

The Academic Sneer as An Instrument of Discipline

Our guest editorial is by Rev. Dr. Gary Willingham-McLain, now pastoring a church in a diverse neighborhood near a major university and medical center. Prior to this, he was an assistant professor of literary and cultural studies at a top-ranked university. This material is extracted from a larger talk he originally gave at a one-day conference for faculty and graduate students.

I think the sneer is a facial expression deeply important to academics. It boosts confidence. It does this by marking others as being “not quite as sharp as I am.” In my life as an academic, at times I know I must have made fellow students and faculty feel my sneer. I certainly felt the sneers of others. The sneer, you see, is effective: it works when it drives home a good argument, but it also works very well without any argument at all. Sneers have power. In Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, the working-class protagonist of the novel is a little boy named Pip. Pip has always loved Joe, his brother-in-law, but he also used to look up to him and his vocation as a blacksmith. But all that changed the day a shining middle-class girl sneered at Pip, his clothes, his dreams. From then on, Pip despised the forge, was embarrassed by Joe, and longed for gentility. Sneers can revolutionize the inner being of others and shape value systems. They are attitudinal instruments, disciplining us into ways of thinking and feeling.

The image of a sneer pictures, for me, the characteristic attitude displayed by the academic “will to status.” As academics, our ambition is often driven more by a desire to stand above the rest, than it is by a love for philosophy, biology, or engineering. The difficulty is that this drive for superior standing cannot be easily separated from our attraction to knowledge itself. Intellectuals with biting sneers are some of the very best minds in their fields. You may find their egoism laughable, they may act like puppets in *Vanity Fair*, but they are nonetheless brilliant and indispensable to the advance of knowledge in their particular areas.

Love for truth and the will to status are hard for academics to separate. But the word of God calls us to separate them. I think there is an ethos, a culture, a way of being — produced by the larger forces that structure and shape academic life — that shapes our very spirits as academics. In my experience, most university graduate students and their faculty were very much caught up in the carrying out, the suffering from, the exulting in, and the constant circulation of the academic sneer. Always arising out of a certain arrogant (or in others, insecure) need to dominate,

the sneer is spiritually destructive. For one thing, it isolates. We may have potentially great minds among us who might thrive in a different kind of social environment than the one that assesses value, weighs contributions, and seeks priorities in the discourse of the sneer.

I remember going to a lunch discussion with Christians in the science department. Outside the office where we were to meet, there was a poster quoting Ernst Rutherford saying, “Physics is real science, all the rest of it is mere stamp collecting.” Now, this statement may contain some legitimate thought in it, having to do with the comparative successes of entirely separate fields of knowledge. But any truth it had to convey was expressed as a sneer. Statements like these, whether they cross disciplines, remain within disciplines, or simply come up between kindred minds — these moments isolate, discipline, and punish. As common utterances, often without even being spoken, they manufacture a climate of triumphalism and its partner, defeat.

If there is a discernment I take away from my time at the university that might be of value to Christians who feel called to live faithfully in their academic careers, it is this: the spiritual stance of the Christian in academic discourse must be fundamentally opposed to the sneer. I believe that there never was a sneer in the voice or the face of Jesus. He was most harshly critical of the religious leaders of the day, but he did not sneer at them. Prophetic address is humble before the Father, even when Jesus did it.

What would the opposite of this sneer posture look like in academic interaction? Can we do rigorous critique without sneering? Of course we can. I have had my own work critiqued by such a person. Do we really want to explore Christian academic life as our calling? Then it is largely, I think, not only in the content of our disciplines, but also in the tone, the facial expressions, the very spirit in which we live in and interact over ideas, that we must explore who we are. We must be in the world, but not of the world. Practicing the sneer is decidedly being of the world, and not being of Christ. Mark 10:41-45 and Philippians 2 reveal a Jesus whose life orientation was exactly the opposite of the sneer.

In Luke 15, Jesus aims three stories against the powerful sneers of his day. Pharisees are criticizing Jesus for spending time with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus then tells of three different individuals overjoyed at finding something that was lost: (continued on page 2)

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(continued from page 1) finding the lost sheep, finding the lost coin, finding the lost son. The Pharisees have no joy in finding lost people. Instead, they are the older brothers, the ones who are more deeply engaged in self-interested comparisons between people than they are in relationship with the Father. The shepherd, the woman, and the Father are all overjoyed at finding what they lost. The younger brother is thrilled to be back home. Meanwhile, the older brother is sneering. He's focused on the comparison between himself and his younger brother, on the comparison between the ways they are treated by the Father.

This parable reveals that the real tragedy of the sneer is not just that it isolates us from each other, thus restricting what we might otherwise be and accomplish. The deepest loss when we sneer is that it isolates us from God. Elder brothers and sisters, we are comparing our-

selves to fellow sinners, when the majesty of a Loving Almighty asks us for worship. I remember being in Chartres Cathedral, looking up at the sublime, towering stained-glass windows in that immense, vertical space, while my two-year-old was kneeling on the floor, scrutinizing a few dirty pieces of paper. Elder brothers and sisters, caught in our little horizontal wills-to-status, we are like my two-year-old son in that moment.

Spiritually imprisoned in our practice of the sneer, we are comparing pieces of dust, while the cathedral of God in Christ is waiting for our attention. Now there's a worthy act of comparison! A comparison worthy of all our hearts, souls, strengths, and all our minds.

Dr. Willingham-McLain is willing to discuss this further. If you would like to do that, contact him at this address: gary_willingham_mclain@hotmail.com.

A Note from the Director

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As the Faculty Ministry Leadership Team and I near the end of the initial listening and planning period for the next phase of InterVarsity's Faculty Ministry, several themes have reappeared in conversations with many, many faculty. We will seek to address two of these expressed needs in the next six months. I invite your participation if you believe this would serve you, or be a means by which you might serve others.

One recurring theme we hear is the desire to better understand Christian theology and its bearing on the academic life. In response, we are hosting a conference this summer in the beautiful environs of InterVarsity's Cedar Campus, on the shore of Lake Huron. Quoting from the brochure, "This conference will offer unhurried time for relaxation and recreation, conversation and community with faculty peers, intellectual stimulation, and social merriment. Indeed, we expect that this week will make for the very best sort of vacation!" For more information or to register, please visit the conference website: facultyministry.org/go/inthylight.

Another recurring theme has been the value of a mentor, especially when this mentor has been a fellow Christian scholar. This echoes the growing body of research indicating the importance of such a person in one's life. Yet we also hear regularly just how difficult it is for young

Christian scholars to find a fellow Christian scholar in their field who can serve this mentoring role. In response, we have been hard at work to develop a means by which younger Christian scholars can be connected with those a step or two down the academic road.

In November, we launched the first phase of an effort to meet this need: inviting Christian scholars to serve as mentors via the Emerging Scholars Network. Our objective is to make this as easy as possible for mentors – mentors define the terms of the mentoring relationship, frequency, way of connecting, and what is discussed. We believe even a small amount of engagement with a mentor will be of great service to emerging scholars. If you have been served by a mentor in your academic development, please "return the favor" and serve the next generation of Christian scholars in your field as a mentor, for the glory of God and growth of his Kingdom within academe! Further information and applications may be found at emergingscholars.org/go/mentoring.

For Christ and the University,
Stan Wallace
Director
InterVarsity's Faculty Ministry



Models of Ministry

Creating Spaces for Deeper Ministry at the University of Illinois

By David Suryk

Should Christians in the sciences pretend that God does not exist as they “do science”? To what extent should we reveal ourselves to be Christians as we speak and write history? How can we Christians in engineering bring into discipline and practice the Kingdom values that are routinely ignored? How should we as Christians help change society without being guilty of merely trying to grab power?

Graduate & Faculty Ministries (GFM) at the University of Illinois has created new spaces where these and other crucial questions will regularly be engaged — and where they can serve as a platform for the development of more effective ministry on campus. These “new spaces” are six departmental groups for engineering, life sciences, non-life sciences, society (psychology, economics, law, medicine, social work, architecture, etc.), humanities, and computer science.

The groups meet two-to-three times a semester, either on a Friday or a Saturday evening as best fits a group’s schedule, and maybe once or twice over the summer. Some groups meet for dinner; many meet for dessert and coffee. Always, discussion and prayer are center stage. Graduate students and faculty explore together what it means to be Christians in their various academic disciplines. Discussions revolve around both content (including intellectual best practices) and ministry (including prayer and outreach).

As one key strategy, we have intentionally paired up new and returning graduate students as co-leaders, helping to kick-start the qualified new student’s involvement in chapter life as well as provide some continuity in leadership transition. We’ve also tried, with very good success, to have key Christian faculty host these departmental groups in their homes.

What we have found is that Christian faculty — and very busy faculty at that — have thoroughly enjoyed their involvement in the departmental groups. After one engineering dinner with eighteen graduate students, Professor Gary Eden (electrical and computer engineering) commented, “I’ve been wanting to have these kinds of discussions for years.” Following a science dessert discussion with a dozen graduate students, Dr. Robert Ghrist (applied mathematics) said, “This was an excellent evening. I want you to have the next meeting here as well.”

We find that our departmental groups are moving us forward in terms of GFM’s Four Commitments: Spiritual

Formation, Community, Evangelism & Service, and Integration of Faith, Learning, & Practice. Christian community is being formed within the various departments, but there is also further opportunity to connect with Christians in other academic disciplines. For example, some of the department groups had or plan to have discussions with another group. The two science groups recently met in the home of Dr. Rob and Debbie Ghrist to discuss Jeff Hammond’s paper, “Overlapping the Magisteria: Challenges for Christians in the Sciences.” (See redeemingreason.org and the 2005 conference papers to download Jeff’s paper.)



Although the groups focus intentionally on Christians, we believe they are also places to which we can invite interested non-Christian friends and so be helpful in evangelism. Paul, a life-science graduate student, brought a Muslim woman from his department who was interested in exploring Christianity. She said she had a very good time with us and found the discussions interesting. These groups are also great occasions to address two important questions. First, what apologetical issues arise in our particular academic disciplines? Or, what challenges to the Christian faith do we find from our studies or from our colleagues in the department? And second, how together can we best address those particular issues? What are the key resources for helping us and our non-Christian colleagues to address these challenges?

All the groups explore numerous issues in spiritual formation, asking questions such as “What kind of people does God want us to be as Christian engineers, historians, psychologists, physicians, mathematicians, physicists, chemists, etc.?” “In what ways do our professions seek to shape us?”, and “How do we thrive as men and women in Christ whom God has called into these various professions and careers?” (continued on page 4)

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(continued from page 3) One M.D./Ph.D. student said she entered the medical profession wanting to serve Christ and didn't want to leave her years of studies having slowly moved away from that commitment.

Hopefully, by now you can see that integration of faith, learning, and practice is a multi-dimensional activity. It involves interaction not just at the level of ideas, but also at the various levels of interpersonal relationships. We believe that the department groups can help us to bring our academic lives into the wider contexts of our new life in Christ.

As we look to the future of these groups, we have several goals. First, we want to find all the Christian graduate students and faculty in our various departments who yearn for engagement with other Christians in their academic fields on all these issues. We realize that there are many more Christian graduate students and faculty on campus than participate in our regular Friday night meetings or our small-group Bible studies. Many are involved in small groups in their churches. And many non-university spouses are reluctant to have their graduate-student or faculty spouse away regularly on Friday evenings! Occasional and more focused evenings away, as offered by the department groups, seem to be an easier sell. And inviting faculty with small children to host the groups in their homes also seems to work well.

Secondly, we hope to partner better with local churches in helping them resource the graduate students and faculty in their congregations, without them feeling we are in competition for their members.

Lastly, we plan to have the department groups take key leadership in new student and faculty outreach each year. Classic new student outreach for us is that special time to find incoming graduate students, Christian and non-Christian alike, and to connect them with a community of Christians who take seriously their Christian faith and so their academic disciplines. We can think of no better way to reach incoming Christian graduate students and faculty than from within their own departments.

The department groups are helping me address one of my primary concerns as I minister to graduate students — helping them develop crucial habits of heart and mind that they can take with them into their careers, whether in the academy or marketplace. And for faculty, the groups encourage them to take seriously their Christian faith right where they work and guide them to help graduate students move in the same direction.

David Suyrk (J.D., M.A.) serves with InterVarsity's Graduate & Faculty Ministries at the University of Illinois.

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In *The New York Times Book Review* of February 19, 2006, Leon Wieseltier, literary editor of *The New Republic* magazine, reviews Daniel C. Dennett's book, *Breaking the Spell* (Viking Press). Dennett is a professor of philosophy at Tufts University, a well-known opponent of Christianity, and a vigorous attacker of various creation stories associated with faith. Dennett's book "investigates the natural history of religion, hoping to break the taboo against questioning faith."

In his review, Wieseltier writes: "The question of the place of science in human life is not a scientific question. It is a philosophical question. Scientism, the view that science can explain all human conditions and expressions, mental as well as physical, is a superstition, one of the dominant superstitions of our day; and it is not an insult to science to say so. For a sorry instance of present-day scientism, it would be hard to improve on Daniel C. Dennett's book. *Breaking the Spell* is a work of considerable historical interest, because it is a merry anthology of contemporary superstitions."

Well, you can see that this man is not impressed with Professor Dennett's work; in fact, neither am I, but this is

one of the most efficient jobs of dismembering Dennett's latest attempts to attack the Christian world. Please find it in your library and read it.

I also strongly recommend to you two books I have recently read. The first is no doubt familiar to you: *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C. S. Lewis* by Alan Jacobs (Harper-Collins, 2005). This is a wonderful biography of Lewis. However, on my shelf there must be six other biographies of Lewis. Why do I push this one? It is the first one I've read that evaluates Lewis from inside the discipline of English in a critical and yet supportive way. Jacobs obviously loves Lewis' writing but also dislikes and disapproves of parts. It's good to hear that! He has interacted well with the other biographers, especially A. N. Wilson's somewhat derogatory treatment of the life and work of Lewis, and yet Jacobs doesn't hide from Lewis' blemishes and failures. For me, he illuminated a whole different way of appreciating Lewis' writings. The title, *The Narnian*, is not just an attention-catcher as the first *Chronicles of Narnia* movie circulates. It's Jacobs' argument that, in fact, if you understand what Lewis is saying in all of the Narnian chronicles together, you have a clearer understanding of Lewis. (continued on page 5)

Keeping Up

(continued from page 4) All of Lewis' work has been significant: both his work as a writer and thinker but also his work as a tutor. I was moved a number of times to hear how Lewis, through the faithful execution of his duties as a tutor — without proselytizing for his Christian faith or condemning the undergraduate mind — was able to steer people into healthier and more productive work and indeed better lives. This is something I hope that all teachers, Christian or not, long to do. So I highly recommend this good read and hope that you'll pass it on to others. It's one that should be on our shelves if we value Lewis.

The next book is a science textbook, but a unique one: *Not Just Science*, edited by E. David Cook and Dorothy F. Chappell (Zondervan, 2005). Cook is a philosopher and Chappell, a biologist. They tell us why they have written the book, for whom it is intended, and how to use it. I am not currently teaching any science courses, but I would certainly use this for a variety of introductory and seminar-level courses for science majors.

The first part deals with the pre-suppositions of science and Christianity in a very thorough way, with good questions at the end of each chapter and suggested further readings, and then goes into selected natural science and mathematics topics: astronomy, cosmology, biology, bio-engineering, earth sciences, environmental issues, mathematics and computer science, physical sciences, other areas of technology, etc. The various chapters are written mostly by faculty of Wheaton College, where both editors teach. A few quotations will suffice to give some enticement:

From "Why We Have Produced this Book," page 15: "Humans as a part of creation intervene in some of its processes. Such interventions often occur through the

practice of science when we study and manipulate the material world. Our proficiencies in doing good are increased through curing diseases, feeding the hungry, stewarding resources, and alleviating suffering. Likewise, interventions in science can give humankind means to support greed, selfishness, hatred, and other vices detrimental to human welfare and God's purposes. Hence the initiative for this book is taken because for Christians it is 'not just science' that concerns them." Wouldn't you agree that this is a powerful insight for young people being trained in the sciences?

From the next section, "Why did we undertake this project together?": "One of us is a philosopher, theologian, and ethicist, and the other is a biologist with interest in theology and ethics. The expertise we bring to this task provides insights that are integrative and enrich the discussion of central conceptual matters."

I found that the book dipped into ancient and medieval history, as well as contemporary issues such as HIV/Aids and the poor, and wrestled with perennial questions that are a struggle for Christians: the age of the universe, the nature of creation, the science of evolution, and intelligent design, etc. It also interacted significantly with applied science issues, how computers interface with other values we enjoy, and more. We're all talking about inter-disciplinary efforts these days. Here is a living example of it done very well.

Terry Morrison
Director *Emeritus*
InterVarsity's Faculty Ministry



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Opportunities

"A Time Apart" — April 29, 2006, in Columbus, Ohio. Join faculty and graduate students from Ohio State for a retreat focused on spiritual disciplines and the academic life. For more information, contact Howard Van Cleave at hvanccleave@facultyministry.org.

Faculty Camp 06 — "In Thy Light We See Light: Theological Acuity and Academic Vocation" — Featuring Dr. Calvin DeWitt. June 17-23, 2006, at InterVarsity's Cedar Campus near Cedarville, Michigan. This conference is sponsored by InterVarsity's Faculty Ministry. For more information, visit www.facultyministry.org/go/inthylight.

National Faculty Leadership Conference — June 22-25, 2006, in Alexandria, Virginia. This conference, sponsored by Christian Leadership Ministries, will focus on a theme inspired by Dr. Charles Malik: "The Two Tasks." For more information, visit www.twotasks.com.

Scholars Coming to Faith — July 20-22, 2006, in Kansas City, Missouri. Sponsored by the International Institute of Christian Studies, this conference will commemorate the 75th anniversary of C. S. Lewis' conversion. Visit www.iics.com/vision2006.html.

For more information about events for faculty, visit www.facultyministry.org.

Future Newsletters

We hope that you enjoy receiving the *Faculty Newsletter* each fall and spring. This year, a task force of InterVarsity staff and faculty is exploring options for the kinds of resources and materials InterVarsity might offer to faculty in the future. We anticipate that this will include a re-designed *Faculty Newsletter*.

What have you appreciated most about the *Faculty Newsletter*? What suggestions do you have for future issues? Please send your ideas to Tom Trevethan, Faculty Ministry Campus Projects Associate, who is overseeing this task force (ttrevethan@facultyministry.org).

Also, we are considering moving to an electronic format for the *Faculty Newsletter*. **Would you like to continue to receive this resource? Please send your email address to info@facultyministry.org. Thank you!**

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