriously challenged by participatory conceptions of knowing coming from many directions: from ecological studies, from women’s studies, from hermeneutics, and from quantum physics. The mechanistic worldview has been challenged by organic metaphors deriving from sources as diverse as Whiteheadian process thought, ecology (again), and philosophical phenomenology. Even the assumption that all genuine knowledge is sense-bound is being questioned in some quarters—by those, for example, who have discovered ancient paths of consciousness-science, and by health-mind-body research.33

This is a massive shift, one that invites scholars to contemplate the possibility of a fundamental transformation in our ways of knowing. In many areas—modern physics, genetic engineering, and cognitive science—even while classical ways of knowing are being challenged, the old materialistic, mechanistic, and sense-bound assumptions about the world are virulent. Sloan asserts that ultimately, a genuine transformation will require not only new theories and categories, but new capacities for insight and understanding, perception and experience.34

This change is also necessitated by the current global political climate, where there is a clear resurgence of religion. In the words of Roman Catholic scholar James Turner,

The assumption that faith is a waning force, a theory inherited from Victorian agnostics and once widely shared among European and American academics, is now seen to be patently wrong as a matter of practical fact—indeed dangerously wrong in today’s world. In consequence, scholars who are themselves secular in outlook are taking more interest in religion as a living force. And especially against the background of Islamist radicalism, ultra-Orthodox Israeli nationalism, and weird Christian sects, like the Branch Davidians, ordinary Christianity no longer seems too musty and atavistic. Christianity is
not chic in many academic circles, but neither can it be consigned to irrelevance.\textsuperscript{35}

Put more severely, the assumption that religion and faith have no place in the academic halls of knowledge can have dangerous consequences. The Jacobsens highlight this as they reflect on the deadly violence of the religiously motivated terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.

Across the nation, people asked how this could have happened. How could the American government and its intelligence-gathering organizations have so completely misunderstood the world situation? How could the negative consequences of religion been so overlooked? Religion could no longer be ignored—not by politicians or the military, and not by the academy. Although many scholars had dismissed religion as tangential to the quest for geopolitical understanding, that attitude was changed in a day. Like everyone else in the nation, educators had received an unwelcome wakeup call. It was time to start taking religion more seriously, and it was time to learn how to “manage” religion on campus more effectively. This was a matter of national security and political necessity; it had to be done. What might have been a gradual process of re-engaging religion on campus suddenly became a matter of grave urgency.\textsuperscript{36}

With increasing necessity, the academy must find robust ways of understanding the relationship between faith and knowledge.

Roman Catholic scholars are eager to weigh in on this area, pointing to the elevation of reason in the Roman Catholic intellectual tradition, while recognizing that in the United States Roman Catholicism has frequently been viewed as anti-intellectual. The idea that faith and reason may function in higher harmony is traced back to Roman Catholic medieval thought.\textsuperscript{37} In 1990, Pope John Paul II issued \textit{Ex Corde Ecclesiae} (“from the heart of the Church”), an apostolic constitution on Roman Catholic higher education that focuses its first section on themes related to the task of reconciling faith and knowledge—presenting a vision for Roman Catholic scholars, colleges, and universities. It articulates the ideal that the Roman Catholic university strives to dedicate itself to the cause
of truth; faith and reason converge in the pursuit of truth. Related to this is the importance of the “integration of knowledge” over and against the fracturing and compartmentalization of knowledge as is common within individual academic disciplines. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* asserts that a Catholic university “has to be a ‘living union’ of individual organisms dedicated to the search for truth. . . . It is necessary to work to a higher synthesis of knowledge, in which alone lies the possibility of satisfying that search for truth that is profoundly inscribed in the heart of a human person.”38 This very idea of a higher synthesis of knowledge runs counter to the ways in which much of the academy currently proceeds with its task of knowledge acquisition and transmission. Yet because of the concomitant contemporary attention to alternate ways of knowing and the geopolitical climate, new spaces are opening for attention to such possibilities.

Efforts to recover from the split of faith and knowledge are important not only for the academy but also for the church. Sloan argues that the split left the churches unprepared to respond to the increasing challenges to the understanding of nature and the human person that are aggressively asserted by a scientific and technological culture.39 As a result, “in reaction to what are perceived and felt as threats to faith, meaning, value, and life, the resort to dogmatic assertions of faith—often presented as alternative worldviews to scientific naturalism and materialism—has become strong in all the churches, as in all religions worldwide.”40 In essence, Sloan sees the modern dichotomy of faith and knowledge as contributing to the rise in religious fundamentalism. He suggests that a radical transformation in knowing, in addition to being a contribution to the academy, will lead to a necessary renewal in Christianity.

In varying ways, Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars and institutions are emerging in the twenty-first century as posing a significant countercultural challenge to the long-standing split between the nature of knowledge and the nature of faith and religion.41 They present a formidable challenge to the notion that progress meant relegating faith and religion to outside the walls of the academy.

“Religious Scholars in the Academy: Anachronism or Leaven?”

If there is room for faith and knowledge to relate within the academy, then this raises a series of questions about individual scholars and their
Indeed, the Harvard conference in 2000 focused on such questions: what is then the place of religious scholars in the academy? And how do we define “religious scholars”? They began to answer this question by asking another: is there a place in the American academy for “faith-informed scholarship”? In his essay “Beyond Progressive Scientific Humanism,” George Marsden argues for this term “faith-informed” after publishing a book, The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship, where he frequently used the term “Christian scholarship.” He explains that what he meant by the term was “scholarship by persons who are Christian and who self-consciously relate their faith to what they say or write.” He contends that “faith-informed” is more helpful than “Christian” because the latter sets off all sorts of alarms—from being potentially imperialistic to being associated with the religious right, theology, expressions of piety, or witnessing. He has no interest in Christians taking over academia or in advocating for some kind of Christian imperialism. In choosing “faith-informed” he wants to suggest on the one hand that faith has some real impact on scholarship and on the other that the faithful scholar should also be abiding by some broader scholarly standards. To explain his perspective on faith-informed scholarship, he writes:

My perspectives on reality, and hence on scholarship, are shaped at least in part by my theological commitments. In this respect I see the case as little different from that of the feminist whose scholarship is shaped in part, but not entirely, by feminist commitments. Such commitments, in turn, shape the way one will evaluate and narrate history. An easy example to understand of the sort of thing I have in mind with respect to religious perspectives is this: if one were a Mennonite who believed God forbade the participation in warfare, that would shape the way one would narrate and evaluate America’s participation in World War II. Nonetheless the Mennonite who narrated a war from that perspective could also be an excellent technical historian.

Marsden challenges the assumption that a scholar must suspend religious beliefs to participate in the scholarly craft well. In reality, multiple commitments shape every scholar’s work. And there is the distinct possibility
that one’s theological commitments may allow a certain outlook on a
topic that is of substantive value to the field, to cross-disciplinary ap-
proaches to a topic, to public life.46

Marsden surmises that religious commitments and traditions are
likely to influence the evaluative dimensions of scholarship. At least five
important questions are important for the scholar to ask: “(1) What do I
think important enough to study? (2) What questions do I ask about it?
(3) What currently fashionable interpretive strategies are compatible with
my religious outlook? (4) How do I, implicitly or explicitly, evaluate
various developments as positive, negative, or something in between?
(5) How do these evaluations shape my narrative?”47 He also offers three
provisos that are essential to understanding the extent of the influence of
“religiously based evaluative standards”: First, religious perspective will
change some things, but not everything. Second, for religiously based
evaluations to be operative there is no requirement that the evaluations
be unique. And third, it is critical to bear in mind that there is no one
Christian perspective.48

Furthering Marsden’s observations, in her essay in the 2004 volume
edited by the Jacobsens, Crystal L. Downing argues for a paradigm of
the relationship between faith and learning that reflects our postmodern
times and also reflects different religious traditions than the dominant
Calvinist model, which she sees as ultimately modernist. She argues for
the idea of the “imbrication” of faith and learning, drawing on the way
“imbrication” is used by architects to refer to the overlapping shingles on
a house; imbrication also describes the scales of a pinecone. This idea
opens room for the reality that we all have multiple vocabularies to talk
about our faith to different audiences, and that Christian scholars will
vary in the vocabulary they each use to relate faith and learning. In her
words, “To imbricate faith and scholarship, then, is to acknowledge that
one’s Christianity does not always overlap with one’s discipline, that many
times scholarship will mention nothing of faith issues.” In other venues,
a Christian professor might clearly talk about the overlap of faith with her
love for her particular subject. Downing explains that her understanding
of imbrication is similar to a concept of “heteroglossia”—divergent
tongues—put forward by the Russian (and Orthodox Christian) philoso-
pher Mikhail Bakhtin.
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For Bakhtin, every self is imbricated differently, due to each individual's situatedness not only in time and space but also in relation to others; he calls this the “architectonic” of the self. For Bakhtin, “architectonic privilege” . . . implies that we have a responsibility toward all that is “other” than the self because our individual imbrications will respond to and hence affect the other uniquely—whether the other is a self or a scholarly topic; and vice versa: other selves and subjects affect each one of us differently. . . . Bakhtin advocates the “unfinalizability” of “becoming” as the various imbricated discourses of the self take on new shapes through genuine dialogue with vocabularies of the “other.”

Whereas the idea of integration implied the attempt to reconcile dissonant discourses, the notion of imbrication ultimately offers a freedom in this unfinalizability.

The Jacobsens further flesh this out, proposing that “the soil in which Christian scholarship typically grows is not the soft loam of ideal logic but the gritty ground of our full personhood.” They draw on the work of the Princeton University sociologist Robert Wuthnow. When Wuthnow asks whether it is possible to combine a deep personal commitment to the Christian faith with the life of the mind, his answer is that it is indeed possible, and that the best way is by “living the questions” of intelligent faith. Faith does not give easy answers about how faith and learning are supposed to relate, but rather open-ended questions about how they might relate. Drawing on the work of Jesuit political philosopher David Hollenbach, the Jacobsens note that the end result of this process will not be a neatly articulated Christian scholarly worldview, but will be what he calls a “fragile achievement”—a tentative and provisional understanding of the connections of faith and learning that is rooted in one’s way of life as much as it is an expression of one’s life of the mind. Ultimately, this kind of Christian scholarship allows for the messy complexity that is the mystery of life.

The Jacobsens further this point as they reflect on how this type of Christian scholarship will actually minimize the supposed differences between the secular academy and the realm of Christian faith, for there will be shared humility in the face of truth and shared mystery at the wonder
of life.\textsuperscript{54} They probe the thinking of Ernest Boyer, who argues out of the Anabaptist tradition that the ultimate purpose of Christian scholarship is to celebrate the majesty and wholeness of God’s creation. Therefore, Christian scholarship, according to Boyer, is “at its best when it is humbly and almost invisibly immersed within the larger academy, tincturing the world of scholarship as a whole with a deepened sense of the unity of reality and of our responsibility to serve others, especially those least able to help themselves.”\textsuperscript{55}

Mark Roche discusses Catholicism’s sacramental vision as he shares the distinguishing features of Notre Dame; this vision clearly applies to the work of the scholar. He argues that the Catholic tradition holds fast to the view of God’s presence in the world. “Even among Catholic thinkers who rightly stress that the mystery of God is inexhaustible, there is greater recognition of the presence of God in the world and greater optimism about our ability to make discoveries about God.”\textsuperscript{56} Divine truth, beauty, and goodness are reflected in this world; the incarnation gives rise to this sacramental vision, and the Trinity includes the idea that the Holy Spirit infuses this world with divinity in ways that extend beyond the singular appearance of Christ. God’s presence in the world then offers a higher justification for the scholar’s work in any field.\textsuperscript{57}

If the historiography gives Orthodox Christians the room to recognize there is space for them at the table, and the questions about the relationship between faith and knowledge challenge any epistemological resistance to understanding the value of the conversation, then this discussion about paradigms of relationship between faith and learning should open the door for Orthodox scholars to recognize some significant value in the trajectory of the contemporary conversation, noting elements that sound surprisingly consonant with the Orthodox theological tradition.

IS THERE A PLACE FOR RELIGIOUS COLLEGES?

Finally, we turn to the question, is there a place for religious colleges in today’s world, and if so, what is it? Scholars who engage this question often have ample experience with people’s visceral negative reactions to Christian institutions. Samuel Schuman shares one such example in