

Toward a Mutually Informing Approach to the Integration of Faith and Learning in Christian Higher Education

Andrew Cress

Pillar Seminary

Abstract

This article proposes a mutually informing approach to the integration of faith and learning in Christian higher education. The formal practice of integration in Christian higher education involves studying Scripture alongside both the things God has made (as is done in the fields of Biology, Chemistry, Psychology, etc.), and the creations of those made in God's image (as is done in the visual arts, languages, literature, etc.). Defined by Ash (2015) as the "exploration and understanding of the interrelationship of God's revelation through the Bible and through the created order," integration is distinct from discipleship and moves beyond prayer, sharing one's faith commitments with students, or opening a lecture with a scripturally founded devotional. A mutually informing approach most clearly recognizes the important work faculty are doing in their own disciplines and programs to teach students and others about God.

Key words: Revelation; integration; mutually-informing; Christian Higher Education

This article articulates a particular approach to the integration of faith and learning in evangelical Christian higher education.¹ Such an approach seeks to integrate truth from Scripture and the created order. After defining important key terms in discussions over faith integration, the article argues for a non-hierarchical, mutually informing approach to integration. The article concludes with some practical suggestions intended to catalyze faculty discussions regarding integration of the historic Christian faith with one's academic discipline.

The Need to Integrate

When done correctly, Christian theology is applied to and informed by all of life.² Faith integration, which is an exercise in theology, can be defined as the "exploration and understanding of the interrelationship of God's revelation through the Bible and through the created order" (Ash, 2015, p. 75). Thus, the formal practice of integration in Christian higher education involves studying Scripture alongside the things God has made (as is done in the fields of Biology, Chemistry, Psychology, etc.), and the creations of those made in his image (as is done in fields of visual arts, languages, literature, etc.). As Ash (2015) states, "Integration requires the active and intentional participation of those variously gifted in the body of Christ (theologian, scientist, artist, for example)" (p. 75). This

highlights the necessity of insights from all disciplines to create a more informed and complete picture of the God who created, sustains, and ultimately redeems the created order (Rom 8:18-24). Such an approach recognizes the important work faculty are doing in their own disciplines and programs to teach students and others about God.

Faith and Discipleship Defined

The description of integration described above may strike some as a rather formal use of "faith," having little to do with the term "faith" as it is often used in evangelical Christian circles.³ In the case of the formal practice of faith integration in higher education, the word "faith" refers not to the act of believing, but rather that which is believed. Thus, faith integration is not referring to the integration of one's own personal beliefs (i.e., their "faith") into the learning or research experience—that occurs whether one intends it or not. Rather, it is the integration of that which is believed, i.e., the historic teaching and theology of the Christian church, founded on Scripture. Naturally, this faith may correspond closely with one's own personal beliefs and commitments to God, but it is not one's personal commitment which is integrated (though this is certainly not excluded from consideration).

Such an understanding of faith brings into view an important distinction that must often be made in conversations about integration in Christian higher education: There is a difference between *discipleship* and the *formal integration* of the historic Christian faith with one's scholarly discipline. The discipleship journey is one in which a person intentionally becomes a disciple (learner) of Jesus.⁴ Thus, to engage in discipleship is to seek to become more like Jesus in his approach to life, his beliefs and values, and his acts of sacrificial love. Naturally, the life and work of a Christian scholar is not divorced from discipleship. However, such living and working is theoretically not so different than the vocation practiced by Jesus's disciples outside Christian higher education. Dallas Willard (1997) helpfully describes the vocation of the Christian professor in discipleship terms by saying that:

as Jesus' apprentice, then, I constantly have before me the question of how he would deal with students and colleagues in the specific connections involved in such a role. How would he design a course, and why? How would he compose a test, administer it, and grade it? What would his research projects be, and why? How would he teach this course or that? (p. 283)

The Christian-scholar-as-disciple framework informs the attitudes and motivations that shape the work of faith integration (i.e., it should be done faithfully, lovingly, with humility, etc.), but this framework is not the act of integration itself. If the intended outcome of faith integration is not discipleship, then what is it?

By way of contrast, the Danforth Commission on Church-Sponsored Higher Education in the United States (1966) sought to discover the societal role of religiously affiliated institutions of higher education. They concluded that such institutions of higher education should provide "a reasoned framework of belief that gives meaning to human existence" since "higher education cannot, even if it would, 'give' the student a faith" (Litfin, 2004, pp. 97-98)⁵ Rather, "through curricular means [higher education] can encourage [students] to organize and unify [their] knowledge and strive for depth of understanding" (p. 98). Though clearly using different words, the Danforth commission clearly distinguished discipleship from religious higher learning. In light of this, the faith integration goal of one's teaching or scholarly pursuits should not be student professions of faith or faculty growth into the likeness of Jesus. Rather, faith integration should provide "a reasoned framework of belief that gives meaning to human existence" (p. 97). As described in the next section of this article, this reasoned framework of

belief is a unified view of God and the created order. This is inherently distinct from the intended goals of one's discipleship journey.

It has been established that the goals of discipleship differ from those of integration. While discipleship is intended to produce devoted followers of Jesus, integration is intended to produce a reasoned framework of belief. For this reason, beginning class sessions with a biblically founded devotional or praying for or with students should not be considered faith integration as discussed in this article. These activities, which are important and essential to the activities of a gospel-centered university, fall more clearly into the realm of discipleship.

Toward a Mutually Informing Approach: Re-Integration Defined

The word "faith" has been differentiated from one's personal faith commitments by describing "faith" as "that which is believed" (i.e., the historic teaching and theology of the Christian church). The integrative task has been contrasted with the intended outcomes of a Christian's discipleship journey. In what follows, the concept of divine revelation, which is foundational to integration, is explained. Following this, several approaches to integration are described and contrasted. The strengths of a non-hierarchical, mutually informing approach to the task of integration in evangelical Christian higher education are described.

A Primer on Revelation through the Created Order

Faith integration begins with the conviction that God has revealed himself through Scripture and the created order. The following texts most clearly address God's revelation through creation, though many others could be added to their number:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. (Genesis 1:1; 31)⁶

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

These texts make clear the foundational concept of integration: God created all that can be seen. In the same way that one can know an artist or craftsman by closely interrogating her work, one can know God by critically examining the results of God's creative acts. Because humanity has been created in the image of God, humans themselves, and their creative acts, additionally bear witness to God's identity and character in some fashion:

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their measuring line goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. (Psalm 19:1–4)

Psalm 19 affirms that God's revelation is not tied to God's past creative acts, but rather the created order continues to declare in the present age something about God's identity (in this case, royal majesty). Though the psalm refers specifically to the heavens and skies above, it could be the case that the entirety of the created order is in view:⁷

Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest. (Proverbs 6:6–8)

The previous texts indicate that there are elements of God's character than can be discerned from studying the created order. Proverbs 6 seems to indicate that the created order (in this case, ants) can teach ethical principles to those seeking wisdom. Thus, those who desire to faithfully follow God can, and should, study the created order to provide a more complete picture of God's expectations for the faithful:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (Romans 1:19–20)

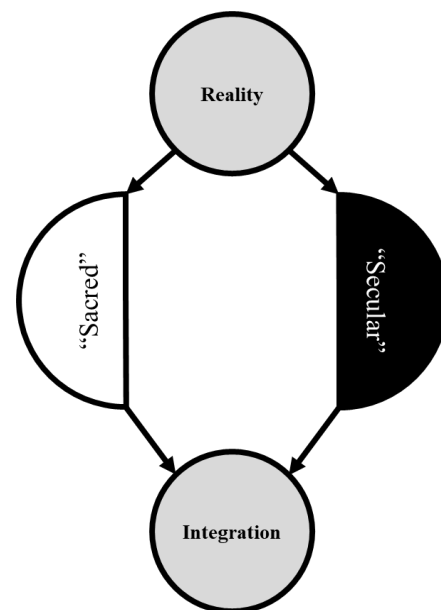
Perhaps by drawing together the themes of the previous texts, Paul held the conviction that God can be known in specific ways by those who have never read Scripture. For Paul, this strong natural theology also entailed ethical obligations: those created in God's image should live as those who recognize his power.⁸

The concept of revelation is foundational to understanding the integrative task. The biblical authors encouraged those seeking God to study creation in addition to Scripture.⁹ Since humans are made in God's image, the things they produce (culture, artistic works, textiles, etc.) also reveal God. Integration seeks to bring these sources of truth together in order to gain a fuller and more holistic view of God.

Integration as Re-integration

If one accepts the truth that God has effectively revealed himself through the created order, and that those desiring to know God should seek to know him through Scripture and creation, the integrative task is brought into clearer focus. God, as the author of both Scripture and the created order, is most likely consistent and unified in the way he reveals himself, regardless of the medium used. Thus, though the word "integration" implies the combination of two otherwise disparate ideas, the model proposed here argues against this understanding.¹⁰ In actuality, it may be clearer to refer to the formal work of faith integration in higher education as "re-integration." Figure 1 below illustrates the process of re-integration.

Figure 1 Re-integration



Even though humans may choose to separate or distinguish the sacred (e.g., doctrine, Scripture, the Church) and secular (everything else), reality, having been created by God, is unified. James K.A. Smith (2009) has sourced this division in the perceived split between that which is known by rationalistic means (e.g., observation and experience), and that which is believed (cf. pp. 41-46).

This unnecessary separation naturally leads toward a divided view of reality—God cannot be truly known through solely rationalistic means, therefore those ideas pertaining to God belong in the realm of the “sacred.” As we have seen, however, such a distinction is artificial: To study the created order through one’s scholarly discipline is to study God through the things he has made (Noll, 2011). Integration is therefore the reuniting of that which should never have been separated: the revelation of God through Scripture and the created order.

Models of Integration¹¹

As described above, the goal of integration is to form a unified view of God—a holistic and reasoned framework of belief. This requires re-integrating one’s academic discipline with the truth found in Scripture. The space allotted for this article does not permit an in-depth description and critique of alternative models of revelation and integration (for which, see Ash, 2015). However, brief descriptions can help distinguish the strength of the non-hierarchical mutually informing approach.

A Bible-only approach to integration finds the Bible as the only trustworthy source of truth, with the created order serving in a secondary, confirmatory capacity. The created order is not seen as a source of truth in its own right. The strength of this model is its focus on the centrality of Scripture as a primary source of truth (cf. 2 Tim 3:16). The Bible-only view neglects, however, the teachings of Scripture that encourage the faithful to seek truth outside of Scripture (on which, see above). In addition, a common-sense approach seems to indicate that truth can be discovered outside of Scripture through observation and experimentation (e.g., the truth that the earth revolves around the sun). In the end, a Bible-only approach is difficult to consistently maintain.

A unidirectional approach to integration views the use of the created order in the construction of theology as a one-way street. While this approach affirms the presence of truth in the created order, to have confidence in one’s conclusions regarding the created order, Scripture should confirm it. Yet, the created order is not allowed to critique one’s interpretation of Scripture. The strength of this view is again its focus on the importance of Scripture as a source of truth for apprehending the created order. However, this approach still suffers from neglecting the texts that clearly draw one’s attention outside of Scripture in the quest to know God.

A mutually informing approach to integration exists in two forms. A hierarchical view affirms the existence of revelation outside of the created order. Yet, when conflicts

exist between interpretations of Scripture and observations of the created order, one source of revelation is preferred. For those who hold to the centrality of Scripture in the construction of theology (e.g., many North American evangelicals), the interpretation of Scripture typically trumps the interpretation of the created order. This arises from a confidence in one’s ability to rightly interpret Scripture alongside a mistrust of one’s ability to rightly interpret the created order.

A non-hierarchical view prefers to assume that perceived conflicts in one’s interpretation of revelation is the fault of the interpreter, and that all sources of revelation speak with authority on matters consistent with their divinely ordained purposes.¹² Integration is viewed as a conversation between sources of revelation, with no source having veto power over another. The strength of this approach is that it rightly affirms, with Scripture, the importance of both Scripture and the created order in the construction of theology. It also acknowledges that the reader of Scripture and observer of creation can equally misinterpret their chosen medium of study. The weakness of this approach is that very often, perceived conflicts between sources of revelation will need to be held in tension and humility. The conversation can continue indefinitely.

The Integrative Task

While the strengths of a non-hierarchical, mutually informing approach to integration have been described, the specific task of integration in the context of Christian higher education has not been outlined. As we will see, a mutually informing approach also provides advantages for the integrative task in the context of a Christian university.

One primary task of higher education is to serve the public good¹³ by advancing human knowledge and pushing beyond the limits of our current understanding of the universe. The Baptist Faith and Message, 2000 therefore rightly affirms that “Christianity is the faith of enlightenment and intelligence. In Jesus Christ abide all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. All sound learning is, therefore, a part of our Christian heritage” (“Baptist Faith and Message,” 2000, Article XII). Thus, the task of Christian scholars is to press toward a greater knowledge and understanding of the universe in light of Jesus’s identity. In Christian higher education in particular, this work is done within the context of the historic Christian faith and mission.¹⁴ The cause of advancing human knowledge should not take place in isolation from the historic Christian faith but should be done Christianly—in proper relation to Scripture and the historic Christian faith. Christian higher education provides the think tank and

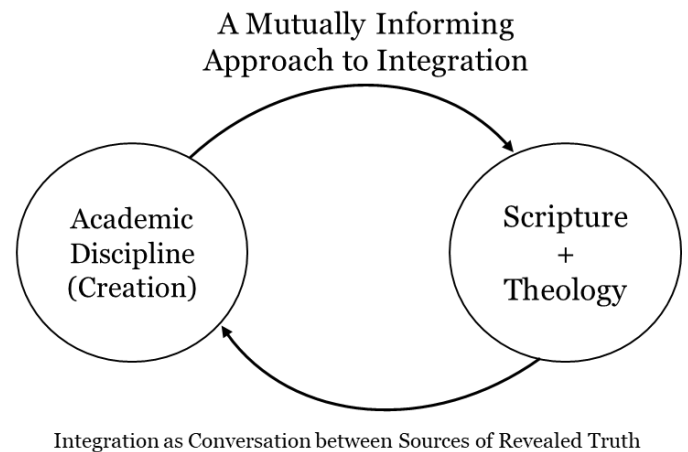
laboratory where the difficult work of integration takes place in service to the church and the world.

Though related specifically to the integration of theology and psychology, Carter and Narramore's (1979) words ring equally true for other disciplines:

While acknowledging that a forced or artificial integration runs the risk of violating the truths of divine revelation or the facts and principles of psychology, we cannot accept a view that minimizes the possibility or the necessity of integrating our psychological understanding of persons with our understanding of the revealed truths of Scripture. If God is the author of all truth, we need not be afraid to examine what might appear to be competing truth claims. If God is the author of all truth, we are not dealing with ultimately different sources of truth. And if issues such as personal adjustment, motivation, determinism, and the handling of negative emotions are not common to both psychology and theology, then we have in view either a truncated gospel or a very narrow psychology. (pp. 15-16)

According to Carter and Narramore, an implication of holding a "truncated" view of the gospel is that one's understanding of God's revealed truth cannot accommodate the complexities of psychology (or other disciplines). In order for one's view of the good news about Jesus to be fully understood and appropriately expressed, it must be able to account for the varied complexities that one's scholarly discipline brings to the construction of a unified view of reality. If Christian scholars remain grounded in an appropriate conviction of God's revealed truth in the Scriptures, they can approach the integrative task with excitement rather than fear. A fully developed and nuanced exploration of the relationship between historic Christian faith and one's discipline can, with confidence, synthesize and articulate fresh discoveries while at the same time making claims about God and the world God created. An expansive and mutually informing attitude toward revelation encourages such an approach. Figure 2 illustrates such a mutually informing approach.

Figure 2: A Mutually Informing Approach to Integration



There is effectively no limit to the ways in which Christian scholars can articulate a more complete understanding of the universe God created. As Duane Litfin (2004) observes:

to speak of a common Christ-centered goal [of faith integration] does not imply a cookie-cutter approach to Christian scholarship; in fact it requires the opposite. Virtually infinite are the methods required to explore the manifold dimensions of God's complex world and our place within it. Christian scholars employ a wide variety of useful approaches across the several academic divisions, across the many disciplines, even within each discipline. Yet the conviction behind the integrative task is that each of these approaches, if pursued aright, aims toward a common end: a unified, Christ-centered understanding of the world. (p. 147)

It is therefore up to each scholar and discipline to collaboratively determine the relevant definitions and methods for faith integration in the context of Christian higher education.

As we have seen, a mutually informing approach to integration compels the Christian scholar to integrate the truths found in Scripture with the truth found in one's academic discipline as a study of the created order. At times, a confrontation with a truth found in one's discipline will require reconsideration of an interpretation of Scripture. In other situations, the truths of Scripture may entail a reconsideration of the assumptions or results of one's research. The following preliminary questions may help the integrative scholar to consider some ways to begin the integrative task:

1. In what ways do the standard answers to life's questions in my discipline cohere with the teaching of Scripture? In what ways do they differ?
2. How does Scripture critique my discipline?
3. How does my discipline critique interpretations of Scripture?

Considerations for Faith and Learning in the Classroom

In the context of a Christian university where not all students are professed followers of Jesus, a mutually informing approach to integration offers additional advantages. For example, this model does not measure success in terms of things that are difficult to assess, such as religious conversions or spiritual growth. Faculty may implement learning experiences to teach students about a disciplinary model for faith integration without requiring that students hold to the theological frameworks inherent in the model. Further, the effectiveness of these learning experiences can be more transparently assessed using evidence of student learning from embedded critical assignments. The first step in this direction, however, requires a program to work collaboratively to develop an approach toward faith integration that recognizes Scripture and the created order as sources of revelation (on this see the questions posed above).

Summary and Conclusion

The task of formally integrating the historic Christian faith with the scholarly study of the created order is a core function of Christian higher education. By using a mutually informing approach to integration, Christian scholars serve the church and the world by articulating a fuller, more holistic view of God. Faculty can define and develop their approach to faith integration as a conversation between sources of revelation by interrogating the assumptions and results of research within their discipline, while allowing their discipline to critique interpretations of Scripture and theology. As a result, the integrative mission of institutions of Christian higher learning is effectively supported.

References

- Ash, C. (2015). *A Critical Examination of the Doctrine of Revelation in Evangelical Theology*. Pickwick.
- Bauer, W. (2001). *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (F. W. Danker, Ed.; 3rd ed.). University of Chicago.
- Calvin, J. (1845). *Commentary on the Book of Psalms, Vol 1*. (J. Anderson, Trans.). Calvin Translation Society.
- Carter, J. D. & Narramore, B. (1979). *The Integration of Psychology and Theology: An Introduction*. Rosemead Psychology Series. Academie Books.
- Dockery, D. S. (2008). *Renewing Minds: Serving Church and Society through Christian Higher Education*. Broadman & Holman.
- Dulles, A. (1992). *Models of Revelation*. Orbis Books.
- Faith, B. (2000). Message. In *Report to SBC Convention*. Adrian Rogers, chmn. Nashville: SBC.
- Lewis, C. S. (2001). *Mere Christianity*. HarperOne.
- Litfin, D. (2004). *Conceiving the Christian College: A College President Shares His Vision of Christian Higher Education*. William B. Eerdmans.
- Noll, M. A. (2011). *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind*. William B. Eerdmans.
- Smith, J. K. A. (2009). *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Cultural Liturgies 1. Baker Academic.
- Stokes, H. B. & Lewis, N. P. (1999). *Integration of Behavioral Sciences and Theology: A System-Relational Approach*. Writers Club.
- Willard, D. (1997). *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life with God*. HarperCollins.

¹ The term "evangelical" is quite equivocal in contemporary conversations, but for the purpose of this article, the traditional hallmarks of evangelicalism articulated by Bebbington (conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism) are generally appropriate as they exist in their North American form. In my view, a primary distinction of North American evangelical belief is a focus on a particular understanding of the inerrancy and/or infallibility of Scripture.

² The insight that faith integration is an exercise in theology came from a conversation with Chris Morgan.

³ For example, C.S. Lewis (2001) defined faith in two ways: first, "accepting or regarding as true the doctrines of Christianity," and second, the consistent practice of the virtue of faith, what some might refer to as entrusting oneself and the outcomes of one's life to God (p. 138-150). The New Testament usage of the term *pistis* carries with it several nuances that can be translated variously into English: "that which evokes trust and faith;" "state of believing on the basis of the reliability of the one trusted, trust, confidence, faith in the active sense='believing';" "that which is believed, body of faith/belief/teaching" (Bauer, 2001, s.v.). It is this third sense that is intended in the phrase "the integration of faith and learning."

⁴ Dallas Willard (1997) defines the goal of a disciple becoming "capable of doing what that person [Jesus] does or to become what that person is" (p. 282).

⁵ Results of the Danforth Commission, *Church-Sponsored Higher Education in the United States*. It should be noted that the Danforth commission is describing here the results

of a student's journey at a religiously-affiliated institution, rather than the goals of faculty scholarship.

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

⁷ John Calvin (1845) claims this: "He only makes mention of the heavens; but, under this part of creation, which is the noblest, and the excellency of which is more conspicuous, he doubtless includes by synecdoche the whole fabric of the world. There is certainly nothing so obscure or contemptible, even in the smallest corners of the earth, in which some marks of the power and wisdom of God may not be seen; but as a more distinct image of him is engraven on the heavens, David has particularly selected them for contemplation, that their splendour might lead us to contemplate all parts of the world" (p. 308).

⁸ While it is the case that God can be known truly through the created order, the truth that can be interpreted is constrained by God's purpose in creating it. While in Scripture God intends to provide truth leading to the rescue of sinners from judgement, there are no indications that God intends for the created order to provide this same message.

⁹ This approach quite deliberately elevates the importance of the created order as a source of revelation. As Ash (2015) has noted, typical approaches to revelation and integration incorrectly reject, both explicitly and implicitly, the use of the created order as a source of revelation (p. 96). Elevating the status of the created order as a source of revelation need not denigrate the place of Scripture as authoritative revelation. Rather, conferring such a distinction is consistent with the status given the created order within Scripture itself (cf. Scripture cited above).

¹⁰ "The term **integration** elicits images of mixing two different substances so that together they form a new entity unlike, and perhaps even better than, the original materials" (Stokes & Lewis, 1999, p. 3).

¹¹ The following discussion relies on Ash's (2015) work, pages 59-97. Only four approaches are described in this article, however others do exist (e.g., a hierarchical-experiential approach, which prioritizes one's experiences over Scripture and/or the historic teaching of the Christian church). Since the focus of this article is evangelical Christian higher education, the intended priority of Scripture as a source of revelation is assumed. Additional information on alternate models of revelation and integration can be found in Carter and Narramore (1979, pp. 71-115), Dulles (1992, pp. 36-130), and Stokes and Lewis (1999).

¹² The phrase "consistent with their divinely ordained purposes" is carefully chosen to confirm the special place Scripture holds as the source of revelation from which one learns how to be reconciled to God. In my understanding, one cannot learn of salvation through Christ by studying a

tree because to do so would be inconsistent with the tree's divinely ordained purpose.

¹³ WSCUC 2013 Standards of Accreditation, CFR 1.1.

¹⁴ The historic Christian pattern of higher learning, while "intentionally and unashamedly Christian...recognizes the place of serious debate and engagement, of testing hypotheses and considering challenges, of changing one's viewpoint or developing new syntheses. A Christian university, similar to other institutions of higher learning, provides a context for the contest of these ideas" (Dockery, 2008, p. 24).

Author Information

Andrew Cress

Pillar Seminary

acress@pillarseminary.org