

A Brief Defense of a Confessional Stance in a Secular School

The IV basis of faith is brief statement of historic Christian belief, and whatever its flaws, should be seen in the same family as the great creeds: that is, as a statement of the principle teachings of the faith, the "gospel handed down," and accepted as such by Christians of many times, places, and denominations.

Is it appropriate for a student group to have a statement of this kind at a secular school, whatever its content? We could characterize this kind of statement as "confessional," a statement of faith. The chief opposing stance we could characterize as "skeptical," one which questions all starting points, faiths, dogmas. The skeptical stance is a methodological one, tracing its roots, in part, to Descartes, who sought to question everything until he came to that which could not be doubted. Moreover, it is a methodology which elevates epistemology, the study of knowing, to a position of primacy. The modern university world has embraced this skeptical stance. It is considered to be an "open-minded" stance, one which delivers us from superstition, makes shared, testable knowledge possible, and holds the greatest promise for free inquiry and advancement of knowledge. No where can the supposed justification of this stance be seen more than in the spectacular success of the empirical sciences. Indeed, even non-empirical intellectual endeavors often adopt the term "science" to be academically respectable.

In this light, it is easy to see why a confessional statement like InterVarsity's can seem like an irrelevant relic of the past at best, or an active enemy of the quest for knowledge at worst. Only the relatively new philosophies of post-modernism have much sympathy for this sort of statement. Radical relativists and many multiculturalists would have us splinter off into many intellectually isolated and mutually incomprehensible tribes who share nothing but patronizing sensitivity and groundless tolerance. Those who hope for a common knowledge, Modernists and Christians alike, can at least join in rejecting this. This brief defense of the legitimacy of a confessional stance contains historical, philosophical, practical, and moral arguments.

The current rule of the skeptical stance in the university is no indication of an historical hegemony. The medieval university was confessional, even explicitly Christian. Theology reigned as the queen of the sciences. It seems uncharitable for the child to claim that the practice of the parent bore no fruit. Similarly, many of the major educational institutions of this country began, and many are, confessional. Again it seems wrongheaded to say that such a stance always compromises intellectual integrity.

Indeed, many have argued that the skeptical stance contains the philosophical seeds of its own dissolution. It may attack its own foundation. Just as the key components of the empirical sciences (e.g. the contingency of nature, the inductive method) cannot be proved empirically, so too the pursuit of truth is based upon certain elements of faith or assumptions. The question may not be "confessional or skeptical?" but "which confession?" In elevating epistemology, the skeptical stance has dislodged ontology (or metaphysics), the study of being, from the position of primacy. While it is beyond the scope of this brief defense, it is arguable that metaphysical considerations (what is) are logically prior to epistemological considerations (how it is known). The concept of God has a long and honorable position of a possible ontological starting point.

Insofar as a confessional stance takes this position, it has had a legitimate place in the university.

As a matter of practicality, a Christian group that ceases to hold to some confession among its leadership ceases to be a group with any but the lowest common denominator as its distinctive. A distinctly Christian group has as its goal the practice of the Lordship of Christ: we seek to be disciples or followers of Jesus Christ in all areas, including the discipleship of the mind, and to see everything come under the grace-filled rule of Christ. A distinctly Christian group has a message: the gospel of Christ. The central problem of humanity is neither intellectual, nor social, nor psychological, but moral. The moral rebellion against God which infects all other areas of life, thought, and culture finds its reversal in the revelation and work of Christ. Christians expect that this goal and message will be questioned, rejected, and even opposed by some. However, to simply dismiss what is distinctly Christian or attempt to recast it as merely "a place for people with religious emotions" or "a collection of fundamentalist kids who comfort one another" is unconscionably reductionistic and condescending. It is the opinion of many in InterVarsity that it is in the secular university's best interest, by its own standards, to enrich itself by allowing Christians their own distinctives.

Finally, a confessional stance is a matter of moral and intellectual integrity for Christians. God is. He has spoken. To play the skeptic is a betrayal of the provision of God. Questioning fundamental truths for the purpose of clarity and deeper understanding is one thing, doubting truth is another. Welcoming, dialoguing with, and respecting doubters is one thing, fostering doubt is another. For Christians, to live life in an unbelieving context (which is where most Christians live most of the time), is to live the life of an apologist. An apologist defends the faith with thoughtful words, by living a godly life, and by participating in a spiritual community. Those truths of faith that can be understood, confirmed, or demonstrated by reason are defended by reason. Those truths of faith which cannot be known by reason (revealed truth), can still be defended as reasonable. Such integrity is surely not incompatible with the aims of the university.

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